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THE MOMMIFICATION OF WRITING INSTRUCTION: A TALE OF TWO STUDENTS

Abstract: *The questions explored in this paper grow out of a long career in the teaching of composition, and out of relationships with literally thousands of students. Centering on two allows an especially complex dimension of such relationships to be treated with some necessary personal depth. The issue of teacher as mother is with most of us, students and teachers alike, from the first moment we set foot in a classroom. Indeed, the issue of mother as teacher – and, by extension, woman as nearly everyone's first teacher – is one that has abided with us for as long as humans have abided as a race. The personal way in which this picture of woman as primal teacher speaks to so many of us in composition may not abide for as long, but is in no danger just now – for good or ill – of fading.*

When I began teaching composition 10 years ago, I don't think I even considered the question of whether I would be some kind of mother figure to my students. Looking back now, though, whether I consciously thought about it or not, I most certainly counted on it in order to do the kind of work I wanted to do with students. That included a good deal of "personal" writing—often separate from their "academic" writing, and other times, in tandem with it. This meant not only a lot of autobiographical papers, but the keeping of daybooks (Donald Murray's more expansive and liberatory version of the journal) in which students, not infrequently, shared some pretty intimate confidences with me. It did not occur to me at the time—at least, not as a fully conscious question I could ask myself—that perhaps, their willingness to do so meant that I represented some form of the maternal to them. I still can't know with absolute certainty if this was so, given the multiplicity of meanings and resonances the very word *maternal* has for most people, but my recent explorations into this long, multi-faceted metaphor of my teaching experience confirm it. Indeed, I am now convinced that the female teacher often finds herself located in some subset where the teacher's universe intersects with the

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mother's.

I began my investigation by asking several of my mostly female colleagues, composition instruction being what it is, whether their experiences in their classes bore any suspicious earmarks of mother-ness. Did they get many student confessionals? Did they encourage them, simply accept them, or try to deflect them? Did they receive treatment from students they felt was designed to elicit a motherlike response from them? Did they themselves consciously encourage this motherly view of themselves?

I found that many shared this sense of surrogate motherhood and responded in a variety of ways. Some clearly relished this aspect of their classroom experience, and encouraged it by putting their home telephone numbers on their syllabus, and being consistently available to hear students' personal troubles and triumphs. Others just as clearly resented it, and made sure to actively and verbally reject being cast in any role smacking of motherhood, seemingly with no regrets whatsoever at any possible lost opportunities to better understand—dare I say nurture?—students as a way to help them achieve. Most, however, myself included, seemed to fall somewhere between these two extremes, on a spectrum consisting of a wide variety of responses to the notion of teacher as mother.

I think it's important to mention that my male colleagues did not seem to be particularly interested in whether or not they manifested as father figures to their students. This is not to say that they did not have close, personal relationships with certain students, or that they did not admit to using their teacherly authority in a fatherly way. It simply did not seem to stay with them as an abiding concern. And most did express some degree of surprise that students were sharing "secrets" with me, related to sexual orientation, abortion, difficulties at home, and abuse as a child. What this is indicative of needs a good deal more exploration, as the sampling was small, and the ages of my male colleagues in composition rather young.

With this very subjective and preliminary evidence, I have come to believe that female teachers are more apt to experience what I will call "echoes of motherhood" in the classroom, sometimes appearing as deep closeness with students, by virtue of assignments and other communications, and sometimes as a deep discontent with the role. But does the mere presence of a woman as an authority figure, particularly in a composition class, open up a space in which students are apt to expect a certain amount of motherliness? I think that in asking that question, I've answered it.

It may be that students can not avoid some sort of parental expectation when faced with a teacher of either sex, but the imposition of "mommyness" onto a female authority figure seems particularly *de rigeur* in a culture that is most comfortable with female authority in the

guise of the mother. While this paper is mainly concerned with the uneasy crossing over of the unstable boundary between teacher and mother, I will return to the question of teacher as father as one growing in importance. But my main purpose remains to, quite shamelessly, explore my central questions primarily with my own experience. The perspectives of Max Van Manen, Sara Ruddick and bell hooks I use (just as shamelessly) to further complicate and clarify this huge piece of one teacher's experience. This approach I offer in lieu of any personal "definition" of motherhood. First of all, that is a definition I cannot compose in 25,000 words or less. And given the almost endless experiences and conclusions every teacher of either gender has accumulated and formulated about teacherhood as motherhood, such a definition by me seems, in every sense of the word, academic. Besides, I don't think a definition is what's needed, so much as what I will call an *active understanding* of this classroom dynamic.

I believe that many students, including adults in continuing education classes, make an assumption, often quite unconscious, that they can expect and in fact, demand, a certain amount of "maternal" behavior from a female teacher, a demand shaped and modified by the teacher's individual temperament, age, style of dress, and any number of other subtle cues. While this has, as I've indicated, many a time been a blessing for me, given the kind of unorthodox and personally rooted work I often ask for, it has also been a curse when I am expected to listen patiently to a long list of ailments and other mishaps as excuses for why a student has been out for two weeks, or why work is chronically late. I know all teachers must listen to excuses, and then weigh them in the balance scales of standards vs. compassion. One of the most outrageous examples of a student not only treating me as she might her mother, but, in the process, regressing into some kind of third grade mindset, occurred during the Fall 1999 semester in a freshman composition class.

The student was a young woman, but no teenager – perhaps mid to late twenties -- and, in fact, a mother herself. She had missed a good deal of school during the first few weeks of the fall term, then came in and told me she'd "been sick." She came to two classes, and then stayed out another week and a half. This time when she returned wearing a neck brace, she told me she'd been in a car accident, showed me a doctor's note, and promised to make up the work she'd missed. We agreed on a date about a week and a half hence on which all the work would be due. The date came and went, and she missed that particular class. The next class she showed up with half the work, said that the injuries she'd sustained from the accident had been plaguing her and she'd finish the work by the very next class. I was losing my patience, but stayed pretty laid back, and told her the term was progressing, and she needed to get caught up in order to work on the newer

and more challenging assignments already in play. She said she understood.

Before the next class, I was checking my phone mail at school, and received a message that was clearly from her—I recognized her voice; also, CCNY phone mail that comes from anywhere on campus will give the extension the person is calling from. This particular student had obviously called from the college office where she worked part-time. I could barely believe my ears. I heard, in a very formal accent and cadence reeking with phoniness and discomfort, "Hello, Miss Tabachnikov, this is Cindy Jenkins' mother (name changed to protect the guilty), and I wanted to let you know that Cindy can't make it to class today because she's very ill with a stomach virus." *Hesitation, guilty gulping and breathing, then:* "Thank you very much."

My system didn't know whether to collapse in paroxysms of hysterical laughter, or "blow a gasket", as we used to say up home in the Bronx, in righteous anger. I remembered that when I was 15 or 16 and in high school, I had a friend who worked for the Dean of Discipline; she accepted all of my written excuses for absence—from "my mother"—and occasionally helped me to compose them. And of course, I remembered that unspoken agreement I had with my own mother—I'd lie and, as long as it wasn't too outrageous, she'd believe me. "Of course I was at school! Who told you she saw me here at 9 in the morning with 6 friends?" Still, I don't think I ever would have attempted a prank like Cindy's, and I was at a loss as to exactly how to handle it.

I guess the logical thing, the "teacherly" thing to do, and the most professional, would've been to call her back immediately and tell her that I did not take at all kindly to that kind of immature behavior, nor to having my good nature taken advantage of, and that I especially resented having my intelligence so grievously insulted. It was what I would normally have done. But I was rushing to get to class, and so put it on the back burner until other concerns drove it from my mind altogether.

Two days later, Cindy showed up at my office about ten minutes before class was to begin—the only occasion she was actually on time to a class. I was wolfing down the last of my dinner and talking on the phone to a friend. I asked Cindy rather brusquely to wait outside the office. I don't really know what possessed me next. Perhaps I had finally had enough of having to be consistently mature in the face of some pretty outrageous boundary violations. Why should students be the only ones allowed to "act out"? Dammit, I wanted some fun, too. I began telling my friend pretty loudly that a student was there to speak to me, and boy, had she pulled the most unbelievable stunt I'd ever encountered in my ten years teaching. I left my friend unsatisfied as to the nature of this outrage, preferring to call Cindy in at that stra-

tegic moment. I was sure she had heard my conversation. It was all I could do not to rub my hands together and twirl an invisible moustache as she entered in an obvious snit, yet too thrown off to look me straight in the eye. I cut off her new litany of excuses as to why the elusive assignments were "almost finished but not quite," and told her we'd continue this discussion after class.

I remember a good deal of sulking from Cindy as I taught in that small classroom, punctuated by some very pointed killer looks in my direction, and a long period of time when she was on an extended "break." At the end of class, I did not rush to "handle" her, but spent a leisurely time talking to two or three other students. She did not wait, and did not come back to class again. She never officially dropped the class, so I dropped her. I can't say I'm sorry. More than a decade of experience teaching composition tells me she would not have shaped up, and was too far behind to hope for a decent grade.

This "roundabout" form of pedagogy—or perhaps passive-aggressive would be a better description—was a real departure for me, as direct and even confrontive as I tend to be. I don't think what I did diminished the mother role I felt Cindy had foisted upon me, but instead destabilized it some, taking full advantage of the mother's "other" stereotype: her unique, guilt-producing and chameleon-like punitive nature, rather than her endlessly long-suffering one. Either way, I enjoyed it, and I got what I wanted, and, I would venture to say, Cindy got what she so desperately needed. I have long held to the precept that a lot of what students learn, particularly from basic composition courses, has nothing to do with the course content, but more with an awakening sense of what it means to commit to being a student. And this may be very closely connected to what it means to commit to being a child, lying in the simple yet powerful epiphany that there are times to question authority and times to just accept it. The terrors of making choices and picking battles are rough waters to negotiate. Cindy was not that good a swimmer yet, and this kind of sloppy form often requires failure, or an early departure.

It occurs to me now that this comparison on my part bespeaks an embrace of the parental role in teaching. I don't think it can be avoided. For me, it offers a new challenge: Can I embrace my 'mommyness' and use it to the best possible advantage in my work? Certainly, I'd often commisserated with students, even held them and cried with them after terrible losses and traumas, including rape and the death of a loved one. I'd also scolded them, sometimes mildly, other times harshly for their transgressions. But I don't remember taking such a questionable, yet unquestionably natural and human liberty as I did with Cindy.

To continue in my own confessional vein, I was embarrassed for several months by this decidedly unteacherly response to Cindy, and

also a little bit thrilled. I believe the thrill came from what I perceived as an unprecedented opening in my ability to give students what they came for—a good lesson—and in a most unexpected way.

Sara Ruddick, in her book, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, defines good mothering as that which fosters growth in a child; in other words, it will "nurture a child's developing spirit—whatever in a child is lively, purposive, and responsive." (82) I think that one can easily substitute the word "student" for "child" and "teacher" for "mother" in the above and, in fact, in much of what Ruddick writes. However, she sees and accepts as natural and often productive all sides of motherhood. I agree: Even the ambivalence she insists is a constant companion to the fierce love in motherhood, comes to the teacher in similar, if less extreme ways: "Mother-love is intermixed with hate, sorrow, impatience, resentment, and despair." (68) Ruddick quotes a piece of dialog from Jane Lazarres' *The Mother Knot*, in which a young mother says of her children, "I love them and everything, but I hate them." (68) After reading this and another account by Ruddick of a young and very devoted mother who, after weeks of sleep deprivation, fantasized about throwing her perpetually cranky, squalling infant girl out a window, I gave up a lot of the guilt I had about giving Cindy a dose of her own medicine, not to mention some other unpleasant feelings I'd harbored for other students over the years.

It occurs to me that a 'reasonable,' by the book—the Education 101 textbook, that is—response to Cindy might not have served her that well. She was quite sharp (fortunately, I was sharper), and not a bad writer the few times she handed something in. And I would also hazard a guess that she came to comprehend quite easily where my behavior was coming from. Also, I "know" (second-hand, from friends and relatives, being childless myself) that an experienced mother will grow very relaxed about being natural and spontaneous with her children, eventually giving up the constant, nagging fear that any false step will ultimately send them into therapy for at least half of their adult lives. As an experienced pedagogical mother, I am also quite inclined now to be myself, and I am no more anyone's stereotypical idea of a mother than I am of a teacher. If I had to give it a label? *Butch Mommy.* That's me. But, lest one misread "Butch" as "unrelentingly tough and sharp-edged," the other side of this role is almost embarrassingly nurturing.

During the Spring 1999 semester, a middle-aged man named Pete, with a very winning childlike way about him that was also unswervingly mature, enrolled in my developmental writing class. As one of the first papers that term, I had assigned an original short story, told in the first person by a character who is clearly revealed. After Pete read aloud in class, he very calmly heard my uncomfortable feedback that, while he'd created a very believable character with a life

that was also believable in its deadly boredom, his character—predictably named Joe—needed some creative occurrences, even obstacles in his humdrum life. Pete's response was to say, also quite calmly, that he 'did have problems with his imagination' and had been psychologically tested to that effect.

I spoke to Pete a few more times and was quite impressed with his lack of defensiveness about being critiqued that way, not only by me, but by a few other students, as well—he said it was no problem. And as to his ability to "defend" his work with pretty formidable equanimity, only throwing one or two mild shots at other students' work, he said he'd had a lot of experience in group therapy, and was used to expressing himself: "That's what I was doing, expressing myself."

Pete then opened up to me about his psychiatric history, calling his condition "residual schizophrenia," which essentially means that it comes and goes, and said that the learning disability he had was a form of dyslexia, and was related not only to his illness, but probably to some of the medication he took for it as well. His candor, as well as his obvious intelligence and commitment to doing well in my class, gave me the courage to ask him if he would participate with me in some research, which eventually came to be an ethnographic study called *Looking at Pete: A Case Study of Disability and the Writing Process.* Pete readily agreed, and over the next three months, we had many conversations about his writing, his educational and personal history, and his struggles to live a quality life despite his illness. Our relationship seemed to develop rather effortlessly into a trusting friendship, but still retained an appropriate amount of distance. Our in-class relationship never seemed to suffer for it—in fact, it was enhanced—and neither did my relationship with other students in that class. Pete was as naturally direct and cooperative a team player as he was a one-on-one communicator. And I know that there was also something very protective in my dealings with Pete. We related in many respects as equals, yet never forgot that there was a difference in our roles and our positions of power. This I attribute primarily to Pete's ability to "swim" so well the waters where Cindy foundered, between questioning my decisions and criticisms of his work, which he surely did, and knowing when to back off and take on faith and, hopefully, experience that I was apt to know what I was talking about.

I think that Pete's age was certainly a factor, although I've also seen this same closeness in age between student and teacher result in unrelenting power struggles. But more than that, I am convinced that the years of intense illness and drug-induced suffering he endured and finally surmounted created an aura of solidity, self-assurance and—I shudder yet remain true to my subjectivity—inner peace about him that made such a productive relationship possible between us.

And I was certainly parental to Pete. I hesitate to say motherly. I

was much more motherly with Cindy, possibly because she behaved like such a child. Not that I was not motherly with Pete. I think what I displayed was a much more fluid movement from teacher, to mother, to father, to parent, which I suppose means to me some healthy combination of the motherly and the fatherly. And this is a good time to wonder, as I promised I would, how motherliness and fatherliness differ, and how much they should. In my study about my experience working with Pete, I quote Max Van Manen's book, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* on this subject.

Several times in the text, Van Manen equates teaching with fatherhood—very natural, as he taught and conducted research with much younger students—and observes at one point that fatherhood is "a creative vow." (75) In my study, I conclude that, after my very rewarding work with Pete, "teacherhood is a creative vow, as well."

After reading bell hooks' views on motherhood and things maternal in her book, *Feminist Theory: from margin to center*, I find it very appropriate that I used Sara Ruddick's views on maternity to explore my encounter with Cindy, and Van Manen's on paternity as a commentary on my work with Pete. hooks takes a dim view of the neofeminist trend, particularly among those she terms "white middle-class, college-educated women," to romanticize motherhood in much the same way as it has always been within the framework of patriarchy. (133, 135) To hooks, this is one more way in which women, even with the best and most liberatory intentions, perpetuate the stereotypes which have kept them chained to home and children, and ensure that men continue not to be equally responsible in child-rearing. hooks asserts that Ruddick is guilty of this romanticizing in *Maternal Thinking* when she envisions the day that there will be no more fathers, but only mothers of both sexes. (138) hooks believes it is useless to try to get men to acknowledge being maternal, even when they are, as closely identified with strictly female behavior as that word is. hooks posits that "[r]ather than changing it *[the meaning of maternal]*, the word *paternal* should share the same meaning." (139)

While it is certainly true that men must continue in the task of adding more nurturance to their parenting and their teaching, it is also important for women to add a bit more authority, more willingness to be the heavy—and sometimes the clown—without all the cloying mother-guilt attached to these behaviors, in their interactions with their children, and their students. This would seem to mean both sexes giving up their notions of being either "mothers" or "fathers" to become truly equal *parents*.

The romanticizing that hooks warns against is worth taking to heart, yet this vigilance must be applied even-handedly, and certainly to hooks' own vision of a desirably androgynous parent, as well as to

any institutionalized sexist notions of the nurturing mother and authoritarian father. Because, as a teacher, as a woman, and as a Butch Mommy, I *will* be gendered in my students' eyes, and they in mine. I think that continuing to find new and unexpected ways to use this unavoidable tendency to the advantage of all is a goal worth working for.

Before, I spoke about the importance of gaining an "active understanding" of this dynamic. To me, the first step in this kind of self-research of our pedagogy amounts simply to a heightened awareness--without undue judging of ourselves or our students, and without any immediate desire to change anything—of what we truly put out there as teachers qua authority figures qua parents, and what we receive.

Months after my encounter with Cindy, I was unexpectedly reminded of it by, of all things, a TV commercial for an automobile. In it, a young man, obviously on his way up the corporate ladder, is in his brand new car, predictably red, which is stopped at a light next to a school bus. As the young man hotly and expertly negotiates a deal on his car phone, the children on the bus scream and make faces at him in a most intrusive way. The young man suddenly breaks off his conversation, and presses his contorted face against the car window, showing a truly horrifying mask to the children, who all gasp as one, face front, and fall into shocked silence. The young man calmly returns to his deal.

As a teacher, I am very concerned with being proactive rather than reactive with my students. Most teachers, and most parents, no doubt share this concern. I know that many might see my behavior to Cindy as the latter, and not without reason. However, I think that there is a third alternative which amounts to being reflective, as a mirror is. This approach is not without risk, as mirrors can distort what they reflect. I can only trust that the overall sense of responsibility and dedication, as well as the lack of rancor or cynicism I bring to my teaching, kept my mirror relatively clear in my interaction with Cindy. And this type of reflection can empower what we do and how we do it in some surprising ways.

I am inclined here to give Van Manen and not myself the last word. He is, after all, both a teacher and a father, and one whose apparent nurturance would fit quite well hooks' picture of the true *parent.* He reminds us, teachers and parents alike, that when we use "the dialectic of inside and outside . . . of separation and reconciliation" (127), we are engaging in that "epistemological silence" in which we come to realize "that we know more than we can tell." (113)

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