

Writing With and After Wendy

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when it comes down to it, i'm an introvert who loves to/needs to write and finds her community where she can--as in these e-mails, the conferences.

Wendy Bishop to me, "re: catching up," 4/4/02 7:34 am

I recently skimmed dozens of emails from Wendy Bishop between 1999 and 2002. Someone had wanted details about the CCCC Public Policy Committee, which she'd asked me to form and chair. I found the information and in the process happily revisited several other conversations: about Wendy's essay that I published in a College English special issue on creative nonfiction, about a book project with Kathi Yancey and Carrie Leverenz that ultimately was overtaken by Wendy's cancer, and, most poignantly, about personal lives that included family worries and career doubts. Each email came entirely lower case and signed "cheers,w" or "I,w" as if her writerly torrent couldn't be hindered by shift keys—or perhaps as if, despite her prolific output, part of her remained careful to leave modest footprints. In August 2001, for example, our main topic was whether I'd lead an upcoming C's Executive Committee retreat, but I was worrying about my wife having cancer, and Wendy was worrying about Hurricane Barry:

we have the place we really want to be living at on the gulf coast and it will take a few days to get there (45 miles away, dean was evacuated yesterday) and see what's left of our cinderblock imaginary retirement. but the place on alligator point has been fine for 50 years so i'm sure it's fine still. hurricanes come with the sea turtles and dolphins and i'd say it's a fair deal.

i'll be in touch and give becky my best thoughts. same for you, I,w

Wendy to me, "re: a double p.s." August 6, 2001, 1:31 pm

I first really got to know Wendy at a picnic in Oxford, Mississippi, July 1994. The occasion was a joint WPA/ADE summer conference, at an evening social beneath oaks on a mansion's lawn, with fried chicken and coleslaw served on long white tables. Libby Rankin invited me to join her, Lad Tobin, and Wendy, people whose work I admired as way out of my own league. I felt lucky. Those three were friends, and I watched their easy banter with envy but was happy to be there as a newcomer warmly welcomed. This was the second time I'd met Wendy, the first being during a small, late afternoon session at the CCCC Seattle, 1989. Wearing a down vest, she sat near the back wall, offering astute comments during the discussion. I went up afterward to share my appreciation, and I mostly remember her wariness.

When I was program chair for the 1999 WPA conference at Purdue, I invited Wendy to speak. She said she'd need a small stipend to offset childcare costs when she left Tallahassee. Of course. She chose as her title "What Interests Me Is What Interests You: The Writing of WPAs," had us write during her talk, and sent us off with some prompts.

1. Write vignettes of all the memorable people you've encountered. In ten years you'll have forgotten many of them—savor—them now.
2. Take off the weight of this world and list the things you have learned: small to large. Practical to theoretical and back again (or aren't these often intricately intertwined?).
3. Write a letter back to this conference; tell it what it did and didn't do for you. Ask it hard questions. Do a short analysis of what you saw as its main text and subtexts. Put your finger on the pulse and pressure points that you brought along with you, that you felt from others.
4. Write a piece praising yourself—your work, your sense of what it means to be in your role(s), the spaces the role(s) create in your life that might not otherwise be there for you to fill.
5. Tally up your losses. Put them down in writing, then take that writing and perform a ceremony for it: let it go, give it up, forgive it (and yourself, and others): put it in a ten-year time capsule, a message in a bottle, bid it (at least temporary) adieu. Now, feel what you feel without these losses. If you could/can forgive yourself, are you more willing to go on?

These invitations exemplify Wendy's pure belief in the personal value of writing, her utter respect for the craft and those who practiced it. Although the Purdue conference was for administrators, and although Wendy surely was one of us, she insisted that we remember and privilege our identities as writers. The prompts were partly therapeutic, a role I sometimes saw writing as

filling for Wendy, though writing for her had the larger purpose of creating, something bigger than repairing or healing.

Those values drove many people to dismiss Wendy as naïvely romantic, even dangerously so. Most infamously, Gary Olson used her as an avatar of ideas threatening “the death of composition as an intellectual discipline.” Olson’s ire focused on Wendy’s 1999 CCC essay “Places to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition,” which he cast as seeking to deny the place for theorists, especially social constructionists, within composition studies. Gary made reasonable points about keeping composition a large field, and he interestingly complicated the present dispute as not between social scientists and humanists but, rather, between both of those and a philosophical/theoretical tradition interested more broadly in status and power. Still, in framing the issue as one of “creative” writing (his quotation marks) v. intellectual work, I think he missed Wendy’s point. She was trying to hold as central to our field the act and craft of writing as opposed to theories about writing. Certainly, Gary was right to assert that theorists cared about writing, including their own, as much as “creative” writers do. But Wendy called for privileging at least in our field the techne and art of making texts, of whatever genres and subject matters, rather than using writing as a topical field and way into larger social and political structures. However vital those latter matters surely are, and important as I found both of and about, both craft and status, I remain drawn to Wendy’s emphasis on producing writing—on the act, on style and practice more than on idea or analysis. Those traces show in my “Creative Writing and Composition” in CCC a decade later.

Wendy certainly heard and was troubled by those critiques. In January 2002, when I sent her editorial suggestions to fine-tune “Suddenly Sexy,” a piece I’d already accepted, she replied,

out of the frying pan into the fire, doug.

i started in revising this last week and somehow the essay turned to shreds as i tried to make it more organized and erudite. i want to give it another go but can’t until friday which i’ve slotted for nearly all day, me and “suddenly sexy,” mano a mano. if i can’t pull it off (i think i may have a spectre of “first time in CE and tired of Gary Olson calling me the death of theory audience jitters”) then i’ll just go back to the original and do the cosmetic things you suggested. but you had good deeper revision ideas and i want to try to honor them--it’s just i don’t write logical or linear and when i pull out a thread and try to insert a backbone, it seems to come tumbling down. and the conflation of cnf and essay is a troubling and pesky one--this is such a slippery area--but i’m game for the challenge.

Wendy to me, “this is just to say,” Wednesday, 1/23/02, 5:47 am

I was surprised that Wendy, to all appearances productively confident, would have jitters about writing for any readership. As someone who's always written with doubts and difficulties, I was reassured to have lofty company, especially someone whose revising could also tatter a draft. Wendy knew she was cutting diagonally against many (perhaps most) of the prominent scholars in our field, and she carried the extra weight of being a poet (one who even became chair of AWP) in the afterglow of Jim Berlin's sharp but ultimately reductive critique of poetics through the 1990s. In those days, poetry specifically (and creative writing generally) met some contempt within our field, both as a classist avatar of an unexamined belletristic tradition and as cushy idling while there were more urgent (politically, economically) writing matters to sort. If composition studies loathed literature colleagues for their resources, status, and power (at that time) in departments, it dismissed academic poets as indulgent and indulged. Compositionists were doing the hard and necessary work. Setting aside the accuracy and fairness of this attribution, it is historically the case that creative writing had been part of CCCC through the 1960s. Wendy was publishing articles in CCC just as poets Marvin Bell and William Stafford had done three decades earlier, although, as I've noted by the mid sixties, scholars like Ed Corbett and Francis Christensen were winning the organization's hearts and minds.

I dedicated the 2004 CCCC convention program to Wendy, writing a few comments on her life and accomplishments and reprinting her "My Convention Poem." Kathi Yancey and I organized a session, "Her Words and Ours: A Celebration of the Life of Wendy Bishop," which I put in a late Thursday afternoon slot. Lad Tobin, Deborah Coxwell Teague, Libby Rankin, and Marilyn Cooper all shared memories of Wendy. Carrie Leverenz, John Boe, Keith Gilyard, and David Starkey all read some of her work. The center of the session, however, featured everyone present writing in response to one of Wendy's invitations—the five from Purdue I reprinted above, plus seven more Kathi and I had culled from her books. After writing, we shared them, led at tables whose leaders included Pavel Zamelinski, Hans Ostrom, Lisa Albrecht, John Lovas, Joye Neff, Shirley Wilson Logan, Michael Spooner, and Erika Lindeman. I include all the names both to inscribe these people into this remembrance and to suggest the company she kept and people who missed her—at least those able to come to San Antonio that spring.

Going on twenty years, I've kept the writings people gave me from that celebration. It's long past time to reach to their writers—the ones still living—to see if I/we might do something with them, perhaps revisit what we wrote. My own piece (responding to Wendy's prompt #10: "Write about decisions, windows, chances, turns") went back to that day in Oxford, Mississippi, concluding, "I don't know cause and effect here. I do know there's a chain of meetings with Wendy that began with the fairly shy me deciding on a July afternoon to sit down with my betters. Not a big decision at all, more chance than window. I've learned since to try making room at tables."

what's bad is i haven't given you much time to respond to this (if any).

Wendy to me, "here 'tis," 1/28/02, 10:17 am

Today I'm drawn to Wendy's shortest prompt, #9: "Write about time." Not much rhetorical situation in that assignment. I imagine someone chiding its author as being too unfocused, lacking exigency. But I see it as capaciously trusting, letting writers figure audience and purpose based on their interests and needs.

"Write about time."

Wendy was 50 when she died. I was 47, which means that as I write, I've now lived to an age 17 years beyond her. Had she lived to 67, I imagine she'd long ago have retired to that cinder-block beach house on Alligator Point to make poems, memoirs, stories, and essays. I can't help confronting the sober truth that she'd have made better use of those years than I have, at least in terms of writing. In other dimensions of life, I think I've done fine, though who doesn't have regrets? But in mapping my writerly life against the extrapolation of another's, especially when that other is Wendy, I enter a dispiriting competition. Wendy would loathe competitive self-doubt and redirect me to ask what writing I wanted to do tomorrow, cautioning against fussing about writing I didn't do yesterday, suggesting that if we're being really honest, I must have derived some compensatory satisfaction from the multiple service and leadership roles I took in the past couple decades, commitments that rendered my writing practice a stream, not a river: an oxbow, not the main channel. I suspect, further, she'd urge me to make writing a priority—now!—if that's what I thought I wanted. Time is neither plentiful nor promised.

I have a preserving strong impression of Wendy that comes from the Monday before Thanksgiving, 2001. We were both standing outside the Baltimore convention center, and she invited me to share a ride to the airport. We talked about meetings we'd just attended, about my son's journey as a cellist, about the upcoming holiday. Conversation that started in animation dwindled to near silence as we neared the airport, Wendy slumping lower in the corner of back-seat and door. She'd just led her last meeting as CCC's chair, and she was exhausted. I was chastened to realize that I'd failed to register the personal costs of her commitments and dedication, seeing instead only the torrent of her talent. We'd continue sending emails. We'd continue meeting: drinks in the Palmer House the next spring, a talk I gave at Florida State. We promised to propose a panel for CCC in 2004, but she was dead by November 2003. It turns out the session we finally did share featured Wendy having us write, showing the way through her own words. The subject was writing. The subject was Wendy.

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