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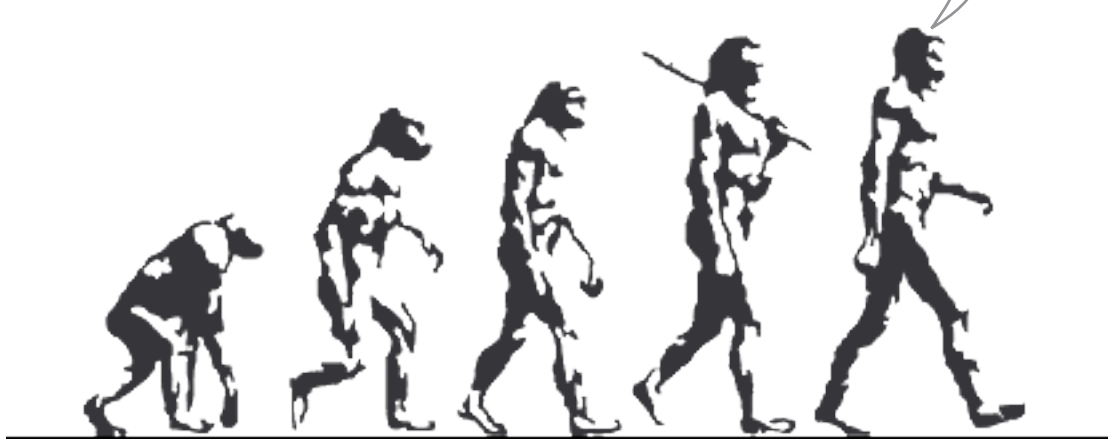
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EVOLUTION OF A *voice*



Graphic from Pearson Education

By Justin Towers

Photos courtesy of the author

Try reading a book to your kids!” My father would yell at the answering machine. As a child, my parents operated a small cable television company in the Southern Adirondacks. It seemed as though whenever a holiday came around, the cable would go out somewhere in Hamilton County. Angry messages would instantly flow in from up to sixty miles away asking how it was possible to survive the rain/snow/Daytona 500 without cable. The calls that disgusted Brian and Kathleen Towers the most however, were from customers who swore that their kids would die of pure boredom if the cable guy didn’t show up yesterday. But, these people paid for a service, so my father and Hamilton County Gore Mountain Cable TV’s only other employee Mike, an ill-tempered but genuinely good-hearted ex-welder/conspiracy theorist, would drive sometimes 200 miles in a day to make sure Dale Earnhardt would grace the afternoon broadcast.

My parents took their own answering machine-directed advice to heart. My mother began reading to me at an early age. She preferred not to read regular children’s books. Instead, she would read books with

easily comprehensible adult-level language. My mother never “talked down” to me; she wanted me to develop an adult lexicon and believed that speaking in such a way or reading books with oversimplified vocabulary did nothing to accomplish this. I remember books such as the abridged version of *Treasure Island*, a few short story anthologies, and some examples of what my elementary school teachers would later term, “chapter books.”

I remember my first piece of creative writing. It was a *Where the Wild Things Are* length first person narrative involving my older brother and a vampire. My second grade teacher, Miss Reese, awarded me some sort of class-wide blue ribbon. Was the prize meaningless? Possibly. But, it fueled an idea that I may have a knack for creative writing, an idea that stuck with me for years to come. Somewhere in my subconscious I believe the event may have fueled an interest for my native language and a desire to record it. In fourth grade, I received a perfect score on the New York State Standardized English Tests.

High school came around and so did high school English classes. My school’s enrollment was around



180 students kindergarten through 12th grade, so there weren't many choices regarding different courses or even different sections for that matter; I ended up in a typical English curriculum. Overall, I enjoyed my classes and performed well, attaining As and A-s. However, I found myself constantly disinterested in the assigned readings. Even when we read authors whose works, style, and contribution to literature I hold in great reverence, such as Hemingway and Steinbeck, I chose only to skim the chapters. I had developed a rebellious nature in regard to literature; I read what I wanted to and chose not to read assigned material simply on the principle that someone was telling me what I should read. It was this iconoclastic discourse towards the education system that I would have to overcome before college.

I was accepted to several creative writing

conferences in my high school years. It was at one of those that I attended a workshop taught by Andrew Devitt, a writer and English Professor from Buffalo, NY. "Don't write like your grandmother is looking over your shoulder." He told everyone. It was difficult. The liberties I was allowed to take with creative writing at this point in my life were a paradox. Gratuitous violence and gore were always "fair game." In fact, I wrote a piece of pulp fiction for a final exam in tenth grade. However, to challenge the ultra-conservative status-quo of the Southern Adirondacks to favor a more moderate approach to politics would not be tolerated. The notion of sexual interaction between a man and a woman was another theme that was very off-limits. Any reference to religion that recognized the validity of other dogmas besides Christianity was likewise unacceptable. Pieces that addressed these issues and

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themes were kept to myself in password-protected files.

It wasn't until college that my writing really burst out of the realm of strictly creative fiction. It was here that I would meld politics, environmentalism, and writing. My writing had long ago taken on nature themes, but I had yet to incorporate explicit environmentalism into a creative piece, or any piece fit to print for that matter. In the Dirty South of the Adirondacks, Environmentalism is seen as the agenda of the far left. "Environmentalist" brings images of the despotic Emperor Curt Stiles of the Adirondack Park Agency and his metaphorical Mara Jade of the private sector, The Adirondack Council. For these people there is no middle ground. There is only us and them, good and evil, God-fearing Americans and Crunchy Granola Sandal-Footed Earth People.

However, I knew better. To a great extent, I agreed with these people. And, to a great extent, I disagreed with these people. Let me step back. When I was five, my father ran for Town Supervisor in the Town of Wells and won. Over the past 16 years I've had almost first-hand experience with the Adirondack Park Agency. The APA is basically an environmental protection agency, which exacts its power as a glorified

zoning board for the entire Adirondack Park. It offers somewhat limited representation of the park residents and is time and time again accused of enacting unnecessary regulations, hindering the already fragile economy with no benefit for the environment, collusion, and being a general pain in the ass. I've seen a lot of the hang-ups that the park agency has caused over the years vicariously through my father. However, I've also seen some of the good it can do and am of the rare opinion that while the current one may be flawed, a similar government entity is necessary. A very personal example of the APA working for the good of the park has to do with the day that I became a closet environmentalist, another chapter in the saga that developed the voice I have today.

When I was young my family lived adjacent to an old rock-crushing pit which mined and crushed stone to make concrete. Day in and day out the horrendous sound of shattering rock echoed throughout our small valley. For years my parents and our neighbors feuded with the owners of the pit to shut it down as it had no legal right to operate. It was an on-going legal and sometimes personal battle that had no clear end in sight.

On a rather overcast day when I was around eight

years old, my family and I noticed a thick, black smoke rising from one corner of the pit. Upon closer inspection, it was evident that the Hunt Bros. were burning tires. My parents called the Department of Environmental Conservation, but by the time the “local” EnCon officer made it to our house, the pit owners had finished burning. “It would be one man’s word against another’s,” the officer told my father. What Officer Pitcher and my parents didn’t know was that while they were waiting for DEC, I had been busy. Grabbing a video camera, I ran next door and found my cousin, two years my senior, who was “working” with his father, a carpenter, at our mutual aunt’s house. Together, we stole off into the woods across from the burn pile and began to film. I can still remember Bill Pitcher, the Environmental Conservation officer, asking if he could “borrow this” as he held the small VHSC tape in his hand. Back in the mid 1990s, cameras never lied.

Score one for justice, right? Wrong. Sure, the tape held up in court and Hunt Bros. received some sort of fine, but it did nothing to change the fact that there was a huge rock crushing pit in our back yard. It was the APA that changed that. Yes, the Adirondack Park Agency, the Evil Empire itself. Everyone’s least favorite government entity recognized that as per its regulations, the pit was classified as an illegal mining operation and summoned the almighty power of the New York

State Attorney General’s Office. I could never view the relationship between people, government and the environment in such simple terms. By the time I graduated high school I had seen far too much of both sides to believe such a picture could ever be painted with only black and white.

Upon entering college, my voice as a writer blossomed and shifted as I relinquished the notion that I must remain a “tree-hugger in disguise” if I were to survive within my peer group. I quickly found enjoyment in writing passionate opinionated essays as assignments for my various Environmental Studies courses. I loved the freedom that ESF allowed. I didn’t have to worry that someone would try to perform an intervention on me for liberal leanings. It was so...liberating! I began to experiment with melding my creative writing and my new-found love for writing about politics. Things seemed to be going very well.

And then, I bumped into an old acquaintance, censorship. We met up when I decided to write an article about the APA and submit it to the *Knothole*, ESF’s bi-weekly newspaper. The piece gave a general rundown of the structure of the Adirondack Park Agency, pointed out some of its flaws, and called for reform that would allow greater representation of Park residents in decision making processes that affected

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them directly. I e-mailed a 1200 word draft to a friend who was an editor for the paper. She replied with a link to a website that gave suggestions on how to meet word-counts; it was too long. This seemed plenty reasonable, until she demonstrated this technique with my paper, e-mailing me back 400 of my original 1200 words and a few comments.

Every part of the article that challenged the status quo had been taken out. It was now a one-page description of how the strictest land use regulations in the country are enacted and enforced. I was told that my statements were unfounded and that she had tried to duplicate my research but couldn't find any of my information. This puzzled me because all of my information was a matter of public record and I was unaware that fact-checking was part of an editor's job. Lastly, and oddly most infuriating, she likened resident's

lack of representation to the fact that her county doesn't get a cut of any of the revenue from state parks within the county. Before I left home, I would be censored for being too liberal. Now, I'm censored for being too conservative. I suppose that when you "critique the common sense of your group," as an organic intellectual does, and have two groups, as I do, you're bound to meet at least some opposition everywhere (Cooper, 2008, p. 61).

Since then, I've managed to avoid being censored for the most part. I'm more careful with word choice

now and think about my audience before I send something to the editor or even the printer. No one wants to read something that will just make them angry; I aim to persuade and inform my readers, not to upset them. With that in mind I've managed to slide a couple of articles by that I never would have thought possible, including one in criticism of the viewpoints of Barack Obama, written a mere two days after his election and a much longer, more damning article about the APA written for an Environmental Journalism class.

I still have a lot to learn and I believe that it's tough to know the extent of what I'm lacking until I learn it. Writing isn't one of those subjects that you can make a study sheet for and cross off the concepts you've mastered until you're ready for the real world. It's a long process. I try to devote a good chunk of my time each day to reading and a good chunk to writing,

and that's the only way I'm going to learn. I suppose to a certain degree I'm still trying to negotiate my voice in terms of coming to terms with all the ways I've had to censor myself and how to get around them. However, a short trip down Memory Lane and some perusal of my manuscripts of yesteryear shows definite evolution in both my voice and who I am as a writer. In contrast to the past, I challenge the status quo, I don't confine myself to the ideals of my peer group and, most importantly, I don't "write like my grandmother is looking over my shoulder."

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Someday, I'll seek a career in journalism, but even then I know that I will still be negotiating my own voice and learning as I go. The pattern is evident even in some of the great writers of modern literature. Compare F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* with *The Great Gatsby*. Next to *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald's first book seems a tad mediocre. However, Fitzgerald was only 22 when he wrote *This Side of Paradise*. Five years, and another novel later and the author was able to create his magnum opus. While I don't expect to necessarily enjoy anywhere near the same amount of notoriety, I believe that my voice and writing will evolve in much the same way.

I believe that my experiences can be applied to the Writing Center in several ways. My experiences with censorship are a useful tool in the case of a student who may not feel comfortable completing an assignment because (s)he is asked to give a genuine opinion. I've been there. I know what it's like to be almost forced to keep your true opinion to yourself. I

can empathize with the student and explain that, in this setting, it's okay to challenge the status quo and say what you really mean. I also have the privilege of having stood on both sides of an issue that is much larger than the Adirondack Park. I can identify with both “tree-huggers” and “rednecks.” This experience has given me the ability to look at both sides of an issue and make a decision based on points from both sides, a skill, which translates well into the writing center. If a student is handed an assignment in which (s)he must examine two opposing viewpoints, I have experience with that. Finally, the fact that I am an environmental writer has the potential to play a role in the success of a session. Environmentalism is a “hot-button” issue these days. The climate is changing, humans seem to be reaching their carrying capacity, biodiversity is disappearing at an alarming rate, and the list goes on and on. If an assignment is environmentally related, I may be better suited to help them with it.

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