

# A Eulogy for an Awful Time That Just Won't Die

Bradley Smith

Recently, a friend reminded me that Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken," contrary to popular belief, is about the fantasies we tell ourselves as we look back, even though it has been widely interpreted as hailing the virtues of forging ahead into adventure by leaving the beaten path. Instead of an attitude in the present, the poem is a commentary on reflection. The two roads are the same, more or less. The road "less traveled by" is a myth of our own making. What's different is our perception of those memories, the things we choose to highlight and the story we tell ourselves. So here are some half-truths about how I made it through these past few years as a WPA and teacher: a reflection on a disagreeable time, like a eulogy for a relative no one likes. In eulogies, we tend to gloss over the worst aspects of a person. These memories I share here are true to my best recollection and shored up by rereading journal entries and social media posts from that time, but these memories gloss over half of the story. The lie of what I write is what's left out: the deaths of friends and family, community and country, line graphs that spike exponentially, the ever-expanding number of commas in total columns. But this is the story I choose to tell at this moment. I'll leave my reflections on these deaths for another day.

## PARENT-TEACHER CONVERGENCE

*How stressed are you all right now? I'm currently-dipping-pita-chips-in-a-jar-of-Skippy stressed. I didn't know that was a thing until just now.*

— Facebook post, July 16, 2020

During the pandemic, say September 2020 to January 2021, I trudged through my work while trying to keep my daughter on track in her second grade Zoom sessions and gamified curriculum. During these months writing productivity settled into a dull routine of editing a database of all the post-secondary institutions of education in the US. Google search, click, highlight, ctrl C, ctrl V, repeat. With my splintered focus, this was the best way for me to be productive while keeping one eye and ear on Addie as she clicked through math-fact games or read passages aloud to her reading group. At other times, I shut my home office door and let Addie and her brother, Evan, watch YouTube and sneak entire bags of chocolate chips

out of the pantry so that I could sit and think and write; remote learning went off the rails.

*[Screenshot. YouTube clip. The caption reads: "Sesame Street: Ernie is loud while Bert reads.]" "Actual footage of me working while Addie does remote learning."—Facebook post, November 2020.*

This is what Addie sounds like while working on her second-grade math facts. She sings, “Two plus three equals fi-high-hive, three plus four equals seven. Everybody’s got their own way, so we don’t have to rush. Seven minus two eee-he-he-quals a different number than them. It was that. Six plus two equals eight so we will go there. One plus zero equals whoa-o-whoa one. One. Oooohhh! But I don’t know what these two equal so I can go five minus two eeequals three-he-he. One plus zero equals one-hun-hun. Whee!” As she answers questions, she works her way around a maze in a math-fact Pac-Man knockoff, where her answers move her toward gems and away from monsters and eventually toward the end of the maze. As she makes it to the end, her computer gives a small ding, which prompts her to say, “Whee!”

I am next to her in an antique armchair more suited for decoration than comfort, working along to this dulcet ambient soundtrack. As we entered November, I realized that I needed a better chair to sit in and write. So, I masked up, made a special trip to a furniture store, and found one that would be more comfortable for long-term sedentary work. It didn’t arrive until April. Supply chains . . .

Sometimes, Addie asks me to pull up a chair next to her to help with math facts or reading, and I do. I model my best writing center praxis. I am patiently prompting and asking questions. My laptop goes to sleep perched on the end table behind me. Some days we free write together. Addie writes about mermaids or horseback riding, panda bears, garbage. I write about how awful the educational computer programs are that she’s required to use. They are right out of Linda Adler-Kassner’s description of the Education Industrial Complex (“2017 CCCC Chair’s Address”), and they claim to make learning easy by diagnosing and fixing Addie’s problems through targeted curriculum. These programs seem to identify a lot of problems that I don’t see in Addie, and I’m further reminded of Sharon Crowley’s description of the rise of Harvard’s English A—how the examination legitimized the need for the course (*Composition in the University* 72). I write about whether I’m being “that parent,” who claims, “My baby is perfect,” and can’t see that Addie is struggling with reading, writing, and math. The program tells us that she reads at a kindergarten level, and her teachers tell

us that too, based on what the program tells them. But then each night she reads to us passages from *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and then later from *Charlotte's Web* and then *Harry Potter*. The program asks her to read a passage about pandas. Addie skips to the end and clicks the answers that she knows already and guesses on the rest. She gets most of them right. She is proud of this life hack.

I dive deep into the research about one program. There are no peer-reviewed texts that indicate this program is effective. The literature is comprised of a few dissertations; some of them demonstrate positive results, some negative, others demonstrate no significant differences when the program is used as an intervention. This is how I cope with the stress and anxieties of processing how Addie is doing in school. I use the biggest weapon I have: my disciplinary training. I research the problem. I try to learn and to understand. It doesn't help much.

I do the same thing at work when I am faced with external pressures that require me to rethink our first-year writing curriculum and add a co-requisite course that doesn't seem to fit with our institutional context. I do the research. I look at curricular structures from across the state. I look at peer institutions. I study what HBCUs and HSIs are doing. I read gobs of literature. I write a 4,000-word memo on the problems with the proposed co-requisite and then offer an alternative plan. It's a battle that I lose slowly and progressively. We pilot it and there are some small wins, but generally, it's a disaster in all the ways listed in the memo. During this period, much of my administrative time was spent thinking there must be a better way to address these exigencies. I never found a suitable solution. That failure still eats at me.

This approach to problem-solving, diving in, digging down to find the truth and understand it, maybe isn't the best. It turns writing sessions and reading sessions into angst-fueled binges that spiral down time-wasting rabbit holes. This is how I arrive at some of my worst moments, mentally. It's not clear to me still if this is cause or effect, or maybe it's a little of both. Here's the truth of this strategy for problem solving: it didn't solve any problems. All that research, all that time and energy didn't do much of anything to change the circumstances either in Addie's education or my administrative work. So, what was the point of it besides being an outlet for my anxieties?

## FINDING A DIFFERENT WAY, FINDING FRIENDS

*[Overheard on Zoom] Addie's Teacher: "When making something plural, you add an 's' or an 'es' to the end. If a word ends in a consonant, like 'books', or 'cards' you just add an 's', except for some special cases. You wouldn't say 'book-es'.*

*Two days later: "Writing on my own today. Addie is doing a school diagnostic in the next room, and I don't want to disturb. I'm beginning to do research into language policies and attitudes surrounding the use of Black and White English. . . . Often, people use the metaphor that language is like clothes that you change with the context. The more formal the occasion, the more formal your clothes. Nah. Language is skin."—  
Writing Group Journal Entry*

*Computer Diagnostic in the next room: "Select the correct spelling of 'cloth-es.'"*

Jelena leads the work portion of our "Show Up and Write" group each week with the question, "So what are you working on today?" We meet on Zoom and start with hellos and small talk. Then, after sharing our goals, for the next two hours we all write. It ends with a quick reflection. From time-to-time, Addie and Evan pop in, stare into the camera over my shoulder, and receive smiles and waves. I smile and wave at Jelena's daughter. I say hello to Chris, Crystal, Novia, and others who pop in and out over the months and years. With Jelena's question, I turn my mental focus away from the nervous energy of thinking about the world's problems and my own problems toward little things that I have been noticing, intellectual itches that I scratch during these two hours. Curiosity spurs me to spend a few weeks reading and writing about risk communication, public health information, and the rise of the neoliberal subject with only a vague expectation that it might become a conference presentation at some point. Later, I set this aside to learn and write about why and how we use reading in first-year writing. When George Floyd is murdered, I revisit Asao Inoue's 2019 CCCC's Presidential Address, read April Baker-Bell's book *Linguistic Justice*, and do some soul searching about how to ethically teach writing given my position as a white, male teacher. Reading a friend's scholarship on restorative justice makes me think about its potential for our discipline and for writing pedagogy, so I read and write about that.

In these moments, my journals and writing shift away from fear, anger, exhaustion. I find myself writing things like "surprisingly, another productive day." The word "fascinating" comes up again and again.

Yet looking back, I see that my writing goals and reflections are conspicuously absent from the “Show Up and Write” group starting in March 2021, and they don't reappear until the following fall. March 2021 was especially difficult; I was balancing a large research project with a major decision about the proposed co-requisite. This writing group absence marks when I'd finally reached the point of exhaustion. Looking back on what I accomplished during that time, I was frenetically productive in ways that I'm still reaping the professional benefits. But it makes me wonder why I cut out the portions of my work that are the most rewarding. Why did I turn away from chasing those curiosities? Why did I spend my time writing long memos that no one would read? If the writing group is the most rewarding and fulfilling aspect of my work, what does that say about my work as the director of first-year writing?

*Ethics of care is focused on “relationships rather than on the dispositions of individuals” (Held 4).*

— Research notes entry

The “Show Up and Write” group is one of two writing groups that I belong to. The second group draws from Joli Jensen's book *Write No Matter What*. In this group, our discussions focus on our writing goals and our writing/researching processes. During meetings, I talk with Christopher, Fran, and Ben about their efforts at putting together a book prospectus and selecting publishers, working at the intersections of scholarship and our personal lives, working with reviewer comments, etc. The group offers the opportunity to celebrate our scholarly successes. Over the years, we cheer each other on when books, articles, and conference presentations move from concept to publication. This group offers support when one of my reviews comes back with a comment about how the work is beautiful and wonderfully written but that I should cut two-thirds of it and rewrite the final third. They commiserate with me when another piece is rejected in a desk review. Sharing these failures with them is helpful. This group helps me process the news and think more ambitiously about my work. With their encouragement, I start to envision more prestigious venues for my scholarship. I start taking risks that I had shied away from in the past.

#### SOMETHING TO TAKE WITH YOU

*The band Chicago on the radio: “Will you still love me for the rest of my life?”*

*Addie: "Is this Kristoff from Frozen? [Sings]  
LOST IN THE WOOOOOODS"*

To suggest that pandemic times are dead and gone is a myth, of course. Carrying through the motif of Frost's poem, we're still in the yellow woods. Moreover, the threat of burnout for teachers and academics is nothing new and isn't going away in this "new normal." The pandemic just exacerbated it to the point where many of us could no longer ignore what was happening. But, perhaps, it's useful to say that we're done with these things, that we are past the pandemic and everything else from these recent years. Maybe if we can tell ourselves that we have made it through and that we are changed somehow, we can feel better about it. I notice, though, that my enthusiasm for being a WPA waned during this time. I notice that I now approach the same old conversations about the writing program with a new administration with a little less patience. Those routine WPA tasks, like assessment and planning professional development sessions, take a little longer for me to start and are put off until they must be done. I don't have the same eagerness for this job. But still, I do love it . . . at times . . . in many ways.

What sustained me during these past few years was the caring relations and the intellectual curiosity from these writing groups: the two formed with my colleagues and with Addie. Even through the growing apathy that made it harder to show up for colleagues and peers and family, I could still find fascination in the things that I noticed in the world around me and comfort in these mini connections on Tuesday mornings and Thursdays once a month. Elizabeth Gilbert writes that "curiosity is the truth and the way of creative living," and that resonates with me (237). Thinking deeply, reading openly, drafting some throw-away scraps that might someday become something helped draw me back and remind me why I love this job. The conversations in these groups spurred me on, encouraged my ideas, and added to their complexity. Now, mellowed with time, the frustration and worry has been drawn out of those memories of sitting next to Addie while we worked. When I willfully forget the daily grind, I'm left with those delightful moments when Addie and I read and wrote together. Truly, she is the Ernie to my Bert.

It is disastrous to ignore the worst parts of history. Such erasures fuel continued oppression, but I think that there is value to carving out contexts where we can selectively remember what was good about bad times. It allows us to cultivate hope for a better future; it allows us to carry forward that which is useful and discard those things that are a burden. It allows us to see the difference between them. And so, looking back, I can see

now that we did it, we made it through together. At least, that's the story I choose to tell myself.

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