

Correspondences

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“Our correspondences have wings—paper birds that fly from my house to yours—flocks of ideas crisscrossing the country. . . . [A] connection is made. We are not alone in the world.” —Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge*



One of my clearest memories of Wendy Bishop is her standing on a chair outside her beach house at Alligator Point in Florida one hot July afternoon in 2000. I was standing on the sand below, reaching up to hand her the hummingbird feeder she needed to hang. That day, she was all sun and smiles, welcoming the birds. I remember looking up to her, shading the sun from my eyes, smiling.

Will Baker, in a memorial after Wendy's death, captured her personality when he wrote, "Wendy was half hummingbird. Quick. Sharp. Light. Intense. Charged with sweetness, and a subtle thrum in every move" (5). She became what she loved, a symbol of life and renewal.

Her correspondences certainly had wings. Rarely, they were paper; most often, she sent emails—faster than hummingbirds but just as welcome. A flash on the screen, a connection made.

In one of its meanings, correspondence is to agree, in another, to communicate. In both meanings, correspondence implies connection. Wendy Bishop wrote to connect, often following a pattern of invitation-response-invitation to respond in her process of writing both personal correspondence and the poems, essays, stories, and articles she published.

She modeled a practice of writing, teaching, and working in the context of relationship, relationships based not on status but on mutual care and interest. She established relationships with

her students through writing and revising with them, quoting them in her work, and caring about their professional, personal, and intellectual development. She did the same with colleagues across the country, both longtime friends and those who were newer to the field of composition (many trained, like Wendy, in both creative writing and composition) and saw in her a model for how those who care passionately about writing, teaching, and teaching writing could do what they love.

In creating these mutually beneficial relationships through writing with and for others, Wendy found in both students and colleagues hope for the future of composition studies, a field that didn't always understand or value what she so cared about. Through her invitational ethos, she not only created an opening for other like-minded people to join active—though not always friendly—conversations in the field of rhetoric and composition, but also made the field a friendlier place for the kind of work she loved.

Seeking and Finding Connection through Collaboration

In July of 2000, hours before we drove from her home in Tallahassee to her beach house and several years before her book *On Writing: A Process Reader* was published, Wendy told me about the initial reviews that claimed she was presenting a solitary writer's view. She was perplexed, explaining, "I don't think of myself as a solitary writer. . . . Internal and private and quiet, but I don't think of it as solitary. I think of myself as always desperate for connection" (Bishop interview). I saw that desire in her eyes and heard it in the quick, low intensity of her voice.

That desire for connection fueled much of Wendy's writing—as well as the relationships she developed and nurtured through writing, especially email. For me, that relationship lasted eight years. For others, I know, it was much longer. For most, the correspondence was connection and the comforting knowledge that we were not alone in the field of composition studies, in our desire to write both creatively and academically, in our teaching practices, in our personal or professional lives, no matter how internal, private, and quiet many of us are or were.

On that same July day, eight months before she was to give her CCCC chair's address, I asked Wendy what she'd like to do for it. Grinning, she told me she wanted to do a version of *Sesame Street's* "Here is Your Life." "Toaster: this is your life," she said with a laugh and then went on to talk about how she wanted her children and all of her friends whose work and teaching had influenced her to join her on stage. I could picture it: blue-suited Guy Smiley with his oval, yellow face and triangle nose leading Wendy's children, Morgan and Tait, and her husband, Dean, to the stage. Numerous students, teachers, editors, friends, co-authors, and collaborators would follow: huddled, herded, and half-embarrassed/half-amused. They would all tell stories, and she would be there to hear those stories. It wouldn't matter that she'd be embarrassed by the attention; she'd know she wasn't alone.

And she would show others that they, too, were not alone, that writing is anything but solitary.

Even a quick glance at Wendy's published work shows how she valued collaboration. Nearly half of her more than twenty books are co-edited or co-authored, and even when she wrote single-authored texts, Wendy was always reaching out, asking for ideas, feedback, contributions. Every now and then, I'd receive a group email with a subject line such as, "friends, if time," asking for reflections on something she wanted to write about. She'd use the quotations from friends as chapter openings, jumping off points, entries into a conversation. Months or even years later, that same group of friends would receive an email file, showing what she did with those initial thoughts, and still later, we'd receive a copy of the book.

Other times, the invitations came through individual emails. When Wendy was working on *Thirteen Ways of Looking for a Poem*, she wrote, asking if I had written a ghazal or pantoum she could include alongside the already published poems. At the time, I had nothing to offer but liked the thought of her including her own and her friends' and students' poems, a risky move that sometimes made reviewers uncomfortable, but a democratizing move from which teachers and students often learned about writing as a process.

Five months into my first (and as of twenty-some years later, only) tenure-track job, Wendy emailed with an invitation to write together. She wrote,

i had been thinking about you these last few weeks, wondering if you'd ever care to try to write something together, now or later down the line—i know your new job is keeping you busy and i know co-authoring takes new learning and doesn't always pay off in depts. in pre-tenure years. i had a request to write a chapter for something i don't know if i even have an idea to say anything about. i'm afraid i may be at a pause, mid-years, mid-passage state myself but i also don't know if it's just this stunning fall 01-spring 02 season which is not like any i recall. i'll forward the call for chapters and see what you think. (Re: [no subject])

The call for papers asked for proposals related to balancing teaching, scholarship, and service in contemporary colleges, specifically English departments. So new to my job, I wasn't sure I had anything to say either, but I welcomed the opportunity to write together.

Both Wendy and I found collaboration generative. Each day for weeks, we'd send long emails back and forth, each reflecting on the ways we sought to integrate teaching, scholarship, and service. Early in the process, Wendy pronounced me "cup half full" and herself "cup half empty," yet despite inevitable frustrations in careers, departments, universities, life, I never saw Wendy as pessimistic. Over the eight years of our friendship, she often asked in differing contexts wheth-

er I was optimistic about the future of composition. Always, I said “yes,” and always that sense of optimism was, in large part, because of Wendy. It was her work, her presence, that made me hopeful.

Writing together seemed to make Wendy more optimistic as well. Early in our work on the essay, she wrote about the process: “and the love of the writing means we don’t care—we write it anyway if it works for the collection or not. which is another difference, point—the liking to co-author for a particular sort of conversation that can only be done with print words and word play but actually has always been what enables the bit of conversation i’m capable of” (Re: Searching for cups). We sent poems, quotations, and stories, cutting and pasting each other’s words into multiple, messy drafts. We left spaces between paragraphs, inviting each other into and to extend the conversation.

Early in the writing process, Wendy ended an email with “m+w squared” (Re: Pulling things together), gesturing to the ways individuals working together add up to more than just two people’s ideas. We change—become more—in the presence of others. In a later stage, she wrote, “i felt a familiar ‘this will work’ pricking of my scalp in rereading the earlier parts and realizing i wasn’t quite sure sometimes who had written which paragraph/section” (Re: here’s the attachment). For me, and probably Wendy, the collaborative process was just as important as any product, any publication, could be. It provided a space for connection, correspondence. As Wendy reflected, “it’s so pleasant to write with someone who understands writing in a similar way: to this project (and others), w” (Re: An Invitation). I knew that pleasure and looked forward to the projects to come.

Beyond writing essays and a poem for her books, one co-authored essay was the only project we completed together, though Wendy was always coming up with ideas for others. She once wrote, “we should edit a whole collection of hummingbird poetry, nonfiction, fiction, and photos. the hummingbird book” (Re: letters to a young writer). She was, just as Will Baker wrote, “Quick. Sharp. Light. Intense” (5), a welcome, energizing presence.

Seasons, Gifts

Wendy and I corresponded most in the openings between semesters or to celebrate (sometimes mourn) beginnings or endings. In January, she’d write about the Chinese tulip trees and azaleas, while my world was marked by mid-Atlantic snow on spruce branches and dreams of crocuses, early signs of spring. When, in March, Wendy described the scent of crepe myrtle and the sight of high pollen season, chartreuse green coating everything, I told of redbuds and tulips. While she wrote about November dolphins and porpoises at Alligator Point, I talked of the last oak and maple leaves of autumn.

Each December, we'd look forward to time and space to write. In December 2002, as we were finishing our co-authored essay and wrapping up the semester, I told Wendy about the creative nonfiction portfolio a student had delivered to my office, wrapped as a gift in purple ribbon. She responded, "what if we asked them to all wrap these in wrapping paper of choice (would some choose birthday, anniversary, xmas papers?)—or name the person besides ourselves they'd most like to give the portfolio to?" (Re: that is). That she saw student writing as a gift worth giving and worth receiving set Wendy apart from many teachers, especially teachers facing piles that became something to get through rather than something to anticipate or welcome.

Like all teachers, Wendy felt exhaustion and frustration, but those feelings simply prompted more writing. When stuck, angry, or disappointed, she went for a run, wrote a poem, sent an email, or tried to figure something out in an article or essay.

For Christmas that year, I sent Wendy a hummingbird calendar wrapped in handmade paper. In her thank you note, she said she'd use it all year long. That year, 2003, we saw each other only once—shared an hour-long conversation at CCCC and emails about dogs, family, work, and later chemotherapy and radiation. Three months into her treatments, Wendy wrote to say she had six months or so left of chemotherapy. I joked, "You could make a person in that amount of time," and she wrote back, that's "the best line i've heard on this process so far" (Re: updated bio).

A little over a month later, she was gone.

Hundreds, even thousands I imagine, of us stared blankly at computer screens or sat silently with a phone pressed to our ears at the news. Speechless.

For months after her death, I found myself expecting one more email or wishing to write to her. I realized how often we did correspond. More than the long, descriptive emails to mark the end of the semester or beginning of a season, there were hundreds of short notes about an assignment that did or didn't work, best wishes for weekend grading, hope for time to write or rest, a poem, a funny or horrifying family story, good news, bad news, an idea, an invitation. "More soon," I'd close. "l,w," she'd end.

For months, I spent hours upon hours, re-reading old emails, stunned by the thought that another from Wendy would never flash across the screen. Of all the memories, all the messages, one stands out. In March of 1999, Wendy and I were both reeling from the death of close friends. We'd just returned from CCCC, from the comfort of seeing friends, and I'd borrowed a line from Leslie Marmon Silko's exchange with James Wright, "I'm glad and relieved you exist." Wendy reflected on the familiar feeling, writing, "that's how i felt when i looked up and saw you in the audience as a still, comfortable point of focus and often the same when i'd look across the hotel lobby and see friends i couldn't quite catch up to but was glad they were there. in fact, a few times

I slipped into a corner and just watched. . . .” (Re: finally spring, thinking of redbuds).

The CCCC after her death, many of us, too, slipped into a corner and watched, half-expecting Wendy to round the corner. She’d be rushing to a meeting, maybe a session, but she’d smile, wave, offer a quick hug and be off. She was present, even in her absence.

I felt that presence in January of 2004 when I flew to Florida for her memorial service at Florida State. For days, I walked the beach on the Gulf Coast side, thinking of how much she loved that place, even though she sometimes dreamed of moving back west. I watched labs run on the beach, thinking any one of them could have been hers—Lucy—thinking any one of the joggers could have been Wendy. One April, she wrote to say that the birds were using Lucy’s sheddings for their nests.

She always noticed the birds. In her poem “Mid-passage,” from a chapbook by the same title, Wendy writes about mockingbirds and hoot-owls, the energies of the young: “Outside, / under night’s spotlight, / I admire the bird’s young energies” (34). It was Wendy’s energies I admired: she wrote more, did more, created more, felt more, nurtured more in just over 50 years than most can imagine doing in a longer lifetime.

There are a lifetime of things I wish I had written or said. I wish I had the chance to tell Wendy I used *Thirteen Ways of Looking for a Poem* in my poetry writing class the spring after her death. Like she would have, I wrote with the students during every class. Most often, my poems were addressed to her. And I finally wrote the pantoum, my first, she had asked for years earlier.

Pantoum for Wendy

I cannot stop wishing you back,
playing your words, your laugh,
over and over. Feet in the sand
at Alligator Point, I look up.

Playing your words, your laugh
in my mind, I see the afternoon sun
at Alligator Point as I look up
to you, hanging the hummingbird feeder.

In my mind, I see the afternoon sun
on your hair, cheeks. I smile
at you, hanging the hummingbird feeder,
spilled nectar pink on Hawaiian print.

Remembering your hair, cheeks, I smile
over and over. Feet in the sand,
spilled nectar pink on Hawaiian print,

I cannot stop wishing you back.

Beyond the change of seasons, poems, teaching or family stories, there was another occasion for correspondence; I'd often meet people at conferences who would tell me that they wouldn't be teaching today if it were not for Wendy Bishop and her work. I'd write to tell her that. And the hope I find today is the knowledge that a part of Wendy exists in hundreds of teachers and writers who teach and write the way they do in large part because of her.

If I could have wrapped every word I wrote in the year after Wendy's death, I would have wrapped it in handmade paper composed of leaves, flower petals, and recycled office paper—all the drafts that weren't quite finished. And, if I could have, I would have given it to Wendy, for most of it was to, for, in memory, somehow because of her and the way we corresponded.

Pause, Mid-Years, Mid-Passage Correspondences

Wendy died twenty years ago. In these two decades, I've seen other correspondences between Wendy and myself. I am now a year older than Wendy was when she died. I'm not the only one who has done the math. Doug Hesse does the math in his contribution to this Cluster Conversation: "Wendy was 50 when she died. I was 47, which means that as I write, I've now lived 17 years longer." Last year, I heard from one of Wendy's co-authors, David Starkey, who wrote, "Now that I've outlived her by a decade, she's starting to feel more like a genius younger sister than an older (genius) mentor" (Re: Trying to find). At 51, I understand the "pause, mid-years, mid-passage state" that I could not have understood when I was 29 or 30. I find myself asking others, like Wendy asked me, "Do you feel optimistic?" But instead of asking about Composition Studies, I'm asking about English Departments, the Humanities, academia.

I've returned to the book chapter, "Is Your Cup Half Empty or Half Full? On Seeking Fullness in Academic Places," Wendy and I wrote more than twenty years ago:

We have found that ‘remembering’ has been instrumental in allowing us to find a balance in academic life. The process of connecting what we thought (then) with what we think (now) is explained in studies of adult reentry (often women) college students. We believe that what is useful for the adult academic learner is useful for the adult academic—a constant attention to and making of accounts of one’s learning helps to (re)integrate diverse aspects of one’s life. (175)

I have been reintegrating my life, in part, because of another correspondence: like Wendy, I was diagnosed with a blood cancer (leukemia rather than lymphoma), but it did not take my life. It did, however, strip away my ability—for a while—to serve on multiple committees, teach multiple classes, work on multiple books, say yes to multiple requests to conduct manuscript or promotion reviews. As the rogue cells multiplied in me, I had to reevaluate what I could do, what I wanted to do, what gave life (whether there would be minutes or years or decades left) meaning. Years later, I’m still doing that reevaluating.

I go back to that article, to the words Wendy and I wrote:

We worry as that old feeling comes upon us, that we are co-existing in an academic climate that encourages the heroic, the martyr-like, the materially-focused, the multi-tasking career arc. We worry about the possible slips between the cup and the lip. How do we advise others on ways to make a nest—find a horizontal safe house—within the vertical hierarchy of the institution? (Is Your Cup 168)

I think about the nest, the safe house, the ways we offered the advice we needed to take ourselves: “find safe audiences—co-author in order to build nourishing relationships and develop innovative thinking/texts; use e-mail exchanges and tag-team writing to build on and refine each other’s ideas” (180). I still need that advice, still need “self-mentoring as a way of seeing the academy, of learning how to accept what’s there and ask for what’s not in ways that fit one’s own ethos and ethics within an admittedly difficult institutional climate” (177). Do you need that, too?

Here’s what that process of re-integration and of finding correspondences reminds me: writing and teaching writing and writing alongside students still matters to me. It still gives my life purpose and meaning. As I create syllabi for my autumn classes—The Practice of Writing, Creative Nonfiction Workshop, Writing and Reading Animals—I’m building in opportunities to write for and in every class period, scaffolding support for a writing life for myself, for my students. I am returning to the radical revision assignment that Amy Hodges Hamilton and Micaela Cuellar describe in their piece: “a ‘radical revision’ of a previously completed text, where students [are] invited to consider changes in voice/tone, syntax, genre, audience, time, physical layout/typography, or even medium.” The re-seeing through changes in form and genre that they describe feels new and exciting even a more than a quarter of a century after the publication of Bishop’s *Elements of*

Alternate Style: Essays on Writing and Revision.

Making connections with colleagues across the country who share similar values still matters to me. This past April, I attended Cheryl Glenn's moving and inspiring retirement celebration—a symposium that looked and felt a bit like that Sesame Street spoof *Here Is Your Life* that Wendy had joked about doing for her CCCC Chair's Address. Former high school students Cheryl had taught, former graduate students, teachers, family members, co-authors, friends, colleagues from across the country all gathered and gave talks and ate together and told stories and made further connections. In Cheryl's kitchen, I talked with one of her former graduate students, Heather Brook Adams, about our desire to mentor the way we'd been mentored. My dissertation director, Andrea Lunsford—mentor extraordinaire—was at that gathering, too. In Cheryl's living room, when I was talking with Kris Ratcliffe and brought up something Wendy had said, poet Robin Becker came over and said, "I heard you mention Wendy Bishop," and the circle of conversation opened. All these correspondences created an optimism and sense of hope and connection that I hadn't felt in a while.

Recently, I was consolidating boxes of letters, putting a lifetime of correspondence into larger boxes. I saw a flash of yellow and Wendy's familiar handwriting, a paper bird migrating back. And then another! The next was a letter Wendy had written on September 11, 2001, a day many of us will never forget, a day on which most of my students now were not yet conceived.

This morning, I pulled Wendy's posthumously published poetry collection *My Last Door* from my shelf and found her poem "Where the Hummingbird Sips, There Sip I: An Appreciation," in which she writes of a hummingbird: "She's what I want to be" (72). And I see Wendy in her description of the hummingbird:

Her wings long hands
in service of her tongue—
even as she begins,
she's at top speed,
rising phoenix-like
from another flower-flame. (73)

Wendy Bishop rises in the flower-flames of her words, the writing that sustained her and that—even decades later—continues to inspire and mentor others. In our teaching, our writing, our friendships, may we continue to find correspondences.

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