

Chapter 29. A Story of Writing Center Labor in a Violent Age

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We will have to write it down. Write it down. Things are happening,
and we cannot write them down fast enough or well enough.

– *Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert,*
from Letters for the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age

The following depicts the feelings and experiences of three writing center colleagues—a peer tutor, a professional tutor, and a writing center director—as we reflect on doing our work in a violent world. In this narrative dialogue, we focus, in particular, on our memories of one specific evening during our spring semester of 2022, in which our writing center went into lockdown due to the threat of an active shooter on campus. While this threat turned out to be only that—a threat—the emotional toll of this evening lingered on for each of us. And then, several months later, our campus community and city were witness to devastating violence, when a white supremacist opened fire in a grocery store in a predominantly Black neighborhood just a few miles from our campus, murdering ten people and injuring three others. As the three of us reflect back on the semester and the specter of violence that surrounded our campus and our work, we find ourselves alternately numb, angry, and sad, with conflicting feelings about our work and its value. Here we attempt to make sense of these feelings and memories using the tools we know best.

Elijah, peer tutor: Upon reflecting on the traumatic events of this semester, all conventional means of expressing my ideas escape me. I'm frustrated, suffocated by a pair of hands strangling me, keeping any words from coming up, grasping at my neck with such strength that perhaps they hope to crush the words along with my throat.

How does one write about a traumatic experience?

John, professional tutor: The afternoon of the lockdown was the second shift of the spring semester for me and the second shift in which I was serving as a professional tutor. I had just graduated with my master's degree the previous semester, and my anxieties about the uncertainties of the future prompted me to return to work at the writing center. It was an easy decision to make. At the writing center, I was comfortable, having worked there for nearly the entirety of my five years as a student. At the writing center, I felt safe.

Maggie, writing center director: I had been working from home that Wednesday when I saw the emergency text from campus police. Someone thought to

have a gun was spotted near campus, and everyone was ordered into lockdown. I texted Elijah and John, who were working the evening shift, asking them if they'd seen the alert. I heard back right away; yes, they'd seen it.

John: My immediate thoughts were those of survival. Shut off the lights. Close the door to the writing center that is protected by a keycard lock. I looked at the glass panels that made up the entire front of the center and thought—*that glass will not stop a bullet*. I suggested we relocate to the inside of the break room and lock that door as well. Once inside, Elijah and I worked together to haul a huge metal filing cabinet in front of the door. Out of breath, we sat and we waited, in utter uncertainty.

Maggie: When they told me what they'd done, I was impressed by how quick-thinking and calm they were. It wasn't until later that I thought about why: they were just kids, maybe not even born yet when Columbine happened. They'd probably been doing active shooter drills as long as they'd been in school, maybe since before they could read. Of course they knew what to do.

Elijah: Safety drills tell us how to react in a dangerous scenario, but they also condition us to simply expect violence without ever really understanding why the violence is happening in the first place.

John: I began to think in headlines, the kind written in a bold black font that we all have had the misfortune of reading far too many times. Lists of names and dates attached to accounts of harrowing violence. Notes on an obituary—an entire person reduced to a photo, a paragraph, an occupation, a vague synopsis of interests, and a heartfelt gesture towards a lost future.

Is this really happening?

I took to my phone to frantically update family and loved ones. Maggie messaged us with words of concern and sympathy. There was comfort in the responses, and they took my thoughts briefly out of the small break room. I did my best to reassure everyone that I was okay. I didn't know whether or not that was a lie.

Elijah: "How could this happen?" This was the sentiment that kept echoing as we waited. I wanted to find some kind of answer, but I couldn't, so I simply kept quiet and kept waiting.

John: After an hour or so, Elijah and I raised our heads sharply. The sound of a door opening and closing prompted both of us to turn one ear toward the room outside. After a moment of prolonged silence, I decided to move the cabinet just enough to open the door a crack and peek out. A group of students had just been herded into the writing center by a library staff member with a key card. I whispered from the crack in the door, asking if they wanted to join us in the break room where they wouldn't be seen from behind the glass. They agreed. This process repeated itself several times. Soon we had around a dozen students crammed into the tiny break room with us. The collective fear added weight to the air.

Maggie: I continued to check in by text with Elijah and John throughout the evening, trying to send encouraging words, though probably more for my own

comfort than theirs. Because, all the while, I had an acute feeling of guilt. I had always thought of myself as someone who did my best to be cognizant of my tutors' working conditions, and who made the center a workplace that felt comfortable and safe for them. But on this evening, I was overwhelmed by the truth: their working conditions at that moment were profoundly physically, mentally, and emotionally unsafe, and my privilege as a faculty member, who has no set schedule, who can leave work early or come in late or choose to work at home for the day (as I had done that Wednesday), protected me while putting my employees—who do the real essential labor of our writing center—at risk. The sense of safety and comfort that I always told myself I created for my tutors was just an illusion, and probably always had been.

Elijah: Despite warm and worried sentiments from my friends and family, I felt an extreme level of futility as I could do nothing but wait. Later this futility would turn to anger. This anger was unparalleled, and my irritation almost turned toward my fellow companions in the room, especially as the same sentiment continued to be echoed: “how could this happen?” However, acting out in anger due to my own lack of understanding of the situation would have resolved nothing, and I'm glad I didn't lose myself in a moment of genuine frustration.

John: That heavy feeling persisted, magnified by the slowed pace of time and the awkward silence of a room full of strangers packed far too tight for comfort.

But then, something broke. We began to joke with one another. There was talk of HBO's *Euphoria*, upcoming travel, and plans for the future. Stories were passed back and forth between us. Hushed laughter lightened the air. Little had been learned from police updates, but in spite of that, there was hope. The threat of violence has become an implicit fact in our society, and yet, at that moment, we continued to believe in the necessity of our education, our work, and our shared humanity.

Maggie: After a few hours, we got the all-clear from campus police. I texted John and Elijah again, telling them to close up the center early and go home. I told them, too—recognizing the inadequacy of my words—how sorry I was that this had happened.

Elijah: Once at home, I felt a startling amount of apathy; after stressing out and having to reflect upon my own rage, sentiments of safety felt oddly superfluous. So, after hugging my mother and petting my dogs, I simply walked to my room, lay down, and slept. Or at least attempted to, only to stare at my ceiling and think, “oh boy, I have to go back tomorrow.” While Maggie said I could take a break the next day, I didn't feel like I could. As much as I would like to think it came from a higher calling to selflessly assist students at the writing center, I'm not that selfless.

It's a job, and I felt I had to go purely because of that.

Maggie: Elijah sent me an email later that night, assuring me, “I'm okay. I'm told these things build character.”

“I think character-building is overrated,” I responded.

John: I have struggled with whether or not I would have anything profound to say about this experience—whether or not I would have any insight to share about what the night felt like. I am still not so sure I do. But something that has stuck with me since that night is the very real impact that events like these have on our collective psyche. How does anyone truly go on with daily routines knowing that at any moment the patterns of our work days could rupture into life-threatening violence? I assume most of us get by not thinking about that if we can help it.

Maggie: When the writing center reopened the next day, students were lined up outside as usual, and John, Elijah, and the rest of our tutoring staff went to work—brainstorming, reading drafts, and offering words of advice and encouragement. It felt normal. Except for when it didn't. Like when I overheard a student panicking about an annotated bibliography, and suddenly, all I could think was, *how dare we?* How dare faculty ask their students—how dare I ask my staff—to concern themselves with the minutiae of APA citation on a day like today, during a semester like this, in a world like this one?

Elijah: Perhaps the most traumatic part of the incident is that I never had time to process that it was a traumatic incident; once the moment had passed, it turned into any other event in my day-to-day life like it was no more than a small inconvenience. Perhaps humans are not built for this level of stress, and our minds simply cope by blocking out the unsavory stuff.

Maggie: In the days that followed, I felt lost on how best to proceed. Should I call in someone from the counseling center? Should I schedule a staff meeting to check in with everyone? Should I close the center for the day? Every option felt like an overreaction and an underreaction simultaneously, particularly on the heels of the prior year and a half in which all of us at the writing center had continued to perform our labor amidst a global pandemic; a summer of police brutality and the ongoing fight for racial justice; and an insurrection against the government, not to mention the personal struggles that many of us carried quietly. Which collective traumas deserve a post-mortem meeting, I wondered? And which do we just endure?

Ultimately, I talked with Elijah and John, offering them time off if needed. I reminded the entire staff of the mental health resources available to them and to our students, and I offered my feedback and suggestions to the building-wide committee that was formed to review and revise our library's emergency protocols. It felt inadequate, though, and I'm reminded of that inadequacy every time I walk into the writing center break room and see the deep gash in the floor, outlining the path of the filing cabinet that John and Elijah had pushed in front of the door as they hid.

Elijah: Looking back, I feel as if I understand myself and my emotions at the time a little more. Anger is a natural emotion; it is universal and can manifest in different forms, but the important thing to recognize is that it can be a powerful tool if used effectively, and it can be dangerous if used brashly.

While it can take away, it also can create and renew, and writing is one of the most powerful ways we can do that work.

John: Through writing center work, I have observed—many times over—how communication, sharing stories with one another, and finding mutual understanding brings us closer together. As we look toward the horizons of our contemporary moment, it is tempting to see only the gargantuan dark clouds that await us in the distance, gliding eerily closer each time we read the news. However, to also glimpse the potential of hope on the horizon is imperative in these times. And in the writing center break room that night, I was reminded that hope is not just a passive feeling but an active experience that we create together.

Maggie: As the semester drew to a close, I called a friend, a writing center director at another institution, to catch up. I recounted to her everything that happened in and around our center, campus, and city over the prior few months. She shared the story of her semester, too, and although she works at a different college, in a different city, in a different part of the country, we had many of the same concerns and fears—for our communities, for our students, and for the world we live in. We reflected on how overwhelmingly insignificant our work feels amidst the chaos of the moment, but also how the conversation, collaboration, and learning that takes place in the writing center space somehow feel more important than ever. We talked about the privilege inherent in our ability to even have this conversation—alive and safe.

“We’re okay,” I said.

“Are we, though?” she asked.

And the question hovered in the air like a fog.