At Risk in the Writing Classroom: Negotiating a Lesbian Teacher Identity

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AT RISK IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM:
NEGOTIATING A LESBIAN TEACHER IDENTITY

by

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Negotiating a Lesbian Teacher Identity

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"Education is a fearful enterprise," says teacher and philosopher, Parker Palmer. Student-centered/ process-oriented pedagogy asks teachers to step out from behind the relative safety of the teacher mask and to enter the risky arena of learning. For the writing teacher, a special challenge is to help students negotiate the risks inherent in the act of writing and in sharing writing with the "Other."

To prevent fears from dominating our students, teachers must model risk-taking and risk negotiation. In my own teaching, my fears around students' reactions to learning my sexual identity meant that I more often reinforced fears than dispelled them or demonstrated to my students how to negotiate them.
FOREWORD

At 13 I knew that I was Different. Different from the people around me—my family and the neighborhood kids. The difference wasn't something good, like mathematical ability or musical talent. Therefore it must be some kind of lack. Sensing this, I felt deeply depressed.

I accepted Christ into my heart and joined a fundamentalist church, which gave me a warm, friendly social milieu. I also took up writing poems that expressed my feelings of difference, loneliness, and my yearning to belong. My poems showed me that part of my 'difference' was not yet feeling attracted to boys. Convinced that I needed to more fully turn my life over to Christ, I burned all my poems.

Losing poetry as an outlet for my feelings, I took up journaling. Journaling made a huge difference in my life, even though I spent a good portion of my time writing what I should be feeling, rather than what I actually felt. Despite my best efforts my actual feelings and thoughts occasionally leaked onto the page. Unwanted insights emerged. For instance, at 15 I realized that I still wasn't attracted to boys. Just as bad, I had a crush on a girl at school. In response, I abandoned my journal and cultivated a relationship with a boy. Once this relationship was established, I allowed
myself to return to journaling with the pledge to write absolutely only what I should be thinking and feeling.

My actual thoughts continued to stray occasionally into my journal despite my best efforts to the contrary. These writings showed that none of the things I wanted desperately to change were changing. At 18 I believed everything about me violated God's Plan. I decided that what I most feared must be true: I was evil. I had no control over my attractions, yet I was a sinner, a poison to myself and my church. I had known I was this way at least since I was 13. A third of my life. I became deeply depressed. I knew something had to give.

A year later, I had decided that I was not poison, that God could not be so hateful and vindictive. I decided to leave my church and fundamentalism. Six months later, I abandoned Christianity. My journal—now focused unabashedly on my thoughts and feelings—allowed me to explore what I thought and felt, although I still dropped my journal when the insights my writing produced ran counter to lingering beliefs about who I should be. I enrolled in community college, majoring in business and secretly longing to take a creative writing class. I eventually took the class, went on for bachelor's in English. In my junior year of college, I finally accepted myself as a lesbian.
Herdt and Boxer's research suggests that lesbians and gays go through a three stage coming out process. First, they "unlearn the principal of 'natural heterosexuality.'" Second, they "must unlearn the stereotypes of homosexuality, and third, they must "reconstruct their social relationships in American society based on new and emerging social status and cultural being" (15). Looking back, I realize that I spent my junior high and high school years struggling in the first stage. College exposed me to a wider range of people-including accepting straight people, bisexuals, gays and lesbians and this is where I passed through the second stage of coming out. The third would be negotiated when in graduate school.

It is during my teenage and college years that my own definitions of writing and risk were shaped, along with my social identity. Essential to my understanding of writing is personal discovery; discovery that is often initially painful, but is also powerful because it reveals us to ourselves. Looking back now, I realize just how vital my journal was.

How, I often wonder, could any activity so innocuous as writing have been (and continue to be) so powerful? I have searched for answers to this question, and the answers I like best come from James Moffett and Janet Emig, and are situated in the internal composition process.
Looking at process, Moffett suggests that first the
writer engages in "attentional selectivity": the writer "tries
to narrow down drastically for the moment his [or her] total
field of consciousness—shuts out most things and concentrates
on one train which he [or she] has set in motion at will and
tries to sustain" (89). Second, the writer opens himself or
herself to "some ongoing revision of inner speech, which is
itself some verbalized or at least verbalizable distillation
of the continually flowing mixture of inner life" (89,
emphasis in original).

Writing then combines intention and vulnerability in
something like Blake's infinite grain of sand—although
Moffett's language isn't nearly so poetic: "a writer stands at
the mercy of prior rumination about the subject as it will
surface in the inner speech that spontaneously presents itself
for further rumination" (89).

Emig's descriptions of writing process explains why
discovery and therefore risk— are central to writing.
Influenced by Bruner and Piaget's ideas about how we represent
and deal with reality, Emig suggests that writing
simultaneously employs all three ways of dealing with reality.
It is "the symbolic transformation of experience through the
specific symbol system of verbal language . . . into an icon
(the graphic product by the enactive hand)" (88). Lived
experience is transformed twice: first from action, into images of action, and second from images of action into symbols of images. It is easy to see that the writer cannot know beforehand what discoveries, what insights, these dimension shifts will bring.

My second perspective on the writing process from Emig centers on analysis and synthesis as ways to unite the “three major tenses of our experience [past, present, and future] to make meaning” (91). Analysis is the motion of “breaking of entities into their constituent parts” and synthesis the motion of “combining or fusing these,[constituent parts], often into fresh arrangements or amalgams” (90, 91). Again, it’s easy to see how destroying and recreating past, present and future could easily result in new and unanticipated discoveries.

In my own personal definition, discovery means vulnerability, risk, taking a chance. For instance, through my poems I allowed myself to be vulnerable, to take a chance, in order to gain something—insight about my “lack.” In my journaling when I wrote what I “should,” I resisted risk. Yet I remained vulnerable because what I actually thought and felt occasionally leaked through, showing me to myself. It was my unconscious demanding to speak. Poet Adrienne Rich says, “The unconscious wants truth. It ceases to speak to those who want
something more than truth” (187). Looking back, my teen years were shaped by twin fears—fear of knowing myself, and fear that my unconscious would cease to speak.

Clarifying, Rich says, “There is no ‘the truth,’ ‘a truth’—truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity” (187). How fortunate I am that my unconscious found an avenue to speak to me, first through poems and then through renegade journaling! The risk inherent to writing is a vulnerability to insight and to truth. It is taking a chance—even though the experience might be painful.

While I like what Rich says about truth, it isn’t a complete definition for me. What Rich names truth, I rename ‘insight’. What insight needs to make it truth is perspective—perspective brought through relationship to the Other. Parker Palmer’s definition of truth elides insight but expresses clearly how truth involves community, belonging: “Truth is between us, in relationship, to be found in the dialogue of knowers and knowns who are understood as independent but accountable selves” (Know, 56).

I felt very much an island all those years from 13 through my young twenties, despite the friendly church. Yet, I was also always seeking a way to belong. I wanted to belong to a group of friendly people, to society. And I wanted to belong to God. Eventually, I realized I needed to belong to
myself first. Another way to look at this switch is that I allowed myself to be a subjective rather than objective knower. Michael Polanyi, suggests that knowledge is inherently subjective: "into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and . . . this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of his [or her] knowledge" (viii). In any relationship, we are each knowers, we are each knowns.

Polanyi’s explanation of subjectivity highlights the importance of passion. It is passion, I think, that helps us belong. Without passion I might have died at 13 when I sensed my difference and felt deeply depressed or I might have died again I concluded that I was evil, that I was poison. Or perhaps I would have continued to exist although my unconscious might have ceased to speak.

Writing with its risk and insights, and truth with its increasing complexity and relational nature are intimately bonded to each other by passion. Like Joan Didion, I realize, "I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means" (114). Writing yields insight; insights become truths when they are heard by the Other, shaped by the Other. Allowing oneself to heard by and shaped by the Other is a second site of risk. Will my insight be rejected? Destroyed? Will it even be heard? Will
it disrupt the community to which I belong? Will I be rejected? Whatever the outcome, as a writer, I return to writing to allow my new truth to be reshaped by new insight. This is the motion of writing life.

As a teacher of writing, I want my students to experience and explore the power of writing to reward risk-taking with self-knowledge. I want them to experience the communal quality of truth. To create this space, it is not enough for me to say ‘Go. Do.’ I must model as well. I must show students writing of my own which takes a risk to reap an insight. I must take part in the community of truth forming in the class by sharing my own process of negotiating a risk—i.e., my process of evaluating what to share or not share with a particular audience. Doing this is challenging work.

Others are engaged in conversation about disclosure and negotiation of risk. From my location as a lesbian English teacher, I have often experienced conversation about disclosure as originating from two locations. One strand of conversation about disclosure has come from queer educators for whom a particular kind of disclosure—‘coming out’—has been an issue since Stonewall.

A second strand of conversation has been engaged in by educators, whose approach to issues of disclosure has come through an increasing appreciation for the role of
subjectivity in learning. Collaborative learning, feminism, liberatory pedagogy, and autobiographical approaches to learning have all contributed to interest in disclosure and negotiation of difference.

Queer English teachers often participate in both of these conversations, which overlap but maintain separate characters. Among many things both conversations focus on is that the fundamental motion of disclosure is a positive one. For instance, David Bleich explains: "Disclosure should be distinguished from confession and revelation . . . to confess and to reveal have an implied reference to a religious morality, as if one is confessing sins and revealing secrets" (47-48). Amy Blumenthal echoes and expands on Bleich: "Coming out is not confession: confession implies wrongdoing, guilt. However, in coming out, I am saying that there is no confession of wrongdoing. There is honesty, yes, but not confession. This is not a question of what I do, but who I am" (Mittler and Blumenthal, 5).

Each contributor to the conversation offers a different standpoint and therefore a different contribution to the ongoing discussion of disclosure in education. For instance, Mary Louise Pratt suggests that communities are often fraught with struggles. These struggles occur in 'contact zones'—"spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each
other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out in the world today" (34). Pratt has suggested that the classroom is a contact zone and that we need therefore, a pedagogy of the contact zone.

Joseph Harris suggests that as Pratt has defined it, the contact zone is "born out of expediency, as a way of getting by"; "it is not a space to which anyone owes much allegiance" (33). Harris, worries that the result of a pedagogy of the contact zone would be "difficult and polarizing arguments" with "plenty of conflict and struggle [but] very little if any . . . useful negotiation of views or perspectives" (34-35).

As an alternative, Harris calls for a pedagogy of negotiation. Negotiation seeks to create a "forum where students themselves can articulate (and thus perhaps also become more responsive to) differences among themselves." The result Harris hopes for is "a social space where people have reason to come into contact with each other because they have claims and interests that extend beyond the borders of their own safe houses, neighborhoods, disciplines, or communities" (39).

Both Pratt and Harris remind me that both conflict and cohesion are crucial to the classroom. There needs to be some sense of balance between them. Yet how little control I have
in some ways to make these things happen! Although I am the
teacher, I am in some ways, only one more voice in the
classroom. If students don't consent to be part of the
community, if they do not bring goodwill to the class, then
community cannot exist.

Thomas West suggests that the cohesive voice is apt to
be far stronger than the disruptive voice in the classroom,
because "the objective of negotiation is often to diffuse
subversive action" (12). This is often accomplished through
"the rhetorical conventions of dominant groups" such as what
is defined as impolite or polite, rational or irrational or
psychological rather than political, (12, 13). Negotiation
then favors those in power and seeks to neutralize disruption.

West suggests that it is easy to slip into "a view of
struggle as negative and negotiation as positive because one
implies violence and the other, ostensibly, does not" (13).
West suggests a "modified, critical version" of negotiation,
one that "attends more closely to the 'paralanguages of
emotions' and specifically to the 'politics of anger'" (13).
"The challenge becomes," says West, "how to listen critically,
how to relate the political impulses of individual and
collective anger to present and preceding social conditions"
(13).
Like West, Miller is concerned that voices of disruption get heard. One reason they don’t get a hearing is that little professional training in English Studies prepares teachers to read and respond to the kinds of parodic, critical, oppositional, dismissive, resistant, transgressive, and regressive writing that gets produced by students writing in the contact zone of the classroom. (394)

Academics are taught by “the majority of grammars, rhetorics, and readers that have filled English classrooms since before the turn of the century” to address the disruptive essay as “a piece of fiction,” that is, to “speak of how it is organized, the aptness of the writer’s word choice, and the fit between the text and its audience” (394).

Rather than elide the disruptive voice, Miller recommends the teacher “establish a classroom that solicits ‘unsolicited oppositional discourse’”. The teacher does this by creating a classroom that invites “articulating, investigating, and questioning the affiliated cultural forces that underwrite . . . cultural commonplaces” (Miller, 397). For example, Miller brought in for discussion and analysis, posters through which a “heated, accusatory, and highly coded
discussion about rape, feminism, and sexual politics" was engaged on campus (400).

Beginning where the students are, and allowing students to use their writing to investigate the cultural conflicts that define and limit their lives is not an easy task (Miller, 407). It is apt to result in "the kind of partial, imperfect, negotiated, microvictory [that is] available to those who work in the contact zone" (407).

Patricia Elliott also finds the classroom to be a place of partial and imperfect microvictories. She asserts, however, that the root of these experiences may be a surprising notion: that disclosure does not equal awareness. For example, in Elliott's gender and society class "a high percentage of [women] students (approximately seventeen percent) disclosed personal instances of abuse," yet the class was "unable to entertain the possibility that systemic gender inequality exists" (144). Instead, the women believed that "North American society has now achieved gender equality" (145).

Elliott's explanation for the coexistence of denial and disclosure is "selective reality," a term coined by Gloria Anzaldua and referring to "the narrow spectrum of reality that human beings select or choose to perceive and/or what their culture 'selects' for them to 'see'" (144). Elliott refines
selective reality to mean "the practice of limiting or selecting what sorts of things are counted as real and what sorts of things are discounted, omitted, or relegated to the realm of the imaginary" (145). Selective reality means that those in one culture can (easily) deny the reality of another's culture; this same treatment may be applied to selected elements within a single culture.

This simultaneous denial and disclosure points to a "struggle between insight and the blocking of insight" which occurs continually, because people realize that critical thinking is political action. Since political actions can be life-endangering, they are hesitant to proceed until they know more or less how doing that thinking is going to affect the particular political constellation of their own particular lives. (Elliott, 151)

While Patricia Elliott focuses on how disclosure isn't always accompanied by conscious awareness, Mary Elliott focuses on how another kind of disclosure—coming out—may be accompanied by hyperawareness. This is so much the case, says Mary Elliott, that most teachers’ coming out narratives "elide, or mention only briefly and then recoil from . . . the dread, panic, confusion, and uncertainty of the actual
moment of disclosure” (694). Instead, of staying with the scary moment of taking the risk, coming out narratives frequently “move on as quickly as possible and without comment to lengthy pedagogical, ethical, and sociological defense of the coming out process” (M. Elliott, 694).

Coming out is so risky that it can generate terror, even if we don’t disclose. Elliott explains, “we risk feelings of personal failure if we cannot quite push ourselves over the abyss. We berate ourselves further with the conviction that if we truly had our political and personal houses in order, this trauma would not be happening to us” (M. Elliott, 696).

Staying with our terror long enough to “differentiate the nameless presences in the abyss we wish to cross” could lead to eliminating or at least reframing our fear and shame (M. Elliott, 697).

Ethical and practical methods of disclosure in relation to sexual identity are examined by Kate Adams and Kim Emery. They propose two kinds of “appropriate” occasions for disclosure. The first is the ‘good’ moment and the second, the ‘golden’ moment. Both follow general guidelines, but the ‘good’ moment is planned, while golden moments in teaching happen when “spontaneously asked (or answered) questions lead to brilliant-but-unscripted connections” (Adams and Emery, 27). In the same way, coming out “can be the result of a
similar instance of unanticipated, although not necessarily unearned, grace" (28).

The guidelines for coming out appropriately seem to apply to any especially risky disclosure: be yourself; make the disclosure relevant; come out before you come out (i.e., take advantage of other forms of communication than talk); don’t anticipate disaster; practice ‘openers’ into your disclosure ahead of time; remember that the moment of disclosure is just a moment (Adams and Emery, 27-30).

Susan Swartzlander, Diana Pace, and Virginia Lee Stamler are also concerned about the ethics of disclosure. They outline four serious reservations about “the impact on students of required writing about their personal lives, whether in journals, freshman compositions, or other writing assignments” (B1).

First, Swartzlander, et al, noticed that some students “believe that the papers that receive the highest grades are those detailing highly emotional events or those that display the most drama” (B1).

Second, they question the extent to which students are able to “make judgments about how much to reveal and to whom“ (B1). In particular, they point out that “students who have been sexually abused often have difficulty understanding appropriate limits in relationships” (B1).
A third cause of concern: "When the boundaries between professional and personal are blurred by turning personal revelation into course content, paternalism may thrive in the guise of professional guidance when the professor is male and the student female" (B1).

Finally, they have the general concern that teachers don't appreciate just how important students' writings might be to them (B2). This is especially true, they suggest for students identifying with non-dominant groups such as race, gender, and so forth. To help guard against these problems, Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler advise teachers to tell students that "they should never feel pressured in any way to say or write anything that makes them feel uncomfortable" (B2).

David Bleich finds Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler's concerns to be reasonable, and advises, their warnings "should be taken seriously by anyone who believes that personal materials must begin to find their way into our study of our subject matter" (45).

For Bleich, one of the advantages of disclosure is that it identifies people as both individuals and makes them central to the learning that occurs in the classroom:

A pedagogy of disclosure needs and asks to know who is in class with us; it believes
that what each person brings to the classroom must become part of the curriculum for that course and that the curriculum is contingent: whatever a teacher prepares to share with students must be understood as a plan that will be revised by the new knowledge of each person who is joining a course. (47, emphasis in original)

When a pedagogy of disclosure asks, Who is in this class with us?, the question is answered through class members’ own estimations about what constitutes “appropriateness and helpfulness to others as well as oneself” (48). Bleich also suggests that disclosure must occur in a ‘context of readiness’—that is, where “a certain level of trust of peers and authority figures” is present (48).

Bleich explores situations “where an unusual level of classroom disclosure might seem to have endangered learning but actually revealed the true terms of membership in the class and demonstrated the actual basis for teaching and learning” (49). He concludes that a pedagogy of disclosure can weather such things as antagonism toward collaboration, differences of affective style, opposition to covert racism, and differences within a presumed cultural homogeneity (49).
In this dissertation I seek to share with readers, my journeys as writer, teacher, and lesbian. I was uncertain, when I began graduate school and began teaching writing, what a writer was. I had not yet found a way to connect my lesbian identity with my academic identity. I felt very much alone in seeking this connection, but I have since discovered that others, like Alison Regan and Mary Klages, found forging this connection to be crucial as well (Regan, 123; Klages 235).

I also began to explore teaching. Leslie Silko explains that in the Laguna worldview, "language is story" (50). This means that "many individual words have their own stories" (50). As I taught writing, I slowly discovered my words and their stories. I agree with Silko, "the story is inside the listener; the storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listeners" (50).

In living the story, I sometimes felt so enmeshed in stories that I did not fully understand that I felt lost. It has been a long personal journey for me to understand the stories of even single words--words like lesbian, writer, and teacher. I do not fully understand these words' stories yet. But I have learned a great deal. In writing this narrative dissertation I have been to some extent, both storyteller and listener, and so have found some of the story of my words. This is what I share with you--story within story.
Language is a special issue in this book. You will find many different terms to designate the same category of persons. Partly these terms reflect the usage of different people. Partly these terms reflect the flux gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people are in.

There are several terms that I could choose among to refer to the groups to which I belong—lesbians, and to queers or non-heterosexuals generally. All of them generate discomfort for me. "Homosexual" is an accurate word for me; yet it is a clinical word, and therefore inappropriate to my context and my writing aims. It is also a term that excludes bisexuals—yet often I wish to include them in what I am saying. "Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered" is an accurate phrase, but it’s also cumbersome. Nonetheless I have often used it because it is inclusive without being clinical. Still the phrase presents problems since it elides the differences among its members. I am also concerned when using this term that I will be thought to be a spokesperson for all members of the group, rather than simply an individual.

Queer is yet another term and it too has its own problems. While homosexual is too narrow—excluding bisexuals and (some) transgendered people, queers has become too broad. In 1984, when Judy Grahn's Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words,
Gay Worlds was published, she defined queer by its German origins: "crooked, not straight" (276). A Feminist Dictionary by Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler, published in 1985, gives the same derivation and meaning (370). But by the publication of Malinowitz's Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Studies and the Making of Discourse Communities in 1995, the term queer had come to be "much more inclusive" (168). "You don't have to be gay or lesbian to identify as queer. You just have to be self-identified as different" (168). While queer often suits my meaning metaphorically, it often doesn't literally. Queer is also a term that is divided generationally. To older gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people it is a pejorative word, summoning images of hatred and violence. For the younger generation it is a word reclaimed, without a negative valence (Malinowitz, 31, note 8).

Finally, non-heterosexual. What's good about this term is also what's bad about it. While it is inclusive in the broadest possible sense, it includes by lumping everyone together by what they are not: heterosexual. Its inclusiveness reifies a dichotomy while eliding differences. In the end, I have used more than one of these terms as they have seemed to shade meaning in particular ways. Most often I
have used lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered, despite its bulk.
CHAPTER ONE
I didn't come to graduate school wanting to be a teacher. That happened after I arrived. I came wanting to be a writer. This was a decision I had made when I was six or eight years old. And here I was--freshly arrived at graduate school, majoring in creative writing. Problem was, I didn't have a clear idea about how to become a writer. After all, the vast majority of the U. S. population can write—but somehow the vast majority are not writers. I read somewhere once that only about 5,000 people put down "writer" for their occupation on their tax return. I am sure there are far more than 5,000 writers in this nation of 235 million. So where are they and what makes them writers?

Is it publication that makes someone a writer? If so, then what of famous authors who didn't publish in their lifetimes? Or not until late in their lives? But if it wasn't publication that made someone a writer, what was it? I had lots of questions; I hoped to get answers in graduate school.

I wanted graduate school to be radically different from my undergraduate college. Since I knew very little about graduate school, this hope stayed with me right into my fall semester. Don't get me wrong: I learned a great deal from my undergraduate professors of writing, and I continue to learn from them by looking back at what they said and did. They
took my blind ambition to be a writer and put both resolve and the willingness to work under it. It was a great foundation to build on. I had "promise"; I just didn't know how to fulfill it.

If I had heard of Natalie Goldberg, I would have known I wasn't daft: "Learning to write," she says in *Writing down the Bones*, "is not a linear process. There is no logical A-to-B-to-C way to become a good writer" (3). But I didn't know this at the time. Besides, I wasn't fussy: logical or not, ANY method would do.

So I entered graduate life with the goal of moving my writing onto a whole new plane—preferably through a giant leap, but I'd also accept a slow evolution if that was the only way.

Back then I hadn't heard the term 'freewriting': writing that doesn't "interpose a massive and complicated series of editings between the time words start to be born into consciousness and when they finally come off the end of the pencil or typewriter onto the page" (Elbow, 5). So I couldn't gain any encouragement or confidence from the fact that I had been freewriting—looking inward—in the pages of my journal since high school.

I hoped that my professors would have a bag of tricks that would scoot my writing onto a new level, but what if they
didn't? Or worse, what if they did, but I wasn't up to it—
couldn't cut the mustard?

I arrived at my graduate school nervous for another
reason: I had finally admitted to myself during my junior year
in college, that I was a lesbian. As a senior I finally
decided that I needed to come out of the closet—to share my
identity with others. I was tired of having no love life. I
wanted---like my friends all around me—to love and be loved---
for myself. I decided that when I arrived at graduate school
I would start fresh, begin a new life as an "out" lesbian.

I worried about how others would respond to me when I
came out to them. I hoped that I would still be able to make
friends among the graduate students and in the community. I
longed to meet other lesbians so I could start dating---
belatedly.

Sometime during the first semester of my M. A. program,
I decided my professors couldn't cut the mustard. They had no
bag of tricks, just the same old pedagogy I had first been
exposed to in the seventh grade---perhaps first grade, if I
dared remember. This pedagogy had brought me a long way, and
I was grateful for that, but it was time to move beyond it.

I was even more disappointed when there was very little
informal interaction between professors and students in
graduate school. Much of what my undergraduate professors had taught me had come not from the classroom, but from informal gatherings after class. From conversations over buffalo wings and beer.

Not knowing what to do, I created a writing project for myself. I knew one of the weaknesses of my writing was a lack of imagery. My professors had pointed it out (among other things)—and so had other writers in workshop. So I gave myself the assignment of writing about symbols, hoping that this writing, if not immediately at least gradually, would stimulate more imagistic writing.

I settled on Tarot symbols to stimulate my writing. But a past as a fundamentalist Christian wasn't so easy to leave behind: I had often spent an hour each morning studying my Bible, taking notes and copying quotes. Now I spent that same daily hour with the Tarot. I often started by free associating with the images on the cards and ended by copying quotes from Tarot books.

I would stick with the project for two years before deciding it had been a waste of time. Looking back, I think my project may have borne fruit after all: in my second year I began writing poetry—the kind of writing that probably takes the greatest advantage of image and symbol.
I wrote terrible poems, but I believed that future poems would be better. They were. I also believed that I could (eventually) say things through poems that I couldn’t say through prose. The timing was also wonderful since when I took up poetry I needed a break from prose. So even though it had been entirely a shot in the dark, the project did help me.

Now I think I know what writing is, what makes a person a writer—it is discovery and affirmation. It is the willingness to look inward and to say ‘yes’ to what one sees—to all of it—and then to find words and perspective to write it. This may sound easy, but it isn’t.

It takes courage to look inward. The inner landscape contains not only feelings and ideas of which we are proud, not only our love and loyalty, but also our shame, our pettiness and cruelty, and as Joan Didion suggests, our fear (Modern American Prose, 114). All these things swim around together inside us all the time. It is the writer who has the courage to go inward and “stand at the mercy of prior rumination about the subject as it will surface in the inner speech that spontaneously presents itself for further composition” (Moffett, 89).

Or, as Natalie Goldberg advises her beginning students of writing: “Go for the jugular. (If something comes up in
your writing that is scary or naked, dive right into it. It probably has lots of energy)" (Bones, 8, italics inherent).

I knew all this back then, but I didn’t know that I knew it. For one thing, I was too nervous about the prospect of teaching to think about anything else. My newly awarded bachelor’s degree in English suddenly seemed a meager preparation for teaching composition. In many ways, it was. Literature and creative writing--the areas I trained in--were thought to be, and taught as, entirely separate from composition.

I looked around me. My cohorts seemed as nervous and expectant as I was. These were the people to whom I would be coming out, when I knew them and when I could work up the courage.

The composition coordinator welcomed us to the department and then disappeared, rarely to be heard from again. It was Faye, the assistant coordinator, who did an admirable job of training us whilst wearing far too many hats.

“You will be marching the students through a two-semester sequence of logically progressive writing assignments, beginning with the descriptive essay, followed by the summary, the reflective essay, the timed writing, the logical argument and culminating in the research paper.”
Faye continued explaining at breakneck pace, while we took copious notes: "Whatever you do, always remain in control of your class—you are the teacher;" "always call roll;" "these are the telltale signs of plagiarism."

We accepted everything she said without question, which disappoints me. Even though I know that we had always been taught to accept what our teachers told us as correct, I am still disappointed that I—that we—were so reluctant to think for ourselves at all. We were.

After she had finished outlining the assignments, explaining the pedagogy, and the syllabus, Faye invited us to ask questions about why we were going to do things they way we were going to do them.

We—a group of eight apprentice teaching assistants squeezed around a conference table for six—sat in silence; we could think of nothing to ask. After a repetition of the question and a second long and awkward silence, Faye asked us to come up with questions for the next session.

"In the meantime," she said, "I'm going to tell you about the new idea that we will be adopting this semester." Even before I heard the idea, I didn't like it. It was going to be all I could do, I was sure, to survive the semester; I didn't need anything else new.
First Faye qualified herself, confessing that she had only been told about the change very recently. She had not yet read any of the articles about the assumptions behind the change, and therefore didn’t understand it well herself. She was a student in this just as we were. This out of the way, she unveiled the new idea: “We are going to allow students to choose their own subjects for each of the assignments.”

Silence for a few seconds while we absorbed the idea.

Then the apprenticeship class woke up abruptly; roused from sleepy acquiescence to strenuous protest. We assailed Faye with questions, as if she had been plotting to betray us.

“What will prevent students from choosing subjects that are a poor fit for the assignment?”

“Or subjects that are inappropriate for a college class?”

“Or offensive? Like racist or sexist?”

“Or personally offensive?”

“After all,” someone added, “these are freshmen; shouldn’t something as complex as this be left for the higher ranks?”

As we questioned, the potential for disaster grew to mammoth proportions. This was much more scary than what to do if we forgot to call roll.
"I think it's a good idea." Every head turned to identify this new speaker. A lone apprentice opposed the rest of us. "I think that more latitude in interpreting the assignments would be good as well."

Before the assistant coordinator could intervene, we pelted the lone apprentice with outrage and criticism, which Faye finally halted with a shout which leaped over the cacophony of our voices.

"I'm happy," she said, "that, for the first time, you seem to be interested in pedagogical theory. On the other hand, freedom for students to choose their own subjects is a new idea about composition, and it deserves a chance. Furthermore, the Coordinator of Composition has chosen to adopt this idea, so you are going to have to allow your students to choose their own subjects."

Faye held off a storm of objections with an upheld hand. "I haven't yet had a chance to read the articles. There might be some pitfalls as well as benefits to the idea."

We ended the class grumbling, but with some small hope that Faye was on our side after all, and that we might be able to stave off this disaster.

The next class Faye announced that she had read a couple of the articles and had talked further with the coordinator. We renewed our criticisms of the idea, this time with
carefully logical arguments to provide a veneer for our resentment. But Faye outfoxed us: "I understand; I think your concerns are legitimate. But allowing students to choose their own subjects can be a good idea, if we give students guidance in choosing subjects."

Again silence while we absorbed the idea.

"How would that work?" someone asked, and subsequent "theory" sessions focused on how to steer students away from inappropriate or offensive subjects, and guide them into subjects with a "good fit."

With the issue largely resolved, we all agreed—even the lone assenting apprentice—that theory was disgusting stuff and should be avoided whenever possible.

The apprentice whom we had all ganged up on was Shakes Reinbotham. His mother had named him Dylan Thomas as a tribute to the Irish poet, much to his embarrassment. As a result he universally introduced himself as "D. T.,” which one of the apprentices had parlayed into the shorthand, ‘Shakes.’

He was the golden child of the new crop of graduate students. He had won the prestigious Steier Award and a full-ride scholarship. I had read his essay and--like half the new class of graduate students--wished I wrote like that. He wrote clear, clean, lyrical prose strengthened by apt images and metaphors that added an extra depth and dimension to his
words. After I had read his essay I vowed to myself to write a clearer, more direct prose, and to begin incorporating images and metaphors into my own writing. Shakes' essay was the inspiration behind my writing project.

Because none of us held a grudge about Shakes' unpopular stand, I was able to ask him later why he favored letting students choose their own topics. He had taken a class, he said, where the teacher had allowed them to choose their own topics and there hadn't, as far as he knew, been any trouble with that.

"People are just scared of doing things differently," he said.

I nodded my head as if I hadn't been one of the people riding his case the week before. I found myself wanting to be one of the ones who was unafraid.

"Besides, that was the greatest class. The professor's name was Potter and that dude was enormous." I wasn't sure whether that meant Potter was fat or a great teacher, and decided Potter was at least great and maybe fat, too. "I did my best writing in that class."

"Was this where you wrote your Steier Award essay?"

"No, I actually wrote it the class after Potter's, but this class was where I learned how to really write, you know? We did a lot of different stuff in that class."
Now I wanted to be in Potter's class, choosing my own topics, doing a lot of different stuff, and becoming a stellar writer. I fantasized being a student in a Potter-type class. My ideas and feelings flowed smoothly into eloquent words and pictures on the page. It was a great daydream.

I didn't forget about Potter's mythical class. Sometimes, I fantasized being a student in his class, even though I didn't know how to imagine a class that was any different from what I had known all my life. I took off from my own favorite teachers and professors. They loved what they did, whether it was Romantic literature, teaching creative writing, or writing creatively. But they had never done anything to change my writing the way that Shakes felt Potter had changed his writing.

As it turned out, teaching changed my writing in important ways. It wasn't the teaching per se that changed it, but my pedagogical discontent. I wasn't immediately discontent: I spent my first semester of teaching surviving and developing a teaching persona. Discontent surfaced in my second semester.

I came to realize that the assignments weren't arranged in some preordained ideal fashion. For one thing, the first assignment, the descriptive essay, was one of the hardest of the semester for the students, who had had little prior
experience with the form. Also, as near as I could tell, the reflective essay was a midterm repetition of the descriptive essay.

The logical argument frustrated me in a variety of ways: The students who came into the class understanding thesis statements had no trouble. The students who didn't understand them never wrote a successful thesis of their own no matter how many essays we studied. Half the time I felt I was a poor teacher; the other half I felt my students were poor learners.

I moved and modified assignments, but it wasn't enough. My underlying feeling that the pedagogy wasn't adequate for me must have kept me dissatisfied. Not surprisingly, I also had some trouble with allowing students to choose their own topics. Although students were supposed to hand in their topics in advance, they sometimes changed them after they had handed them in. Sometimes students handed in topics that looked like a good fit when I read them, but wrote the paper in a way that made them fit poorly.

Yet, the most interesting papers were from students who had chosen an unusual topic or had written about something that connected to their own lives. The papers that lingered longest in my memory were, as Shakes had suggested, interpretations of the assignment.
Most of all I felt I wasn't teaching these students anything new about writing; the students who were already above average writers found ways to make stale assignments more lively for themselves. The below average students and average students rarely seemed to move up—to master the thesis statement or develop their ideas any better.

Gradually I realized what I wanted: Potter's class. I wanted to be a student in it; I wanted to teach it. I knew it existed; Shakes had taken the class. My writing would jump to a new level. So would my students'.

Potter's class became my polestar. I began to think about teaching--my own and my teachers'--by the effects we had on our students. Did our teaching help students become creative and eloquent? Did students feel they had really learned how to write in my class?

It took a year and a half of teaching before conviction rose to the surface and expressed itself as the conscious desire to share with my students the power of writing to help us love our lives. I wanted my students to experience—or have the opportunity, the invitation to experience--what I had: that writing was so powerful it could even help us come to terms with our worst struggles--to love even what seems to be or what may be horrifying, what may be sick in us, what may be shameful.
After a year and half of teaching, I had a clear desire, but no clue about how to convey this desire to my students. The only idea I had immediately was to simply tell my students. Stand up before my class and give my testimony to them of my experience and my realization. To exhort them in the same way that my minister had exorted us on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. Should I do it?

Further thought told me to avoid a sermon to the class. No one liked being sermonized outside the context of a church. A sermon might invite resistance when I wanted to invite receptivity. I wanted to invite willingness to experience writing as a powerful tool.

I did testify to a couple of students individually. While I knew virtually nothing about any of my students' lives, there were exceptions. One student told me at the beginning of the semester that she had an ongoing family issue that made some absences mandatory. Would I help her with manage the class despite the absences? I told her that I would indeed be willing to help her and also the limits of my help.

She responded not with what the family issue was, but by revealing that the issue affected her by draining her energy both physically and emotionally. That was the challenge that she faced this freshman year of college, not the coursework.
This is when I spontaneously testified to her about the power of writing, finishing with an encouragement to write about her problems and her feelings. I could see that my words came across to her as both sincere and pressuring. While my sincerity was attractive, the pressure merely added to an already heavy load. She managed to thank me for the suggestion and evade a commitment to writing about her problems. I wished I could have spoken without pressuring her; it was the strength of my own experience and consequent conviction that had made me do it.

The second student I spoke to was a gregarious young man who often lingered for a few minutes after class was over to tell me about his life. He was a student who befriended everyone, and whose charm was that he drew out even the quietest people with his friendly candor. In connection with a problem he related one day, I responded with encouragement to write, and gave my testimony to the power of writing.

He laughed in response to my testimony. “You really are an English teacher, aren’t you!” I was puzzled.

“I guess so. Why?”

“Well, you really get into this stuff.” I was disappointed. I had thought this young man liked English, liked my class. He continued, “I might give it a try, but I don’t know. I don’t want to turn my life into an essay, you
know? Besides, it takes me forever to come up with a thesis, you know?"

"Don't write an essay, write a journal entry, just write about the problem and how you feel about it."

"I don't know. I'm not into diary stuff. What good would it do to write down all the stuff I know anyway?"

"It'll help. You'll feel better."

"Maybe," he responded, but I could tell that the momentum was swinging more to not trying than to trying. "I'm not an English type, though. I'd rather just go talk to my friends."

If even someone as friendly and easy-going as this student couldn't see writing as a powerful tool for living, wouldn't give it a try, who would? Who was I reaching in my classes? Anybody? What were they learning? Anything? Clearly it was not what I most wished to convey. What I found most important. Equally clearly, just telling people that writing was powerful was ineffective, even though both of my students had noticed my sincerity. This was a dead end.

While I was acknowledging that testimony was ineffective, I became more curious about how my students saw my class, what they learned from it. Then, spontaneously, the student who I had helped to manage class despite necessary absences gave me some insight. She had turned out to be an
'A' student, so I felt confident about asking her about what she had learned in my class. I was surprised by her candor.

"Not much."

"What do you mean?" I asked, feeling hurt but hoping it didn't show.

"Well, this class was pretty much the same stuff we did in high school. Nothing new. Most of the assignments were the same old stuff and pretty boring, but I could write around them. When I was sitting, waiting, I would think about the assignment and keep coming up with ideas until I thought of something to do to make it interesting. When I could do that, the assignments ended up being okay."

She could write around them?! That shook me. "Did you learn anything?"

"Well, I liked the way you kind of did something a little different with the argument assignment. I didn't know that you could find places of commonality as well as differences in an argument." I nodded my head, glad that something had been profitable. "But I don't think it's much use either." I looked her in the eyes, curious. "I can't use it in my other classes. I had never heard of it before and I don't think very many people have."

This conversation rang in my ears for a long time.

Other things that students said confirmed this initial
impression. My students were untouched by the power of writing. They were more and less proficient in filling in a form—a form that they had seen a thousand times before and was about as interesting (based on my student’s tone of voice) as filling out financial aid forms or tax returns.

My grades reflected my students’ ability to manipulate forms! Bright students, like the one I had just talked to, could make the same old form more interesting by sitting around and coming up with ways to do something different with it. Tweaking the system and getting A’s.

The ‘C’ students never saw that you could play with the form. Or if they saw, they couldn’t think of how to tweak it, play with it, manipulate it. It held a kind of tyranny over them—they served it. The ‘D’ and ‘F’ students didn’t understand the form or didn’t care about filling it in. They had some other agenda that I knew nothing about.

I couldn’t help coming back to the basic contrast that my talented students saw me as a obstacle to write around, when what I most wanted was for students to experience how powerful writing could be. At first I thought none of my students understood the power that writing could be for living life, for learning. Over time, though, I began to see that a few of my students kept journals or diaries, or that they wrote poems or stories outside of class, although I had begun
to realize that even "creative writing" was also subject to the tyranny of forms.

My eyes were opened. The vast majority of my students didn't see writing as a tool for living, but as something separate from living one's life. Separate from the task of making sense out of one's existence or finding solutions for problems; separate from seeking, celebrating, sharing, connecting with oneself or others. Reflecting. Voicing. Loving. Separate.

The question was--how could I contribute? How could I share my love? Throughout my master's program, I struggled to answer my own question, and got parts of an answer. When I came to my Ph.D. institution, an's was offered a new pedagogy, I found a fuller answer. It was at some level, incredibly simple. It was my love that had shown me the power of writing. The answer was to invite students to write about what they loved, about what preoccupied them in the same way that my sexual identity had preoccupied me, in the same way that my desire to be a unified rather than a split person fueled my writing. But creating an environment in which an invitation to write about what one loved was possible and worth the risk was not so simple a task.

While I pondered how to become Potter, my own creative writing began to change. While my undergraduate stories had
focused on childhood, my new stories centered on adolescence and young adulthood. My characters refused to define their sexuality; they kept half-buried "illicit" attractions and fought with shame for feeling attracted. The stories reflected variations on my struggles in the years before I acknowledged I was a lesbian. The stories spilled out, one after the other.

Despite my difficulties coming out, I did make friends. This and my pride at having had the courage to come out resulted in a new-found sense of self-acceptance. From this new perspective, I disliked the characters' sense of shame. I also disliked the often negative tone of the stories.

But apart from these reservations I felt pleased with my new stories: happy to be opening up new fictional material; relieved to be able to explore and release my own struggles fictionally.

Around this same time, I encountered another lesbian at a conference. She was newly graduated from a prestigious creative writing program. Her name was Amanda. I met her because her question to a presenter revealed her as a lesbian. After the session I introduced myself and we talked for a long time. She had been out much longer than I had. She adopted the tone of older sister and I listened willingly. Most of
our talk focused on our writing. I told her about the new stories I was writing.

She looked me squarely in the eyes. "Don't kid yourself. Your professors won't tell you, nobody will tell you because there aren't very many people you can talk to. You've got to choose whether you want to write literary stories or hack stories."

"Of course I don't want to write hack stories. What do you mean I need to choose? Why would anyone choose to do hack work?"

"Nobody chooses it, it just happens. Look, literary fiction is mainstream, heterosexual fiction; lesbian fiction, feels great to write, but it's only going to be read by a ghettoized minority group. I don't mean to be insulting. Our community is so grateful to get anything that reflects us that we don't demand anything more than hack writing. We're too small a reading public, even if you add in gays and bisexuals, to be able to demand professional, quality fiction. Literary writers can't afford to write for a homosexual audience. Lesbian writing is hack writing and it's not going to change in our lifetimes. So you have to choose. Do you want recognition and marketability--which means mainstream, heterosexual fiction--or do you want to write hack stories for a lesbian audience?"
"I don’t buy that dichotomy."

"You need to know what you’re doing with your career."

"I still don’t buy it" I said, but I did, more than I realized.

She shrugged. "Suit yourself."

I could only judge what Amanda said by the tiny amount of reading I had done. A great deal of what little I’d read was second and even third rate. Mainstream fiction was overwhelmingly heterosexual. While I knew it was rumored that Whitman and Cather, and Woolf and Wilde were homosexual, their writings were veiled, and they were safely dead.

Among living "out" writers, I could think of only one 'crossover' novel—a novel with non-heterosexual characters that had become popular to heterosexual, mainstream readers—Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle*. What were the odds that my fiction would inspire a crossover following? How could I possibly know when I was still figuring out how to become a writer?

I knew virtually nothing about the field of lesbian and gay fiction, a lack I suddenly realized needed to be redressed. Unfortunately, my small midwestern city was not a good place to broaden my knowledge. Besides, this reading had to come after reading and research for my literature classes, writing short stories for my creative writing workshops,
grading and preps for my two composition courses per semester, my journaling and my writing project.

I gave myself advice: 'Don't worry about audience or marketability. Just work on developing as a writer. Keep exploring. After you develop a direction and a distinctive writing voice, you can begin worrying about audiences and markets.'

Another piece of my willingness to believe Amanda came from my experiences coming out. I had started fulfilling my pledge to be honest about who I was, to come out. Shortly after I had arrived at graduate school, I decided to tell one person in the department— one of the new graduate students. The gossip would spread like wildfire, and all my coming out would be over with at once.

I was shocked when the person I told brazenly repeated the information to no one else. What was the matter with these people? Since I now faced the task of coming out to one person at a time, I decided to make the process easier by not hiding this information about me, but not thrusting it at people either. This slowed down the process of coming out, but didn't make it any less stressful. Each person I was honest with was someone I was just beginning to know and whose reaction I had only a scant basis for gauging.
Most people I came out to responded in the moment with nonchalance, even though at first I was pretty clumsy; later I would discover that I had been excluded from a party; when I came into the office I shared with 20 other teaching assistants a conversation between four or five people would suddenly end. My phone calls went unreturned, and my invitations refused or left unanswered.

A few people told me I was sick and sinful. One or two begged me frequently and desperately to accept Jesus Christ as my personal lord and savior.

They were stopped in their tracks when I said I had accepted Christ as my savior—when I was thirteen. A day or two later, though, they returned to witnessing. No amount of discussion could convince these people that my soul was not in imminent jeopardy.

It was again my notebook that guided me and supported me while I slowly made friends. Letters to friends on the east coast who remained my friends even after I came out to them were also important sustenance. They kept me going while I made new friendships. It wasn’t easy and might not have happened at all if my east coast friends weren’t there to remind me that I was the same old person I had been all my life, not a sinner or freak, nor a wayward child to be reproved.
While I had journaled throughout my undergraduate years, I had never fully appreciated how crucial my journaling and letter writing were. I began my papers in my notebook or in letters to friends. I sorted out my emotions, and sought support and answers to my questions. These writings helped me think about how to handle the situations I faced, make decisions, keep alive my dreams, my goals. Without my journal and letters I would be lost—without hope of writing an academic paper and without hope of holding myself together in the face of the stresses around coming out—and not coming out.

I began looking at my old writing in a new way. The simple act of noticing produced amazing insights.

For instance I wrote a lot. For school I wrote stories and research papers. For myself I wrote long letters to my friends. On days when I didn’t write letters, I wrote several pages in my journal. I wrote about the change from undergraduate to graduate life, the move from the east coast to the midwest, and my experiences coming out. I also continued my symbol writing project. All told, my non-assigned writing easily tripled what I was doing for school.

Almost all my extra-curricular writings—jottings, journal entries, personal letters sent and unsent—were written with my attention almost exclusively on content and
very little on form. Not so much for the reader, but for myself—a stark contrast to the way that I had been taught to teach and the way that I myself had been taught to write. Writings that later became form- and reader-oriented benefited from being begun here without those considerations.

The teaching method I used with my students never allowed them to begin with inchoate thought, I as often did in my journals, feeling my way toward something that could be called a subject, a form. If they couldn’t develop subjects and forms through exploratory writing, where were students getting their subjects? How significant, how thoughtful could these subjects be?

Requiring students to write to a form forced them to bypass exploring and instead turn writing into a matching game between prefab subjects and forms. Not intellectually stimulating work; nor likely to tap one’s loves, one’s preoccupations, nor foster independent, intelligent thinking.

I also felt a tremendous sense of what Donald Graves calls ‘ownership’. Whatever my shortcomings as a writer, my non-assigned writings were at least my explorations and ruminations, not a faux self born from a shotgun marriage between subject and form.

Meanwhile I didn’t bring my new stories to my creative writing workshops. I feared that I would get responses that...
were more about how the readers felt about homosexuality than about the story itself. I also worried that I might receive a low grade from the professor, or some future professor, or that I might forfeit a letter of recommendation. A negative letter might end up in my permanent file.

Nor could I think of a way to raise the dilemma of mainstream versus minority writing in workshop, although it was not unusual for workshop members to talk about controversies or theoretical issues that they struggled with as they wrote. I was certain that my sexual identity would become the topic of discussion rather than the audience dilemma.

At the same time, I needed to keep cranking out stories that I could bring to workshop. Eventually writing two sets of stories became a burden. But it was also too discouraging to keep writing stories that went unread, and that sent me back into the dilemma Amanda had laid out for me.

I quit writing stories and switched to poetry, naively hoping to evade the issue by changing forms. At first I found some satisfaction here, especially since poetry further cultivated image and lyric. Over time, though, I noticed that I was once again writing exclusively about childhood. When I began to write poems about love and frustration, about the first stirrings of attraction between unspecified people, most
of these poems also remained unseen or were mailed to friends back on the east coast.

Fly the Grand Canyon

Since you kissed me
lipless
even in bed
with our legs intimate zees,
I watch the sun
sailing smoothly over the far red wall.
Beneath me
cliff wall deep in shadow.

Through leather sandals
my toes seek the edge
and curl.
I remember my first dive,
the water tugging.
I raise my arms and tuck.

The red-orange rocket thrust,
the feathered arms of Icarus,
then my legs pedal
and I rise
away.

What was it that had made my writing experiences powerful? Freedom to follow my thoughts wherever they went? Freedom to focus on myself and not on audience? That I wrote over a long enough time span to gain perspective? That my thoughts were outside myself, held by a sheet of paper and I could look at them apart from me?

But if all or even any of these were true, then what? How could I bring these things into the classroom? If I told my students to freewrite, to keep a journal and write whatever was of concern to them at that time--an issue of the moment or
an on-going issue, then what? If the journal wasn't private, how could they write freely? If I didn't read what they wrote, how could I give students a grade? If I sacrificed their privacy how these writings be graded? It was hopeless. The two ideas were completely incompatible with each other.

Students kept marching through my classes, however, ignorant of the power of writing, unable to use its qualities to help them live fuller lives. As often as I abandoned all hope of bringing a powerful experience of writing into the classroom, hope insistently returned. If I had anything of value to give to my students, to the teaching of writing, to teaching in general, this was it. There had to be a way. I was simply being too narrow in my thinking.

I knew that if I could get students to experience writing in a new way, a way relevant to the living of their lives, it wouldn't matter to me what they did with this experience. Forget about it for a while if they wanted, but when difficulties or confusion arose in their lives, or when they wanted to deepen or expand their lives, they would know from experience that writing was available to them as a place to hold their feelings and thoughts, a way to explore, consider, evaluate, to dream with freedom and support. This was what mattered.
To complicate matters, the department hired a new coordinator of composition. A semester's experience adjudicating the cases of students who protested their grades convinced the coordinator that there needed to be more uniformity in the grading of the sixty-odd teachers in the composition program.

All the teachers of composition, except for the tenured professors who taught Honors English, were given packets of sample essays to grade. Then, in monthly meetings, we were split into small groups to compare and explain our grades. Our grades were then tallied by the coordinator onto the blackboard, where the goal was to have only a narrow range of variation from what was agreed to be an "A" down to what was agreed to be an "F."

Teaching assistants and adjunct faculty alike disliked these meetings not so much because the majority objected to uniform grading per se, but because they added to workloads, and because big brother was watching us.

The first time through there had been, I was surprised to discover, about 65% agreement about which paper was an "A" and 90% agreement about which was a "D." The coordinator praised this, but he also said we could do better. As we read and graded subsequent packets, our uniformity improved to a point and then stopped. Although there were more than sixty
composition teachers, it didn’t take long to identify who the “hold outs” were.

One day the coordinator asked for a show of hands from the hold-outs. In the group of almost seventy teachers, four hands went up. Two long-time adjuncts and two teaching assistants. The two teaching assistants sat together on the topmost riser, in the row of seats that lined the wall. A poet and a playwright. I knew them both casually, Anita Jemez, and Lyle Erikson.

The coordinator held up the mimeographed pages of the paper the rest of us had given a D.

“You both gave this paper a B?”

“Yes,” they both answered.

“Do mind if I ask why?”

Jemez answered. “The A paper is an okay paper. It has a clear thesis statement; the body develops the thesis well enough. The conclusion is good. But there is nothing special about the paper. The whole thing feels like the writer wasn’t very engaged.”

“Engaged?” the coordinator asked.

“Yeah.”

“I see,” he said. I don’t think any of us saw at that moment. I certainly didn’t.
"This paper," Jemez said, holding up the paper she had given a B, "has its problems--"

"Yes, it does," the coordinator said, and I could hear sotto voce two rows in front of me, "No shit, Sherlock!"

The coordinator ignored the aside. "What do you see those problems as being?"

"Well, the whole things seems to me a little under-developed. It's a little short,--"

"A little!" Another aside from off to my left and in front.

"Yes, it is," the coordinator agreed. "The assignment calls for 500 words and this paper is about 350."

Erikson jumped in. "Look, before we get lynched here--"

"No one is going to get lynched."

"--this paper has it's problems, sure. Development, organization, and there are some grammatical errors that I would want to go over with the writer. BUT, this writing is fresh."

"'My dog died' is fresh?" The same voice from the left. "We may think that the death of a pet is petty, but it wasn't to this writer, and that comes across when you read the paper. This was this student's first experience with death and it had a big impact on her."
I remembered this paper. It was true, I had noticed it when I read the paper. The dog's death had hit her hard. I could feel it on the page. While most students might be embarrassed to say their dog's death made them cry and think about death as a reality for the first time, she had written the paper letting her feelings show.

"This paper can be developed, the grammar errors fixed, and it will be a good paper. Maybe an A paper. In comparison, the paper most people gave an A does a good job with the mechanics, the organization and so forth, but the writer could never improve, because she hasn't really said anything that she cares about. I gave this paper a B because I want the writer to wake up."

The writer had the formula down pat: the thesis statement, the development, the conclusion, even good vocabulary words thrown in here and there. But the paper didn't have anyplace to go.

Stunned, I listened briefly to the conversation going on around me. The sotto voce speaker turned full voice and started the objections rolling. "You gave her a B because her dog died and you felt sorry for her."

"No--"

The coordinator refereed.
I tuned out the talk-cum-argument. Wow! Jemez and Erikson had honed in on what was alive, fresh and what was lifeless. I had noticed these things, too, but I had ignored them. Big mistake! Seeing alive writing and acknowledging it as alive writing is important—not just to the writer but for myself as well. Getting used to seeing it in others’ writing would strengthen my ability to see it in myself—and ignoring it would weaken my ability! I couldn’t just ditch students to conform with the majority. It hurt them and it hurt me.

After the hubbub had begun to die down, I talked to Jemez at the creative writing hang-out bar.

"Hey, what you were saying about that paper about the dog that died?"

She nodded.

"You’re right. I saw it when I read the paper, too. It was fresh. Alive."

She looked a little suspicious of me.

"I mean it. I felt bad to think about all the papers I’ve graded like a zombie. How do you feel about it?" I asked.

"The coordinator never got it," Jemez said.

"No, I don’t think so. But he can’t; he’s got to uphold the uniformity of grading thing. That’s his investment."

She scowled. "Doesn’t make it right."
"No." I paused for a minute, thinking again about all the times I'd betrayed, sold out myself and my students. "See ya. I almost told Jemez that I wanted to teach in a fundamentally different way, but didn't. What could I say? I couldn't even articulate what I wanted to do differently. I knew intuitively the changes from the methods I had been taught to the new methods I would want to adopt (whatever they turned out to be) would be big. That was it. So I didn't say anything.

I am not at all surprised that I made only modifications rather than real changes in my teaching. Major changes would have been noticed and probably not approved, so I curbed my thinking, and tried to content myself with changes that wouldn't show up on a syllabus or calendar, nor in the scuttlebutt of the department.

Also, it was hard to imagine a new kind of classroom because my ideas were so tentative and hypothetical and the pedagogy I was using was so familiar, so present and tangible. Yet I couldn't resist that larger question, what would I do if I wasn't concerned about the reaction of the department?

While the possibility of coming out to my students had existed from the moment I began teaching, it had almost never crossed my mind before. At my master's school, composition class time was most often spent explaining the writing
assignments to students and outlining the pitfalls they should make special efforts to avoid—including poor subjects. Alternatively, I talked about thesis development or transitions between paragraphs or gerund phrases. I felt I couldn’t bring my own writing or the connections between my life and my writing into my own composition classes.

My last year of teaching at the master’s level would have been my best opportunity to come out to my students in the natural course of things. The department adopted a new text that had an article on efforts to end the ban on gays in the military. Perhaps what held me back was my distinct feeling that I would receive no support from my department. Perhaps it was the full plate I already had. I also felt that I had leaned on my friends for support while I came out in the department. They might not appreciate my leaning on them again while I came out to my students.

There were environmental factors that held me back as well. I felt the article was flimsy, not doing more than inadequately skimming the surface of either side of the debate. To top it off, neither the logical argument assignment nor this lone article provided me with the kind of context I wanted for coming out. I didn’t want to become the center of a debate about military policy, nor be expected to logically justify my so-called “lifestyle choice.”
Underneath everything else was a foundational belief in the department and in me that teachers were neutral in the classroom. It was acceptable to talk about innocuous or inconsequential things with students; however, anything else should be avoided. At no time should a teacher’s personal life or personal beliefs take up more than a passing moment of the class’s time. The students were here to learn how to write, not to become friends with the teacher or to be converted to the teacher’s beliefs.

Faye had mentioned this at the beginning of our apprenticeship, along with the myriad other guidelines we were given, but mostly this dictum was assumed rather than stated. Advice was given to teaching assistants on the basis of this assumption without it being spoken.

While I mostly accepted this belief without challenging it, I simultaneously knew of teachers who did not follow it in their own teaching. Mr. Cavendish, the tenth grade history teacher at my high school, had taught Twentieth Century American History with a decidedly socialist slant. That wasn’t neutral. We routinely accused Ms. Parker, the English teacher, of seeing too much sexual innuendo in Shakespeare. But while I could accuse these teachers of being less than neutral, I couldn’t say they had talked too much about their own lives.
The only teacher who might have talked too much about his own life had been one of my creative writing professors. He talked about himself a great deal, from what he had done on the weekend to where he felt the country was going. I had never thought about these teachers and the "be neutral, be impersonal" guidelines. I had simply accepted that these teachers had their agendas (or axes to grind) and that creative writing professors were often eccentric. It didn't consciously occur to me that their agendas and their "eccentricity" were actually their teaching methods. Coming out to my students was not a real issue in my mind, nor did my friends ever suggest or ask if I came out to my students.

Meanwhile, at some point the frustration with having so many of my short stories go unseen overcame my fear. I decided that I would bring into workshop one of my most veiled stories—a story that dealt with a young woman's attraction for another woman—and her feelings of dissatisfaction, of being trapped in her own life, so she drank to numb the pain. The story subtly highlighted the shame the young woman felt about the attraction, and the entrapment the other woman felt in her own life. At least that was what I wanted it to do. Getting some response to the story would let me know whether the story was succeeding or not.
She stared blankly ahead for a moment, then we began to laugh again. Swaying up against the sink, she fell, sliding along its edge, the gold and rust pattern of her dress standing out sharply against the white porcelain, then my own center of gravity shifted and I fell against her, my breasts (through my shirt, her dress) brushing her back, and we landed on a stack of dog-eared books on the floor.

We fell next to each other, me holding onto her—as if we were scared children in a bed: my arm around her waist, a curl of her thick hair in my mouth. I brushed it out, instinctively knowing I was fine, but that Bron had taken some of my weight in the fall. "Are you all right, Bron?" Pushing up with one hand and craning over her body, I felt a moment of panic: What if she's really hurt? Unconscious? A firm command to reality clamped down in my mind. Then she moved, struggling to sit up.
"I'm fine. How 'bout you?"

"I'm fine. But we've got to be more careful." I sat up and grabbed the sink to pull myself up, feeling slightly dizzy. I should have eaten some dinner.

Bron was crying.

I looked down at her, sitting on the floor still, side-saddle, her legs slightly bent. The bare, weak bulb gave a grayish cast to the room, and glinted off the tears in her eyes. "Bron, what's wrong?" I crouched down beside her. "Are you hurt?"

A tear slipped down her cheek and dropped onto her dress. "Bron?" I waited, staring at the black pipes under the sink while Bron let two more tears slide.

"I'm drunk." Her voice was flat, somewhere between not caring and self-condemnation.

"I know," I said, and I couldn't resist the urge to touch her, to reach out, but I felt foolish and halfway to
her face I dropped my hand. "Do you want to tell me why?"

Her eyes glistened. She blushed bright red even through the make-up on her cheeks. I tightened my hands into fists, held them firmly by my knees, and waited. "I'm pregnant."

My face went blank. I had forgotten about her husband. I saw her only as a woman. I let the silence last for a minute while that sank in. "Is that good or bad?"

The first response to the story came from Brent, my nemesis in my final year of graduate school. We shared an office with 20 other teaching assistants, and it was common for him to tell derogatory and sexually-themed lesbian and gay jokes in my earshot, but not to me. He complained loudly to his coterie of friends—but not directly to me—about the corruption of our society, about the degeneracy of our times. We had sparred a time or two in graduate student meetings held at the English hang-out bar near campus.

Despite all this, he insisted that he was not anti-gay, really, he simply wanted the gays and lesbians to go elsewhere. "And why do they," he said making eye contact with
me out of a group of graduate students, "have to be so obvious all the time?" The one good thing about Brent's stance was that I had always been clear exactly where I stood with him—which was quite different from the more passive responses that I had come to think of as usual.

For the two sessions before I brought in my story, Brent had been absent from class, and I had decided this was the propitious time to bring a story to light. Brent had irritatingly showed up for workshop and was getting in the first comment. His response was that the story was too vague. It was so vague, he said, that the story could be about anything, it could be about a couple of sick queers.

About half of the workshop shrank back into silence, while the other half of the small class chimed in with Brent's comment. The professor made no comment on Brent's language, but agreed with him that the story was too vague, too restrained. That was the only comment from the professor for quite a while. I could tell that Brent's comment was making the professor think about the story in a new light—he was trying on sexual identity as the crux of the story.

Meanwhile, Brent continued his critique of the story by saying that he was surprised by the obscurity of the story, since I was usually so obvious, like so many of a certain kind of people. Writers were not allowed to speak while the story
was being discussed—they were given a chance to respond after
the discussion was over. But I almost broke the rule. About
the time that I decided Brent needed a good dressing down,
another responder jumped in and raised a different issue. A
few minutes later though, Brent was back, harping away.

The professor, who seldom commented until the end of the
discussion, said nothing as usual, and for his final comments
elaborated on the need for the story to be less vague. He
also mentioned that "stories like this" could be "hard to
place."

What did that mean? Were "stories like this" vague
stories, or sexual identity stories? Or something else? What
about "hard to place"? Did that mean hard to slot into a
category? Or hard to publish? Or what? I wondered whether
or not my professor was being consciously cryptic.

I left the classroom angry at Brent for his homophobic
potshots, and angry at the professor and the others in class
for ignoring them. Then again, why expect others to defend
me--why hadn't I told off Brent myself? I was angry at
myself, too, for not being out to my professor. If my
professor had known that I was a lesbian, he might have said
something to Brent, I told myself, because he would have
recognized Brent's comments as personal rather than unbiased.
And what had I gained from the workshop? It was true the group had more or less agreed that the story was too vague. But I also wondered if a nonheterosexual audience would have felt the same. Perhaps they would have picked up on details that I had put into the story that the workshop hadn’t mentioned at all. Then again, there had been little mention of the text itself in the whole workshop. But what made me think that nonheterosexuals might be such different readers? Would the cues they picked up be that different? I had no idea.

For my final workshop story, I returned to childhood themes. Brent managed to inject only a single homophobic reference into that conversation.

I continued to wrestle with what I could learn from my own messy writing and to make what changes I could within the existing structure. Probably the most radical change I made in my teaching was one of attitude. While the department was very concerned about plagiarism and assumed that students who were given the chance to cheat would, I decided to let go of that belief. I agreed that cheating, in whatever form was wrong, but I also felt teaching from this negative assumption created a counterproductive learning environment.

As a by-product of this decision I realized that allowing students to choose their own subjects and forms might
very well eliminate cheating, since the chance to say whatever one wanted to say in whatever form wished was so tantalizing, so empowering that few could pass up the opportunity. Most people cheated, I reasoned, when they felt they had to. If they felt there were viable alternatives, they would choose those. Freedom of both subject and form constituted a viable alternative.

Because I was not out to my professors, my master’s thesis ended up a hoax. Half of the thesis was composed of stories I had written during my first semester at the master’s level—stories I had outgrown. The other half were poems that I recognized as ducking the issue of sexual identity. As part of the creative writing thesis, I was required to analyze my work and to place it within a tradition of other writing and writers. I managed to do this, but felt that all I had accomplished was chicanery.

By the time I was finishing my master’s degree, I felt that creative writing had become a dead end for me. I could find no way out of the dilemma that the lesbian graduate student had presented to me three years before. As much as I loved creative writing, I decided to write creatively on my own time. I had already been working for a couple of years on bringing more imagery and power into my writing. The idea of
working alone, apart from the institution felt more helpful and less discouraging than taking more workshops.

Literature had been the least conflicted area of English throughout my graduate program, and I decided that I could continue my graduate work by switching to literature when I went on to the Ph.D. level. My sexual identity would have much less impact on my professional life if my field was the writings of others, rather than my own writings.

As I came down to graduation, I realized that I had changed a great deal from the young woman who had arrived from the east coast three years before. Among other important changes, I had new ideas about teaching that I knew I wouldn't abandon when I went on elsewhere for my doctorate.

I had landed a teaching assistantship at my Ph.D. school— as I needed to in order to continue my education. I decided to keep my eyes out for opportunities to do something different from the mainstream; I'd begin experimenting, surreptitiously if need be, with new methods of teaching. If I was successful and the environment was conducive, I'd express my belief that the teaching of writing could be improved, and suggest some new methods of teaching. I felt both presumptuous and determined. As long as I was teaching, I would strive for a better method than filling in a form.
I also vowed not to allow my doctorate work to be warped by being in the closet. With kamikaze-like determination I decided I would come out not just to my friends and peers, but in my work as well, whenever it was relevant. I would stand or fall by who I was, make my career by being myself or get out, but I would not subsist cringing in a corner.

Despite my investigations into better ways to teach English, it didn't occur to me that I might end up in a classroom where I would routinely be presented with opportunities for coming out to my students.
CHAPTER TWO
"I think it's risky--too risky--and ridiculous. What do you think?"

The speaker is one of my two new officemates; a woman from a nearby state, and an experienced teacher. We are on break from apprenticeship teacher training at our new Ph.D. institution--our inauguration into serious, bigtime careers in English. The joint coordinators of composition--a woman and a man--have just finished giving us an overview of a pedagogy they hope--expect--we will use with out students this semester.

For many of us, this is a brand new pedagogy. Its backbone is involvement: to teach by showing and learn by doing. It had sounded innocuous when put that simply, but as the coordinators continued to talk, we could see it would involve taking risks. It is an iconoclastic pedagogy: the teacher replaced at the center of the classroom universe by the students. What else it means, precisely, to engage in "student-centered, process-oriented" pedagogy isn't clear to us yet, but already my officemate is nervous.

Despite the risks, I like it. From what the co-coordinators have said and the writing we did in the morning, it sounds and feels like this must be Potter's class. I'd face a hundred risks to be part of Potter's class! I'm excited, but don't want to say so baldly. On our last break,
the talk centered on my two officemates' new boyfriends. When they asked if I had a boyfriend, I had responded, 'No boyfriend, but I have a girlfriend.'

They had hardly batted an eye in response. They immediately asked about her and in a moment, I was a natural part of the conversation. 'Wow!' I thought, 'I love acceptance!' Although I couldn't help wondering if I would get the cold shoulder later, I felt very good in that moment and didn't want to blow it by saying I liked the new ideas being peddled by the composition coordinators.

"Oh, I don't know" I say. "I think I'll wait a while and see. It might turn out great. I liked the freewriting we did this morning. That was fun."

"It was. But should school be fun? The sharing stuff feels good, but being friends with the students just makes it harder on everybody when grades come out--if we ever give grades around here!" The coordinators had alluded to new grading practices in their overview.

"Good point," I said, genuinely. The coordinators came back into the room. "Looks like we're about to find out!" We headed back to our seats.

About half the apprentices agreed with my officemate, sharing Nancie Atwell's initial belief that these ideas would lead to "certain anarchy" (11). The term "freewriting"
sounded attractive until the coordinators explained it meant writing without censoring "unacceptable thoughts and feelings," not editing out "interruptions, changes, [or] hesitations," nor even stopping to correct mistakes in spelling and grammar (Elbow 5, 6).

When the coordinators announced that volunteers would share their freewriting afterward, even I shifted around uncomfortably in my seat. I had never shared my freewriting! Not even with close friends, let alone strangers. I wondered if there would be any volunteers, but there had been five.

Maybe the volunteers felt like me: irresistibly drawn to the new ideas—even though the only idea I had any experience with was freewriting. Nonetheless, I felt certain that I had stumbled into Potter's class.

I felt so excited and pleased that for my freewriting I babbled on paper. My freewritings continued to be disorganized and haphazard throughout the training. I didn't mind: I felt stirrings deep within. When my writing settled down some, something big—and wonderful—would come. I could feel it.

The backbone of the new pedagogy was involvement: to teach by showing and learn by doing. For teacher and students to become a 'community of writers'. The coordinators had used this same approach with us throughout training and the results
had been eye-opening. For the first time, I had heard what others in class had written. The coordinators sometimes read their freewritings as well. The sharing had given me encouragement and a hundred ideas to write about. As soon as I settled down some, I would begin to write some of these ideas.

In the end, we all agreed to try out the new pedagogy, but for half the group the agreement was superficial: they wouldn't buck the coordinators' program. For me, this was my dream come true.

At the first meeting of the regular-semester teacher training class, several teaching assistants were worried. When we told our students they could write about anything, many students could think of nothing to write about. Writing teacher and researcher Lucy Calkins was right: students were habituated to "writer's welfare": having their teacher "dole out topics;" "they'd come to believe they had no writing territory, no turf of their own" (25). What could we do to show our students that they had many subjects they could write about—without perpetuating their dependence on us?

As if he had known we would ask this, one of the co-coordinators led us in the Lifeline, an exercise designed to meet these very needs. The co-coordinator drew a horizontal
timeline across the blackboard. At one end of the line, he entered his birth date, at the other end, the day's date.

He told us to create our own timelines on a sheet of paper while he filled in his on the blackboard. We should feel free to get ideas about what to put on our timelines from what he put on his. When we were done, we would share our Lifelines in small groups, and then choose an entry to write about. Other entries would provide a storehouse of topics for future writings. Writing independence!

The Lifeline also demonstrated that students would learn more effectively if they saw their teachers as writers--saw us in the process of writing as well as reading the final results. They would benefit from seeing us not just as teachers, but as people. This would humanize and demystify the writing process.

After I had filled in some major events of my life--my high school and college graduations, I looked up at the blackboard to see what the co-coordinator was coming up with. Not only were major events on his line, but minor and personal events as well--a track meet, a winning game of chess, a memorable camping trip, and a cryptic entry labeled simply "God." His entries broadened my parameters and I went back to work on my own Lifeline.
When our charting time was up, I realized that simply reading the co-coordinator's timeline gave me some insight into his life. He had left no significant time gaps. Looking at it more closely, I was surprised by what he'd added since I had last looked up. He had included parts of his lovelife on his Lifeline. There was an entry for first meeting the woman who would become his wife, and another entry for their marriage. There were entries for significant things they had done together.

I realized that a good deal of my surprise came from the co-coordinator being male. Had the co-coordinator been female, I don't think I would have been nearly so surprised to see lovelife entries.

I was glad to learn something about the shape of the co-coordinator's life. This person would be my supervisor throughout my six-year program. I wanted to know this man both as a human being and as an authority with influence on my career. Just as my students—at least some of them—would be interested in the shape of my life for the same reasons.

Looking down at my own life sketched onto a single page, I noticed that my entire lovelife was missing. I hadn't entered my first meeting my girlfriend or our "union" onto the timeline. Nor was there anything about the two men I had
dated in high school, nor the two women I had been involved
with before my girlfriend.

There were other omissions: I hadn’t entered coming out
to myself or my friends. There was an entry for achieving my
M. A., but no entry for the story I had brought to workshop.
I could easily write meaningfully about all these missing
entries. Why hadn’t it occurred to me to enter these events
on my Lifeline?

Was it partly because the co-coordinator was male and I
didn’t expect that he would enter anything personal on his
Lifeline, and therefore I had unconsciously decided I should
leave anything personal off my own? Was it just that I was a
private sort of person? Or that I didn’t want to show
anything controversial?

We broke into groups of four to share our Lifelines. I
discovered that I was the only one in my group to have left
off my lovelife. I wondered if others in the class as a
whole—perhaps some of the men?—had also left it off or if I
was the only one. Two women had gone into more detail than
the co-coordinator, listing their best friends and boyfriends
throughout their lives.

I noticed that what the co-coordinator had included on
his Lifeline had strongly influenced what we had written on
our own. While the two women had included categories that the
co-coordinator hadn't, we all had included at least one entry for all the kinds of things he had included, even if we had had to dig to come up with even a single entry. We agreed that we'd never write about these entries, yet we felt compelled to include them. This was the power of a teacher.

Another thought occurred to me about the co-coordinator's Lifeline. While others chose an entry and began writing, I thought. Where were the co-coordinator's entries that were at least a little risky to list? I didn't believe for a moment that he had nothing risky to write about. No one could reach even the minimal professorial age without having stories that were risky to tell. Not even the most sheltered person. So where were they?

Had he decided to hold off on what was risky until later in the semester, when he knew his students better? Or would he never show anything risky, anything that showed him in a socially controversial or potentially less than flattering light?

Omitting the risky entries left him more in the role of teacher--at some level, the ideal human being. His Lifeline entries didn't have to mean anything to anyone except himself. Nonetheless, I could see that he had made silent choices about his timeline; the results of his choices were visible only by their absence--an absence that was easy to miss.
I thought about our course texts—three books written by practitioners of student-centered, process-oriented pedagogy. The first, Lessons from a Child: On the Teaching and Learning of Writing, followed a class through the first, second, and third grades as they tried out these new ideas about teaching writing. One story from this particular book leaped to my mind.

It was the story of Mrs. Howard, the third grade teacher. She had noticed that when she told her students they could write anything, they felt they had to write "exciting stories." She wanted to model for students how their own ordinary lives and ideas could be fertile ground for writing. To do this, she had considered several options, but had finally settled on bringing an x-ray to class.

Naturally curious, the students asked her questions about it. The questioning revealed that Mrs. Howard’s dog had hurt its leg and needed to be taken to the vet. Having asked the teacher questions about her story, they were ready to bring in their own interesting objects, share their stories, and then write.

The story stuck with me because of how energized the students were that their teacher was sharing a story from her own life with them. I was interested in the kind of everyday
events Mrs. Howard had considered and rejected: "I thought about telling about my last haircut, or the new fern that's growing outside my door, but I finally settled on . . . my dog" (Calkins, 26).

She chose stories that would appeal to both girls and boys. She chose a story with a prop that was certain to generate her students' curiosity. Consciously or unconsciously, she also chose stories that were not at all risky to share with her students, although plenty of "everyday" stories have controversial or risky elements. Perhaps third grade was not the place to begin tackling this kind of writing.

Of the other two course texts, one was written by a junior high English teacher, and the other by a college composition professor. Both discussed their own variations on student-centered, process-oriented writing pedagogy. Neither text addressed writing controversial or risky subjects—either for the writer to attempt or for the writer to share with an audience. As students mature, for their writing to mature as well, didn’t they need to learn how to handle writing socially or personally risky subjects? Of course they did. It was just a matter of when—and how—to broach it.

By junior high, students are grappling complexly with some of the difficulties of life. Although they are not yet
adults, surely something could be said—needed to be said—about writing about difficult material. Had the junior high school teacher modeled writing about complex subjects for her students? I had no idea: the text said nothing about it.

Surely by the time students arrived in college, they needed to know the benefits and complexities of writing about controversial or difficult subjects. What did the college composition professor model for his students? Did it involve ways of handling risky material or complex treatments? Again I had no idea.

And what of my own teacher training professor? Had he decided that discretion was the better part of teaching? If he had included even one controversial entry, would the rest of us have followed suit? If we had, then what?

There was nothing risky in entering on his timeline meeting his future wife—although there might have been some risk in entering loves previous to his wife. There was no risk in entering his marriage. There was nothing visibly risky in the rest of the entries about his lovelife. On the other hand, perhaps the co-coordinator felt that he had taken enough risk to include any part of his lovelife. He had made his choices, I just wanted to know how he had arrived at them. Was it coincidence that his modeling was as innocuous as Mrs.
Howard's? Or did the new pedagogy ignore the issue of risk and controversy?

In any case, I could see that I faced a choice: whether to include or exclude entries that would reveal my sexual identity. The choice would be conscious for me now, although it hadn't occurred to me before. Wasn't it funny that hadn't I seen that coming out to my students would be at least a possibility, if not a probability? Had I been so wrapped up in absorbing the new ideas, weighing them, looking for a place for them within my frame of reference that I hadn't seen the potential? Could I still be so blinded by my old ideas about teaching? Could I still be--after three years out of the closet--so automatically careful about what I revealed and to who?

Did the pedagogy advocate coming out or not? I had no idea. I was mad at the co-coordinator for leaving me hanging. I could decide to direct my students in the exercise without modeling it. But then I wouldn't be giving the pedagogy a fair trial; I'd be back to the old methods. I couldn't face that. Besides, I believed these methods were a substantial improvement over the traditional method.

I could omit my lovelife again. Some students would probably go ahead and include their lovelife on their timeline anyway, but other students were bound to notice my omission.
and hence omit their lovelines too. My actions would undercut my words, but my students wouldn't be familiar enough with the pedagogy to be mad at me, like I was mad at the co-coordinator.

I also wondered how my students who noticed the omission might interpret it. Would they attribute the absence to ideas about me as a woman or ideas about me as a teacher? Or would some other lens be applied? In any case, I wouldn't be presenting myself as a writer or human being, an individual. Nor would I be teaching my students; I'd be avoiding teaching them.

But what if I included my sexual identity--by mentioning my loveline or my coming out? What if I included other risky entries, things that showed me as less than a paragon of schoolmarm virtue? Let my students see not just my achievements, my privileged professorial life, but let them see too, my flops, my washouts, the mixed aspects of my life. Things that they might even object to. Just seeing these entries would unveil the teacher and reveal the human being. If I chose to write about even one of these risky entries, it would reveal me as a writer as well: a whole person coming to grips with the complexity of myself and society. This was the path. I could feel it in my bones.
If I chose to be honest, to include these entries, students would have an advantage over my simply coming out to them. In coming out to them, they might have just the fact that I was a lesbian—a piece of information that could easily direct their attention to stereotypes. By coming out through my Lifeline, they could read something of the shape of my whole life. My lesbianism would be on the Lifeline, but so would all the other important parts of my full life. This idea pleased me.

So often, in coming out to others—people I had hoped were budding friends—I had noticed that once they knew I was a lesbian, they wanted to know no more. They wanted me to stay silent about anything connected with being a lesbian. They became nervous if their stories about their ex-lovers led me to talk about my ex-lovers—either female or male! Some people seemed nervous no matter what I said—they worried that anything I said might be an unwanted revelation. The Lifeline might get beyond all this.

When I had first faced the task of coming out to other people, just sharing the bare fact that I was a lesbian was all I could handle. But over the course of my three years, I learned that coming out was more than "just the facts." Coming out was a way of opening up a social space for myself—so that when people (regardless of sexual identity) talked
about their lives, I could talk about mine as well. So that
Monday morning talk around the coffeemaker included me.
Without this social space I am not a part of the community.

Being closeted touches very little on my sex life, but a
great deal on my social life. Often I'm not able to share in
social talk--talk as simple as a movie and how I responded to
it. Or a romantic dinner that my girlfriend and I shared. It
is difficult or impossible to talk about taking care of my
partner's elderly father because explaining the relationship
means coming out of the closet.

Being closeted sometimes means pretending to have no
significant people sharing my life: no friends, no lover, no
extended family. Being in the closet means isolation for me
and for the people around me, who continue to be ignorant of
what it means for one woman to be a lesbian, and for them to
know (at least) one lesbian woman.

I read widely in teacher training class--and in
following semesters as I continued to take composition
classes. Like Harriet Malinowitz, I have read "romantic
expressionists" such as Elbow, Murray and Macrorie. I have
read "basic reading and writing" theorists like Bartholomae,
Flower and Hayes, and Bruffee. "Liberatory theorists" such as
Friere, Shor and Giroux; ethnographers like Heath and Rose. I
have read, too, Berthoff and Berlin, Faigley, Fish, and
Foucault, Kristeva, Vygotsky, Bakhtin, hooks, and Graves, and a host of others. Like Malinowitz, I came to wonder “[w]hich of our theories of writing don’t explode when we consider their ramifications for lesbian and gay writers?” (39, emphasis inherent). Malinowitz explains, “[e]ven the theories that offer the most promise of connecting writing to radical social change fail to imagine the perils at which outlaw sexuality is articulated in homophobic culture” (40).

Coming out is perilous—and nowhere more perilous than in school (whether secondary school or college), and at no time more perilous than from teens to mid-twenties. A 1990 study found that “while teenagers were reluctant to advocate open bias against racial and ethnic groups, they were emphatic about disliking homosexual men and women. They are perceived ‘as legitimate targets which can be openly attacked’ (Malinowitz, 9, 10). Homosexuals are attacked linguistically as well, since they function as “social metaphors” for “sin, sickness, criminality . . . and the demise of the family” (Malinowitz, 111). Between violence and metaphor stand commonplace experiences, as Crumpacker and Vander Haegen point out:

Students ask to change roommates because they suspect their preferences; parents seek to withdraw students from the
'lesbian' influence of women's colleges; harassment of homosexual teachers and students occurs daily; conservatives attempt to discredit educators who confront prejudice or curricula that are critical of our social systems. 65

To complete our sketch, a campus study in Berkeley, California found that "82% of lesbian and gay students surveyed had been subjected to pejorative stereotypical comments about homosexuals by instructors (Hart, 31, 32)."

While writing pedagogy fails gays and lesbians, it doesn't fail only gays and lesbians. Freewriting is obviously risky because it includes everything--even "unacceptable thoughts and feelings" and "interruptions, changes, and hesitations" (Elbow, 5, 6). However, risk is inherent to all writing--or more accurately, all 'authoring'. Authoring, explains Moffett, means "authentic expression of an individual's own ideas, original in the sense that he or she has synthesized them for himself or herself." (89).

The author "stands at the mercy of prior rumination about the subject" demonstrating the writer's vulnerability (89, emphasis added). What is the writer at the mercy of? The complexity of her or his interior world:
not just the stream [of consciousness]
but a confluence of streams issuing from
sensory receptors, memory, and a variety
of more or less emotional or logical
kinds of reflection. All the elements
of this rich mixture, trigger, interrupt
and reinforce each other. (Moffett, 136)

When writers look inward, we don't know with certainty
where that gazing (or glancing) will take us. Sometimes we
haven't the vaguest idea. Risk follows from risk. Having
dared to look inward and to write, the writer then risks again
in sharing writing—whether with an actual audience or
exclusively an audience in one's head.

It's easy to understand why so often writing is reduced
to performance. In the classroom writing as performance is
not just one way—students performing for teachers; for
example, seventh and eighth grade English teacher Nancie
Atwell came to recognize the writing she did for her students
was performance when she decided to do the writing she
assigned to her students: "My assigned poetry was formulaic
and cute. My assigned narratives never went beyond first
draft; I wrote them at the breakfast table the day they were
due. My assigned essays consisted of well-organized and
earnest clichés" (9). Many of my students came to grips with
risk, as did I, each of us more or less blindly, without
foresight, and alone.

*   *   *

When I walked into my class the day following the
Lifeline, I had decided to give my students my expanded
Lifeline. On the first day of class, when we had broken into
small groups, a trio of young men had introduced themselves to
a quartet of young women. The introductions were followed by
invitations to go out with them after class. Next, the men
rated the women's looks and suggested with sounds and gestures
what they wanted to do with the young women.

The young women in class had tired of the men after a
while and had tried a variety of strategies to fend them off.
Nothing worked. I thought about saying something to the trio,
but was reluctant to come down on anyone on the first day of
class. I chalked their behavior up to first day bravado and
overlooked it.

Now the trio picked up where they had left off, taunting
and teasing the same foursome. They took turns blowing kisses
at the women. One offers, "Let me make you moan, baby!" while
another answers, "Do it! Do it!"

Finally, one of the women, Tracie, erupts. "How would
you like it if the situation was reversed and we were making
wisecracks to you?"
"Yeah," Jana echoes. I am proud of these young women for speaking out to these guys before the whole class. I suspect it wasn't just the guys' egregious behavior that has pushed them to it. They will be presences in the class in any case.

"I'd love it," one of the guys responds grinning.

"Absolutely!" another of the guys--Frank--adds, and slaps palms with the third. Guys around the class giggle.

"You guys are so sexist! You're just pigs! Why do you say stuff like this? You're disgusting!" Tracie slouches back in her chair and crosses her arms, clearly frustrated by the trio and the giggles.

Other young women take on the trio, telling them increasingly boldly that their comments were unwelcome. But they make no dent in the guys' armor. The boys blow kisses back at them.

"Men are pigs!" Tracie declares. Then the other guys in class begin joining the controversy in earnest.

Had I been teaching with the pedagogy I was used to, the whole issue would never have arisen. Talk in class would most often be directed to me; it would certainly be directed by me. Asides would be unusual, and asides with sexual innuendo highly improbable. But the composition coordinators had pointed out that talk would help students feel more
comfortable sharing their writing with each other, and could generate new topics to write about.

Nevertheless, I feel certain that gender war is not good talk. Besides, the class is spinning out of control.

"Hey, everybody!" I enter into the fray. "Talking time is up! We’re going to do some writing that will help you generate a supply of writing ideas. Get out a sheet of paper."

Heads turn. Twenty-odd faces look at me as a stranger: 'Who is this woman and what is she talking about?' After many seconds' pause, they get out paper. I draw a horizontal line on the blackboard and began writing out my timeline. Tension in the class remains high and at the end of class, young women cluster around my desk, insisting that I do something to stop the trio. I promise I will, and then wonder how to keep my promise.

It isn't until I have returned to my office that I realize that I wrote my original, censored Lifeline on the blackboard. When I realize what I have done, I grill myself. Was I simply distracted by the feuding? Or, like the lesbian and gay educators in Griffin’s study, had “maintaining secrecy” become my “reflexive response”? (175). I couldn’t tell.
In the next class, the students needed some persuading that they can write about anything they want.

"You don't actually mean anything, so what do you mean?" Jana asks.

"Why don't I mean anything?" I smile.

"Well, you wouldn't want somebody to write something controversial, like—not like gun control or something—but like something personal."

"Why not?" I ask again, still smiling, pleased to be an advocate of freedom, of roominess.

"Well, then you're saying it would be okay with you if I wrote about my boyfriend?" Her tone of voice mixes curiosity with defiance.

"Sure," I say confidently, "but what's controversial about your boyfriend?" Now I am worried my cocky attitude has set me up for a fall.

"He's Mexican," she says, and I have the sense that she is expecting some trouble. There aren't any fireworks, but suddenly the class is entirely different. Until now, the class has been quiet, listening to Jana and I talk. Now I've been forgotten while students ask Jana questions and discuss amongst themselves. Jana reveals that "he" has virtually no accent, that she met him in high school and that her parents
pretty strongly disapprove now, although they didn't at first, when they'd thought she wasn't serious about him.

The talk amongst the students ranges from the rights of parents in regard to their kid's dating to the rightness or wrongness of interracial relationships. No one says directly that interracial relationships are wrong, but many say that they are much more complicated. Some students confess they wouldn't get serious about someone from another race. A show of hands reveals that few have ever actually dated interracially. Some admit they would never date someone from another race.

"Is Mexican another race?" I ask. Answers are divided. Some say yes, while others admit it isn't technically, but functionally it is. A small group says that the whole notion of race is absurd: cultures exist, but races are made up.

The questioning and debate continue.

"Are you dating him to defy your parents?" someone asks.

"No," she says, "At least not when I started out." She went out with him because she liked him. Now she is so mixed up she doesn't know anything anymore. The tension came first from her parents, but now from her boyfriend's family as well. They are wary of his involvement with someone not Mexican.
Jana’s pain is apparent. I’m still not clear how serious she is about the young man. But this is because she no longer knows either.

“Sometimes I think I should break it off. I can’t stand the tension. But I don’t want to break up with him just because of that. Besides, I think maybe I really love him. What if he’s the right one for me?”

No one says anything.

A student asks me the question that I have suspected might be coming. I am pleased and nervous. “What do you think of interracial relationships?”

“I think the same thing of interracial relationships that I do of any relationships,” I say. “The question is love. Two people who really love each other is special and seems increasingly rare. If you love each other unconditionally—not meaning that you’ll take anything, like being beat up or abused—but that you love this person as they are, accepting them, not trying to make them be somebody else, and they love you the same way—then I don’t care if they are purple or green, Kurdish or Korean, gay or straight, jug-eared or quadriplegic. You are lucky to have love like this and I would hold onto it with both hands.”

I think about the things I haven’t said, and add, “It’s simple to say hold on to love, but sometimes it’s complicated
to do it. You don’t want to put a rift between you and your parents, but you don’t want to lose something as rare as real love either.”

The room is quiet, and then I remember the bigger picture. I look at Jana. “You can write about anything, including your boyfriend. You don’t have any opinion except your own. The idea is to write honestly and complexly about something you care about.”

I was pleased when Jana’s first paper focused on her Mexican boyfriend and sad when she told us, late in the semester, that she had broken up with him. The tension became too great.

After this, students knew they could write about anything. But this bred problems of its own. Two weeks later at the end of class, I had a small group of students gathered around me protesting. “What if we don’t have anything like, big and dramatic to write about? Like Jana.”

“Then write about something ordinary. The point is to write about something important to you.”

“But who’s gonna care about something ordinary? I don’t want to write something boring.”

“It won’t be boring. If you write about something you care about, it won’t be boring. People will pick up that you
care about it, and that'll make it interesting for them." They left wanting to believe me, but still skeptical.

In addition, I had a steady trickle of one-on-one conversations about whether or not to write about something. Often the students said very little about the subject itself, instead focusing on how scary or dangerous it felt to write about it.

"I'd write it," I said over and over. "But I write about everything. It helps keep me sane, even when I am scared to death. Gives me a chance to sort out how I feel. All the conflicting feelings and ideas. I don't even know what I think till I write, because too much is clogged up in my head. Sharing it is another story. But I put everything in my notebook."

I loved the questions—they were what writing was all about. But there were parts of the new pedagogy that frustrated me. Like wanting to silence the trio of young men, but knowing doing it would thrust me back into the center of the classroom, a blatant display of my power as teacher. On the other hand, I was pretty frustrated with the way the class seemed to be shaping into a community of gender brawlers instead of writers.

I talked to the composition co-coordinator, pouring out my frustration with the trio and the pedagogy. "Yes, we're
talking about writing in new and exciting ways. Yes, the
students are connecting writing to their lives—at least they
seem to be. But the sense of community in the class is
suffering. The women in class, especially are suffering.”

“I don’t want to throw in the towel with this pedagogy,
but I feel like I need to put a stop to the sexist remarks.
The only solution I can think of is to come down on the trio.”

The co-coordinator surprised—and annoyed—me by being
sympathetic to the young men—perhaps because I was so annoyed
with them. “My guess,” the co-coordinator said, “is that
these guys are trying too hard to impress these young women,
and that they are covering up just how nervous they feel.”

The trio didn’t strike me as nervous at all, and I
didn’t feel inclined to be a person with them. Nevertheless,
I felt reluctant to come down hard on them early in the
semester.

“Talk to them as people,” the coordinator suggested.

“How are they doing in the class?”

“John isn’t doing any of the coursework at all. He just
horses around. Frank isn’t much better. Royce has been
mostly keeping up with the homework, but he was absent today,
tardy on Monday, and tardy one day last week.”

“Well, be frank with them about that too. Let them know
they have to come on time and do the work or they’ll flunk.”
I nodded. This appealed to me more than being human with them.

"Maybe Royce is dropping the class.

"Good! Good riddance!"

"Be careful," the co-coordinator advised. "If you really dislike a student, they'll figure that out and it will hurt them, and it will hurt their learning."

I nodded, but secretly hoped the trio might be breaking up. It hadn't occurred to me, but it seemed a likely explanation for tardiness followed by absence. Getting rid of Royce would be a godsend. He was the most difficult of the trio to handle. In addition to annoying the young women in class, Royce liked to be the center of attention, something he accomplished by telling funny stories about his life to the class. He started before the bell rang, but often spilled over into classtime.

By Monday I had decided to give being candid a try. I could always pull out threats if being candid didn't work. Royce was absent again, so I met with Frank and John in my office.

I told them baldly that the women in class were annoyed with their remarks, and they both looked surprised. I didn't want to credit these looks, but they did seem genuine.
Amazing. They spoke over each others' words, insisting that they didn't realize that they were offending anyone.

Then I talked about their performance--or lack of it. "You guys need to decide whether you're going to buckle down and take this class seriously or whether you just want to horse around. If you want to horse around, this is the wrong class." The guys promised to get their acts together and left quickly.

I felt good about how the talk had gone, but I didn't kid myself that I was out of the woods yet. Royce was the most difficult for me to handle, and the instigator of most of the trouble. The talk with Frank and John might not stick if Royce came back and got them going again.

When Royce was again absent on Wednesday I felt even more hopeful that he had indeed dropped. But Friday he showed up at my office before class, explaining that he'd had to move out of his house and into an apartment unexpectedly, change bank accounts over into his own name, and straighten out his financial affairs.

I was curious--concerned--about these huge changes a month into the semester, but I didn't want to pry. Royce volunteered that things were rocky at home and he was now living on his own.
The little I knew about Royce came from a conversation about his name. His father had named him after the luxury car manufacturer, Rolls-Royce. His father loved the name and Royce hated it, each for what it symbolized. His father, Royce said, wouldn't let him major in anything but business.

"He wants me to turn into some business-suit guy or Donald Trump or something." Royce had grimaced at the thought. I had the feeling that the tension between Royce and his dad went back a long way. "I don't mean to offend you or anything, but my dad is an asshole." The final word came across half in anger, half as flat statement of fact.

Without even pausing to see what reaction I might have, Royce talked on. "My dad started this company from scratch. He did pretty well. See, he came from a really poor home—so I'm supposed to be this bigshot businessman—take the company international. Then I'm supposed to get into politics and practically run the world!"

I couldn't tell where the factual account left off, and the exaggeration started. I had the feeling Royce was covering up and distracting at the same time he was explaining. But that didn't make sense. Why make up a huge story from a simple question about his name? Yet I felt vaguely toyed with. Had his father really named him after a
car? Or had Royce just capitalized on the coincidence to make a good story and get attention? I wouldn’t put it past him.

I had asked Royce what he wanted to do with his life. He didn’t know; why think about it? His dad wouldn’t let him do anything else anyway.

Now I ask Royce how he was doing, and he said ‘fine’ and then shifted the talk away from being kicked out of the house.

“Now I can do anything I want.” He tipped an imaginary can to lips.

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

He sat back in the worn out cushions of the easy chair across from me. A look of anxiety flitted across his face which was replaced with indifference; he shrugged his shoulders. He didn’t know; he hadn’t really thought about career and major and things like that.

“I dunno. Maybe drop out of college. Make my modeling job a career.” More than one photographer had told him he had what it took to make it.

“I hope you stay in college. At least stick with it until you get things sorted out.”

It was funny: I had begun the class hoping Royce had dropped, now I was worried about where his life was headed and making mental notes to keep an eye on him.
Royce promised to make up all the work he had missed, and to notify me in advance if he was going to miss a class in the future. He was true to his word until late in the semester—when he took his final absence without penalty—without notifying me. By then, I wasn't worried anymore. In class, Royce left the women alone, but still demanded—and got—a great deal of the class' attention through his stories.

Frank handed in a backlog of homework, stopped horsing around, and even made a sort-of apology to the women in class. They forgave and forgot quickly, and before long Frank became liked by both the men and the women in class. I made an effort to let Frank know, through eye contact and a nod, that I appreciated the change he had made. John quieted down for a class or two, but then reverted to his old antics.

In the meantime, I decide that I have delayed as long as I possibly can. The coordinators have encouraged us to freewrite with our students and to share a more developed piece with our students as well. I have shared a freewriting or two with them—but my free writes are nothing special: while I am used to free writing in my notebook, I am unsettled still by writing in a classroom atmosphere. My writing is jumbled and jumpy.

For the up-coming midterm Read Aloud, I want to share something special. I am excited and pleased by my students
and the way that the new pedagogy is actually working. My students, many of them at least, are writing about their lives and what is important and meaningful to them. Through our discussions, I realized that the class is a microcosm of society as a whole—opinions on any given topic range across the spectrum. While some opinions seemed biased or uninformed, our conversations as a whole never became petty or acrimonious. We have come to the line, but have never trespassed into this territory. All our talks have a directness and freshness that thrills me.

I decide I want to relate to the adjustments my students are going through in coming to college, so I write about my own adjustments. I start with leaving my east coast home to come to the midwest, the unexpected differences in cultures; I talk about the differences between graduate school and my undergraduate experience. I write about the character of midwestern people from my perspective and the challenges of making new friends.

I don’t reveal that I am a lesbian, but I’m candid that there is much less diversity here than I am used to, and that the midwest seems behind the times in both in fashion and social change. I end with the things I appreciate about the midwest.
I am pleased with the piece I write and I am eager to share with my students. My happiness came partly from my writing settling down enough to produce a coherent piece. I felt reassured. My happiness also came from believing I was doing what Griffin calls "inferred disclosure"—disclosing gay or lesbian identity by taking actions that would increase speculation about my sexual identity (180). This piece of writing coupled with the stand I had taken on love in the discussion begun by Jana amounted, in my mind, to inferred disclosure. More accurately, I vacillated back and forth, hoping I had disclosed, and reining my hopes in. If all went well with the Read Aloud, then I would screw up my courage and take the final step.

Terrell fell into step beside me on the sidewalk on my way to the Union, shortening his long-legged lope considerably. I felt dwarfed walking in his six foot seven inch shadow. He had lustrous mahogany colored skin and a statuesque bald head like his idol, Michael Jordan.

He seldom spoke in class. He was one of the group of students who had wondered what to do if you didn't have anything exciting to write about like Jana. Now he wanted advice about what to do about the up-coming Read Aloud. Terrell has shown me excerpts from a writing about his father, who had died of alcoholism when Terrell was 13.
"Your piece does run longer than what you can probably get into the time allowed. Can you pick sections from your paper? Kind of condense it?"

"Do we have to Read Aloud? Couldn't I skip this one?"

He sat down on a bench in an alcove and I sat down nearby. Almond-shaped eaves from an overarching tree fluttered onto the grass and concrete around us.

"No, you can't skip. Why?"

"I don't want to Read Aloud. My paper's too personal."

"Ah." I wondered what I was going to do now. Then it occurred to me. "Have you shared any of your pieces with your small group?"

"Not really. I pretty much just show them freewrites."

"Hmmmm. One advantage of sharing your writing with your small group is that gives you an idea how the class might respond." I picked up a leaf and began to tear it up. "You could write a throwaway piece. A piece just to share with the class. The problem with that is when you don't care about it, it usually shows. Then you feel bad and the class knows you gypped them."

"I don't know if I could write about something I don't really care about."
“Good! What about sharing sections from your papers with your small group? The easier to share sections. If it goes well, you’re all set.”

“What if it doesn’t go well?”

“Then better your small group than the whole class.” I tossed away the leaf stem. “Look, it might not go well, but I think it will. Most times, things feel scarier to us because we’re inside them. To other people your experience isn’t so personal.” He didn’t look convinced. I tried again.

“If you rate your scaredness on a scale, and you say some paper is an eight out of ten—”

“More like an 11!”

“Okay. Most people, if they heard the paper, would give it about half what you would. So people probably won’t react as negatively as you think. I know this isn’t an easy decision. I do think you’ll be glad if you do it.”

“I don’t know.” He went away thoughtful. His shoulders still hunched. I hadn’t found the right thing to say.

On Read Aloud day I read first, then asked for volunteers, unsure whether I should have just assigned a reading order. But there were enough people who wanted to get it over with, and enough people who actually wanted to read their papers aloud that I had no trouble getting volunteers.
For Royce the Read Aloud was an opportunity to be the center of attention legitimately. Royce read a piece about his part-time job as a model and the good money he made from it. He wandered into the conflict with his father and being kicked out of the house. Although the piece began lighthearted and funny, the class sobered when Royce said he had been kicked out and was now living on his own, supporting himself. Royce ended the piece by inviting the entire class to the apartment he was sharing for a kegger. Although everyone laughed again, the talk afterward focused on how Royce was doing. The consummate showman, Royce sang, "Don't worry, be happy!"

Toward the end of the period we came down to a handful of students each waiting for the other to cave in first and read. One by one, they read, until only Terrell was left. He pulled his paper from under a folder. Without preamble he began to read.

The students had created a pattern of commenting briefly on each reader's paper before moving onto the next. When Terrell finished his paper, there was silence. No one knew what to say. Hurt and anger from the brutal things done to him, mixed freely together with the pain of loss and the love that remained despite the injuries. His father's influence on
him was complicated and often left him in turmoil about how to direct his life. No one knew what to say.

Eventually someone said that they really liked what he had written; another said it was deep. But both comments fell far short of how the piece affected us; no one else added anything. We were too busy absorbing what Terrell had read to talk.

On Monday, one or two people said hello to Terrell, and asked him how he was doing. Before he had read, Terrell had hung back from the class without their noticing. Now he was noticed. In response, Terrell spoke up for a class or two, but then lapsed back into silence. But he remained a presence even in silence, and he did speak up on his own once or twice.

* * *

In the meantime, something was finally beginning to happen in my second class. A student pointed out that we would spend less time writing if we talked, so from now on he was going to talk, and he hoped others would too. He followed up with a gripe about the rudeness of the people in administration. After a long pause another person told a warm fuzzy. I decided that my luck had definitely changed. I doubted that the class could be called a community of writers. But even if they were only talking in order to write less, I
was happy that something was finally happening in this dead class. The joy of writing would come over time.

On the following Monday, I arrived early for class. I followed what was becoming my usual routine, and sat down at one of the student desks scattered in a loose circle—and tried to look busy until class time. A few students were already seated and killing time like me, others were filtering in. I shuffled my papers back and forth. If any students had been sitting near to me, I would have chatted with them, but there were wide gaps between the few of us in the room so far. Frank and John were sitting across the circle, shooting the bull with each other. I distracted myself in order not to hear them.

Quickly their conversation became too loud to ignore and one of them shouted, “God, I’m no stinking faggot! Not me! I’m no pussy-faced faggot! They ought to kill all the fucking faggots! If I was one I’d kill myself!”

“Me, too! But they’re everywhere.”

“Yeah! You know what we ought to do? We ought to round ‘em up and put ‘em all on an island in the middle of the ocean and starve ‘em to death.”

“No way! I say shoot ‘em! I don’t want them around a second longer.”
"Don’t shoot ‘em. That’s a waste of ammo. Burn ‘em!
Toast the faggots! One match and whoosh!

"Yeah! All right!"

Their conversation finally seemed to have burned itself out. While they talked, my insides quivered. I flushed hot and then cold and a film of sweat broke out across my face. I told myself I was safe—’These guys weren’t bashing lesbians, they aren’t bashing me’—my insides paid absolutely no attention to my desperate rationalizations. ‘Are they the type to hurl bricks through homosexuals’ windows,’ I wondered. ‘Are they the type to harass gays? What would they do to me, if they knew their teacher was a lesbian?’

I tried to quell my own feelings while also trying to decide whether to confront these guys or not. What would I say? Should I assert my authority as teacher, even though the class hadn’t started? So much for freedom of speech. Should I ignore them? I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to run, but I didn’t move from my seat. No words came out of my mouth.

I did nothing. It was the safest route, always is in the short run, but I felt awful. How could I do nothing—nothing but pretend I was invisible, pretend I was deaf, blind, and dumb?
I believe the Department of Health and Human Services estimate that one in ten people is lesbian or gay (Task Force, x). That meant probably two of my 22 students were struggling with their sexual identity or were feeling just as frightened as me. One out of four people has a close family member who is lesbian or gay. It isn’t any easier to hear that someone hates your sister or brother, your daughter or son. How could I say nothing and give my students the idea that I approved of this kind of talk? I felt disgusted with myself—but also relieved to be unknown to these two students.

When I first tried to write about this event in my journal, I felt tongue-tied. It was months later, into my next semester before I could describe the adrenaline rush of flight or fight, while at the same time another part of me, coolly detached from my body, observed from above that I felt frightened. Everything was instinctual. Nothing—not even the detached observation—was rational. My rational mind had been by-passed by my survival mind.

In the middle of my second class I began to feel my body dropping out of its hyper state. I felt more and more tired. I could barely wait for class to end. When it did, I climbed the stairs to the second floor women’s bathroom and sagged against a stall, exhausted. It was an effort to lift my
backpack, to walk to my bus stop, to sit, round-shouldered, for the ride home.

Now, years later, homophobic remarks still have a big impact on me. I am still stunned, shocked, frightened. Sometimes I speak up and object to these remarks, sometimes I say nothing. My actions—or lack thereof—depend partly on the circumstances, but mostly they depend on my level of fear.

What strikes me is that I come back so often to fear. I don’t talk about fear because I handle it well, but because it is familiar: the flush as my cheeks cool suddenly, my guts quivering. My focus of moments before lost, and the awareness of danger.

I’m not the only one to feel fear freshly with each homophobic remark; nor the only one to allow homophobic remarks to pass out of fear. Common sense tells me many people react as I do. On the other hand, it also makes sense that many people use my alternate strategy: we all slough off what we don’t want hear, don’t want to see or feel, in order to keep an illusion of safety and stability. When it happens, we are reduced. We lose a part of our lives to erased memory, and to fear’s grip on our lives.

Later I asked the other co-coordinator how she handled homophobic remarks in class and got some good advice: “I point out that there are probably people in the room who are
insulted by what they have said and ask them to think about
the impact of their words before they speak." This sounded
calm and rational, and I felt even more ashamed of myself for
not having spoken up. But when I remembered my adrenaline
reaction, I doubted that the next time I would make use of the
good advice.

I argued with myself after this incident. I should
still come out to my students: if they knew I was a lesbian,
they wouldn’t make homophobic remarks—at least not in my
presence. It was silence that equaled death. Another side of
me argued caution. How well did I know the professors in my
program? My department? This new state I had moved to? I
didn’t even know if the university had a policy that would
protect me if I came out. I argued myself to a draw. I
decided that I would be neutral—I wouldn’t hide the fact that
I was a lesbian, but I wouldn’t volunteer the information
either. While I was being neutral I would find out the
answers to my questions—and then, come out.

Things changed in my classroom as well. Royce no longer
sat with Frank and John. They stopped speaking to each other
and, I noticed, made sure not to end up in small groups
together. Someone finally commented on this new development,
but Royce passed it off with a joke.

*   *   *

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To take my mind off the homophobic incident, I focused on the second class. Much more slowly than my first class, these students were finally beginning to talk to each other. Week after week, the Gripses and Warm Fuzzies time—a time designed to stimulate community and generate writing ideas—passed in silence. Only the previous Friday had this class loosened up. "The class will go a lot faster if we talk, so I'm going to talk and I hope other folks will, too." He followed with a gripe.

On Friday, the same student again initiated the Gripses and Warm Fuzzies, but three other students also spoke. One of these three is Deborah, a fresh-faced former beauty queen from a tiny school in the most rural part of the state. Her writings have been about her homesickness, and nostalgic descriptions of her life back home.

Her warm fuzzy is also a gripe. The people here are not as nice as the people back home, so she appreciates even more the value of growing up where she did. But she is managing to meet a few nice people here.

This, I hope, will spark responses from others in the class. Someone will want to dispute her claim. Or ask where she is from. Or for an example of how people are not as friendly here. No such luck. Oddly, even though we haven't
yet achieved conversation, I am still pleased: conversation can’t be far off.
The following Friday, the Gripes and Warm Fuzzies in my second class begin with a student who has been in a car accident on the way to class. Where Deborah's gripe sparked nothing from the class, this gripe immediately launches us into conversation! Students share car accidents they have been in. Within five minutes' time, several students have shared stories. A brief side conversation even springs up among students sitting across the circle. I am pleased to no end!

Stories of car crashes give way to comparing drivers: male to female, parents to children. We have just listened to a story illustrating the claim that parents are no better drivers than kids, when Deborah, sitting across the circle, turns to me and out of the blue asks, "Are you married?"

I am completely nonplused. Where did this question come from? How does this relate to drivers or car accidents? On the surface, this is an innocuous question, a common one in our culture, and is easy enough to answer with either a "Yes, I am," or "No, I'm not." Beneath this surface simplicity, though, I see trouble.

This question could be difficult for any number of people: those who are in transition from one state to another, the widowed, those who are estranged or who are in relationships but whose relationships are outside the institution of marriage—for whatever reason. And for those—
both married and unmarried—who expect that they might be defined by their status rather than perceived as individuals.

For me the trouble is how to answer this question and remain neutral?

I hesitate while deciding what to do. Maybe she wants to make a point about husbands and wives as drivers. I need to answer this question quickly and facilitate a quick return to the discussion in hand. Unfortunately, I also want to tell the truth, and the truth is that my answer to this question cannot fit into the prescribed 'yes' or 'no' boxes.

Should I say, "Yes, I'm married," since I'm in a committed relationship of four years? Isn't this tantamount to married? Or should I say "no," since I'm not legally married?

I could say her question is off the topic—but the whole point of the Gripes and Warm Fuzzies is to generate community in the classroom and to feed our sense of having things to say. It would also be unfair for me to assume that she won't relate my answer back to male and female drivers or car accidents.

If I simply—yes or no—will my student leave it at that? Or will she want to know more? My husband's name, if I say 'yes' or 'Do you have a boyfriend' if I say I'm not married? Deborah is an inquisitive student. From her
writings I have learned that it's normal for small town people to know all about each other; rural neighbors freely admit they keep an eye on each other.

If I say I'm married, will my students to assume I'm heterosexual? What good can come of representing myself as something I'm not? This class is about exploring ourselves and our world. It's about summoning the courage to share our perceptions with others. Conversely, whatever else this class is about, I am not teaching my students to lie. But saying I'm not married denies my relationship of four years. Erases it.

I could say, 'No I'm not married, but I have a girlfriend,' but this, too, is likely to prompt further questions because 'girlfriend' is so ambiguous. There can no such thing as neutrality, I realize, too late. Not with this pedagogy, not in a heterosexist culture. It is the presumption that a person is straight, and that straight is that creates 'coming out' and makes it risky.

However much I hate it, I decide I am about to lie, because I am nervous about my students' reactions. How many of the students in this class feel like Frank and John? If I come out and enough of them are hateful—or even just uncomfortable—it could become impossible for me to teach this class. I don't like where my thinking is going.
I emerge from the panicky reverie I have fallen into and look up at Deborah. She and the entire class are staring back at me. I have been thinking about this apparently simple yes-no question too long. For some of my students this could be as complex question as it is for me. But they aren’t thinking of it that way. We are all trained to treat this as a stock question with a stock answer—“Hi, how are you?”—“I’m fine,”—whether our lives are indeed fine or are tragic.

“Sorry,” I mumble, “I got lost in thought.” I have to make a hasty decision. I am attempting to say ‘no’ when my throat constricts. I cannot get the word out. It is too much of a denial of my life. But I cannot say ‘yes’ either. All eyes are on me, awaiting my answer. An idea leaps out my mouth, before it even registers in my mind: I find myself smiling coyly and saying, “I don’t think I’m going to tell you that.”

Even as the words come out of my mouth, I am wondering what I have done. I sweep my gaze around the room before coming back to rest on Deborah. I have the beginnings of a sense of dread: this will be either a brilliant stroke or a disaster—but which?

No one is talking. Deborah is looking puzzled. A few students—the ones prone to be wary and disengaged—are
beginning to look rebuffed. Still certain that people's lives should be open books, Deborah asks, "Why not?"

Silence takes up space and air in the room. Many students, who had been sitting forward in their seats, now sit back, looks of disengagement on their faces. These students are more savvy about the ways that people hide from each other to protect their privacy.

I sense that my denial is shaping up into a disaster—a minor one, I hope. I have undermined the community I have been trying to foster by sidestepping the question—a question that appears both simple and common enough not to be considered prying.

Deborah has missed these non-verbal signals telling her "Drop it, forget it. The teacher doesn't want to talk about it, so don't ask." She is still looking to me for an answer.

Is there any way I can back away from this whole situation? "I don't want to make this into a big mystery or anything," I say, "I would just rather not go into it."

At first no one says anything; is there anything they can say to this? I estimate that a third of the students consider Deborah foolish to have pressed me on a question I have already sidestepped; they are unwilling witnesses to Deborah's persistence and my question-dodging, and they have disappeared into themselves.
Another third, like Deborah, still want an answer, and the last bunch seem confused and unhappy. I’m unhappy too. Everyone has forgotten about car accidents and male and female drivers. The classroom that two minutes ago had finally bloomed into lively conversation has abruptly withdrawn into silence.

Later, when I tell my new friends about Deborah’s question, I am feeling terrible. Will the class revert to the silence of the previous weeks? Or will they bounce back?

My friends are sympathetic and surprised: they’ve never considered this question from a non-heterosexual point of view before. For the first time I let myself off the hook a bit. I can see that anybody might be thrown by a question coming out of left field. They suggest that I talk to my lesbian friends or to the lesbian professor.

My officemates agree that I have probably undermined the community I have been seeking to create. They also see the incident as proof that the “student-centered” classroom is a mistake, and for the students and teacher keep to their roles is best.

Although I haven’t yet established any close friends in the nonheterosexual community, I have made some casual friends. I ask them what they would have done. Their answers show that they have no experience with the kind of pedagogy I
have adopted. Most suggest coming out to students when it is
directly relevant to the subject at hand.

"Like, if you were teaching a political science class
and you were discussing the ban on gays in the military. Or a
health class, and AIDS comes up, that's an opportunity for
coming out."

My friends' examples remind me of how out of control I
feel a times with this new pedagogy. I have allowed the
students to generate the subjects and direct the discussion.
I wonder what my friends would think of my classroom. Would
they say I had lost control of the class? That I have allowed
the students to take over and the whole situation was my own
fault?

Almost universally they--none of them teachers--are
perplexed: why didn't I simply dismiss the question as
inappropriate? After all, they point out, the students are
there to learn English composition--not to interact with the
teacher as a private human being.

I try to explain English as people exploring their
thinking, their thought-processes, their frame of reference
for perceiving the world, but I have little success. I am up
against two deeply entrenched ideas: that teaching is about
impacting objective information, and that composition is
essentially a game of matching subjects and forms.
They just can't picture the kind of classroom I have fostered, so their comments aren't much help. Talking with them makes me realize I have indeed changed in just the short time I have been at my new university—although this change has been in the making since I began teaching.

Two lesbians tell me that if I wore a wedding ring I wouldn't have this problem. But wearing a wedding ring is no different from telling my students I am married. If they saw a wedding ring, they would assume I was heterosexual. I know this from experience.

Three years earlier, in the first year my girlfriend and I began living together, we wore matching wedding rings. While my partner believed the rings we each wore on the third fingers of our left hands only symbolized our mutual commitment, cashiers, clerks, and bus drivers assumed that commitment was to a man.

I grew increasingly unsettled by comments based on the assumption that I was heterosexual:

In the kitchen appliances of a department store: "Are you a newlywed? Just remember, honey, you'll never change him."

At the check-out in K-Mart: "Oh, he'll really like this." At the gas company: "When will your husband be home?"
I had encouraged their assumptions by wearing a wedding ring. Eventually I stopped wearing the ring, although this caused several months of conflict between my partner and I --- almost ending our relationship. "If people assume we are heterosexual because we wear a wedding ring, that is their problem."

When I ask my partner how she would have handled Deborah, she says unequivocally she would have come out. "Beating around the bush is a bad idea. If this department is enlightened, you shouldn't have a problem."

Is the department enlightened, I wonder. Would it stand behind me if I came out? Is it too soon to know?

There is, amazingly, a lesbian professor in the department. One of only three "out" professors at the university. I ask her if she comes out to her students.

"No," she says, "not yet. But I'm beginning to think coming out is the best thing to do. After a moment's hesitation she adds, "Being a graduate student means you could be facing career risks I don't have because I'm tenured."

"Career risks?" I ask, with a sense of foreboding.

"In the short term, poor evaluations could jeopardize your teaching assistantship. Even if they don't, in the long term, poor evaluations could have serious consequences on a job search." I must have looked as stunned as I felt, because
she hastened to add a positive note: "You could explain low
ratings and negative comments as being related to coming out,"
she frowned and added, "but with the tight competition for
tenure-track jobs, you could be eliminated from the running
before you had the chance to explain."

My eyes are opened. Before I can absorb what she has
said, the lesbian professor is speaking again.

"On the other hand, some universities want to hire gay
and lesbian professors. In fact, some universities are
creating Gay and Lesbian Studies programs. That could be
really exciting. Would you rather be in Gay and Lesbian
Studies?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I've never heard about this
before."

"Maybe you should think about it. Talk to the graduate
job placement director about the job market, too."

As I walk away, I realize I have been preoccupied with
my little life and haven't been thinking about the bigger
picture. Coming out may be a career decision--or should I say
a career-ending decision! Do I want to come out if it
constitutes a decision to leave English? Leave English?! Could I still be a writer? On the other hand, I could have a
career in an area I have never dreamed of before. I feel
overwhelmed. All this, I remind myself, has come from Deborah's simple-seeming question!

Some part of me has known all along that coming out is risky. It follows that it would be risky for my career as well. Yet, I have deliberately denied this, in order to protect myself from the dismay I am feeling now.

I am overwhelmed, too, by the variety of reactions I have gotten from people, none of which seem very helpful. It hasn't occurred to me that my straight peers'

insofar as that part of their identity is not regularly challenged or scrutinized, are free to not regard it as a significant fact demarcating their selfhood; it is possible for them to experience it instead as part of a seamless garment of 'humanness'--which is to say, they frequently do not 'view' or 'see' it until it is touched by the discourse of the Other. (Malinowitz, 24)

Our interaction makes me see that I carry around with me a 'double consciousness.' It is like vision: unless I close an eye, I don't register the bifocal nature of it. My peers don't have this stereoptic point of view.
On the other hand, my lesbian, gay and bisexual acquaintances don't understand the new pedagogy, have never challenged the traditional notions of teaching and learning.

I want to make friends of all kinds—gay, straight, in my department and in the community. Most interactions make me feel that I am doing that. This encounter, though, makes me realize that reflects only a piece of me. I realize that I know of no lesbians, gays or bisexuals within my own department. In a department of this size, there must be one or two more, but it is going to take time and subtlety to locate them.

I don't feel that anybody—except perhaps my partner and the lesbian professor—has much insight into both my pedagogy and my location as a lesbian. I am not as willing as my partner to make myself a potential cause célèbre, especially in light of the short and long term career-risks that I can't ignore any more. The possibility of leaving English is definitely something I will need to shelve until I can wrap my mind around the possibility.

I mentally walk away from all the opinions I have solicited. I need, I decide, to quiet my own internal confusion, not to dwell guiltily on my students' reactions nor indulge my sense of isolation. Time will provide the clarity I need.
The following week I am having conferences with individual students at my office. Deborah and I have finished talking about her paper; she has answered all the standard questions I ask students in conferences. "Is there anything else?" I ask.

"Do you remember that time I asked you if you were married and you said you didn't want to talk about it then?"

"Yeah...," I say, reluctantly, feeling dread. I realize by the lump in my throat that I have been afraid of this all through my conference with Deborah, perhaps through all my conferences. I try to make my mind think, because I know the question that is coming.

"Well?" she asks. She stares straight into my eyes and will not turn away. I am the deer caught in the headlights of an on-coming car; I can't take my eyes away from hers.

Will I come out or won't I? Her question is so simple, but I just can't decide what to do. I stare back at Deborah silently. She has large, soft brown doe eyes.

"Are you?" she asks, and I am so wrapped up in my thinking that at first I think she is asking me if I am a lesbian. I almost say yes, but then remember the question is 'are you married' and my eyes fall from hers. I can't fight off a feeling that there is no way out, that there's no win-win scenario out there. I fleetingly consider 'I'm living
with someone," but my first attempt at diplomatic evasion is what has brought Deborah back to the question. This is a moment for truth.

Deborah is still staring at me. She is relentless, and yet she intends nothing ill. In fact, her motivation, I am reasonably sure, is to give me chance to answer her perfectly reasonable question in private, giving her the chance to discreetly tell the class what I felt self-conscious saying in public. If I could play along with her scenario, this would go a long way to restoring the damaged trust of the class.

Is there a reason, aside from repairing the damage done by my earlier sidestepping, why Deborah wants to know whether or not I am married? Is she bothered by something—perhaps by my not being a strictly traditional teacher—and wanting to reassure herself that I am "normal" somehow, that I fit into some reliable, familiar category she can count on? If she is looking for reassurance, do I want to give it to her? Or do I want to challenge her to go beyond her comfort zone?

I finally answer without looking into her unbearable eyes. "I know you want me to give you an answer to that question, but I'm just not going to." Her eyes finally drop away from my face and I know she is embarrassed and disappointed. She has done her best to understand, to offer me a chance to restore what has been lost, and I have let down
her and the class. Deborah slips her backpack over her shoulder and beats a hasty retreat from my office.

My writing explodes. I freewrite about Deborah's question and how I have handled it—or bungled it. Without pausing, I move into writing about the trio, the homophobic remarks from Frank and John, and the effects the remarks have on me. I write about coming out to my new officemates and to peers in the program. I write about coming out to two of my professors. I write that I thought that coming out to professors and peers would be a victory, but that these issues have been dwarfed by my new dilemma.

Twenty-two pages tumble out of me effortlessly, swiftly.

While I have often journaled privately about incidents related to my sexual identity, this is different because I know the moment I am done that I will share this piece of writing with others.

My writing group is composed of other teaching assistants in the teacher training class. The co-coordinators' created the writing groups at the beginning of the semester so that we would have some experience with what many of us would be offering to our own students. This will be the first time a writing related to my sexual identity will be seen by someone else's eyes.
This writing is also different because it adds up to something. I am certain of it, although I have no idea what. In the past I have written about events related to my sexual identity individually, as they have happened; this is the first time I have written about incidents together, linking Frank and John's remarks to Deborah's question and to coming out issues—first in my mind, and now on the page.

* * *

During pre-semester training, my concentration had been scattered, but I had felt stirrings deep within. I knew that I would find my concentration again, and when I did, something big would come. I was certain this writing was the fulfillment of those stirrings.

This was the leap onto a new level—a new realm of writing; a leap into a new audience by my willingness to share the writing with others. It was not another retreat into childhood.

When I shared my twenty-two earth-shaking pages with the group I was disappointed. Where had the great leap gone? My words seemed crude compared to the experiences themselves. How could I have felt certain that this was a piece that had come from stirrings deep within?

Yet, running throughout the whole piece, behind the words, there was tremendous energy. I had broken new ground.
with my writing. Revision would help the writing do more justice to the experiences. Further writing would help me get at what was behind the words.

I was two-thirds through my first semester and I felt mixed about the teaching I was doing. From the Lifeline exercise, other exercises and from frequent free writing, the students were coming up with their own subjects and forms—and this pleased me.

They were also talking to each other in small groups about their writing. I had explained to the students at the beginning of the semester how to respond to each other’s writing, but I, too, was just learning a new way to talk about writing.

Each student had read aloud a piece of writing at midterm, and this had pleased everybody, even though quite a few students needed to screw up their nerve to do it. The students loved having an audience of their peers. The things that they read aloud were aimed much more at their peers than at me—their language was less formal than in other things they wrote, and a good portion of the class wrote into their pieces direct statements to the class—things like, “I’m sure you know what I mean when I say that party was kickin.’”

For the most part my students were doing well, but my contributions to the class not up to par. I knew that I
censored my freewriting with my students. For example, one Monday morning, I was still preoccupied by the discussion that a movie had prompted between myself, my partner and two lesbian acquaintances. Yet I deliberately freewrote about some other subject—a subject that barely engaged me.

I worried too, about the incidents in each of my classes. My second class was only slowly opening up again after I had turned the 'are you married' question into an issue. Even though I felt I was at last beginning to relax after the homophobic incident in my first class, I wondered if an outside observer would notice some residual effects in me.

Royce continued to regale the class with the soap opera of his life. From the Gripes and Warm Fuzzies each Friday we heard a long episode that was sometimes humorous, but increasingly sarcastic. Some time later, he came by my office again. Ostensibly he wanted advice about how to improve his grade, but eventually he revealed that he was worried about supporting himself and still being able to pay for school.

He was sharing an apartment with three other guys, which he had thought would keep his costs down. But the other guys weren't paying their share of the bills or doing their share of the chores. On top of that, he wasn't getting along so well with them. He needed to move. The problem was that he
couldn’t afford an apartment of his own and pay for school on
his part-time modeling pay.

"I have this other option," he says. He begins picking
at the rubber trim edging the desk. An older man, someone he
has met at a modeling party, has made him an offer. For $100
a month, this man will share his spacious luxury apartment
with Royce, and will pay for Royce’s schooling—tuition,
books, fees, everything but spending money. "The place is
really cool! It has this two-story stone fireplace and a built
in stereo system. He has a Jacuzzi on his deck."

"How old is this older man?" I ask.

"In his thirties," Royce says, "maybe 33 or something.
Pretty old, but not really old." He hesitates. "I think
maybe I need to do it."

"That’s quite an age gap." Royce nods. "There are so
many questions! Do you know why this man wants to be so
generous?"

Royce begins to peel the rubber trim off the corner of
the desk. "He’s a really cool, for someone older. He says
that he wants to help me out, since my folks have kicked me
out. And he knows how expensive college is."

I can’t decide from his tone of voice whether Royce
believes the explanation or not. I don’t feel satisfied by
it, although it is certainly possible that the offer is
genuine. I wonder if my doubts come from my East Coast background—from a more urban assumption of distrust. Maybe this was another difference about midwesterners. "Are you going to take it?"

" Probably. I've got to move and I can't afford to live on my own." Because of his parents' income, he can't get financial aid until the government declares him financially independent—five years from now.

I don't ask him why he can't continue with his roommates until the end of the semester. Instead I suggest he look into new roommates, or a really cheap apartment of his own.

He agreed that these are possibilities for the future, but right now, in the middle of the semester he can't do these things. He might just take the older man's offer.

I feel uneasy, but say nothing more, and Royce shuffles out, thanking me on the way for giving him time to talk about improving his grade. His thanks is given shyly and with a gratitude it is hard for me to fathom. I feel I have let him down somehow.

I worked frantically with both classes in the final weeks of the semester, helping students choose which writings to put into their final portfolios, and helping them further revise and polish their works. I also oversaw the creation of class books made by collecting and photocopying a piece of
writing from each student in the class. At last we came to
the end of the semester and to what I hoped would be a
celebration—at least for the first class. The class was a
celebration and spirits ran so high I worried teachers from
adjoining rooms would complain.

The celebration turned serious for me when Royce read
aloud his final paper. Puzzle pieces I didn’t know I had,
began to fit together. Before he read aloud his paper, Royce
explained that he was straight, but because of his modeling,
he was meeting new people. The piece focused on describing a
huge, “weird” modeling party that he had gone to the weekend
before. He’d met a lot of “crazy but interesting and really
cool,” people.

Lots of the people at the party, he said, were gay and
lesbian. He’d heard that a lot of male models were gay, and
it turned out that quite a few were; but some of them were
ones he’d never expected, and some of the female models were
gay too, which surprised him totally.

They said outrageous things—that he was cute. “But all
the models talk like that.” They made jokes about themselves
as queers—which was strange, but they were also tons of fun.
He had a great time and there was a ton of booze of every kind
and he got totally wasted. The whole class cheered and broke
into spontaneous applause.
The paper portrayed the party as an exhilarating adventure with people who were really weird, but so much fun he could overlook their weirdness. It was also a culmination of all the stories he'd been telling all semester.

After he finished reading, someone asked Royce if these people were really that cool. Royce said yes, and added that he was even going to move in with one of the photographers that had been at the party.

Aha, I thought, the older man.

After each reader, I often made a comment or asked a question about the piece read, so now the whole class looked at me expectantly, silently. I realized that the students were wondering how I would react to Royce's paper. I stuttered that I was glad that he hadn't shied away from writing about an experience which sounded like quite an adventure. This pronouncement released the class, and people chatted among themselves until I called for the next paper.

Put together, the picture puzzle showed Royce was a gay man. The more I thought about it, the more I felt sure that my notion was right. I saw the whole semester from beginning to end with new clarity. His parents had kicked him out because they found out; the homophobic ranting of John and Frank wasn't random homophobia: they'd discovered—or maybe just suspected—that Royce was gay.
I felt pretty foolish as I considered how Royce being gay solved all the little mysteries of the semester.

Like the roommates troubles. No wonder he felt he had to move. And the older man, the photographer, who was willing to do so much for so little in return. Attraction was the key, maybe sex. That’s what had hovered just outside my awareness! It all fit neatly.

How ironic! I had been so preoccupied with making the new pedagogy work and with deciding how to handle my own sexual identity, I had missed what was going on in front of me: Royce’s own painful coming out.

This piece changed the entire tenor of our communication over the semester. I tried to remember: had he been there the day that John and Frank had spouted off? I couldn’t remember, but I felt ashamed anew.

As I replayed his visits to my office, I wondered if he had known somehow or suspected that I was gay. Had he been hoping I realized he was gay, even though he hadn’t said anything explicitly? Or was he totally ignorant that I was a lesbian and had struggled with rejection, too? More likely, I decided, had he confided in me because I was his only teacher to know him as an individual.

I wanted confirmation even though I was certain, but I couldn’t think of a way to approach Royce without simply
blurting it out: Are you gay? The young man had already been through enough this semester. Besides, if he had wanted to talk openly he would have come out to me. After recasting the whole semester in a new light, I said nothing to him.

Between Christmas and New Year, when I had put the old semester behind me and was beginning to focus on the semester ahead, I heard from friends of friends about a “mega-party” given by a group of young gay men with a reputation for wildness and self-destruction. The cops had raided the party, then ended up calling an ambulance because some guy named Royce had gotten himself really fucked up on drugs and booze and fallen into a coma.

“Some guy named Royce!”

In the ambulance his heart had stopped beating, but in the emergency room doctors had been able to revive him. I felt stunned. Memories of Royce laughing, of Royce shyly thanking me mixed with my imagination of his inert body on an ambulance gurney. His muscular body limp, all that vitality ended. Who had been pulling for Royce to live? Anybody?

I had seen and felt this coming. He had been through too much rejection, too much upheaval in his first semester as a freshman. The sarcasm and “who cares?” attitude that had replaced his humor. The people he needed support from the
most had rejected him, had been the first in a chain of rejections.

I could have offered him acceptance and support. I could have at least tuned into the subtext of what I was being told for sixteen weeks—four months! I could have come out to him. I could have told John and Frank to stuff their homophobia. If I had done something, anything, maybe Royce wouldn’t have ended up in the emergency room. Maybe.

I’d never know the answer to that question, but I did feel strongly, that if I had been out to Royce, if he had known—even for four months—someone who was gay and who lived a meaningful life, it could have been something to hold onto. Maybe he wouldn’t have held onto it, but I would have at least done my part.

A year later, through a book called *Children of Horizons*, I learned that lesbian and gay youth who receive the acceptance and support of people who are important to them, have no more psychological and emotional problems than to do straight teens. It is because crucial people withdraw their acceptance and support that lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are so much more at risk for suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, prostitution—all the evils we wish didn’t exist, but do.

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There were lots of ways that I was pleased with the semester. I had longed for a new, more effective teaching method; I'd had the chance to live out my longed-for fantasy. Students had learned how to freewrite; they had allowed themselves to write about what was relevant to their lives. Some had safely negotiated big risks.

But some things had gone wrong. Like how I had handled some risks. Like Deborah's question. And Royce. It had to do with risk, I knew that much. But at the time, the obvious solution seemed to be what I had suspected back when I had first done the Lifeline exercise: I needed to come out. I had almost come out to my classes this semester. Almost was not enough. The idea that I could be neutral just wasn't going to work with this new pedagogy.

However my students reacted--good, bad, or otherwise, I would have fewer suicidal students on my hands. Fewer lies on my conscience. Telling the truth to the world had been the path of healing the split in my life. Now, coming out to my students would keep me on that path.
CHAPTER THREE
The first day of my second semester of teaching, I was nervous, as I always am at the beginning of a new semester. As I came into the classroom, the desks were already arranged in a circle, so I sat in one and scanned the faces around the class, looking for clues into who these people were. How odd, how arbitrary that we would be spending sixteen weeks together. There was nothing that drew us together except the desire for a required three credits of English. This was the group that I would be coming out to--but how and when?

There were several interesting faces. Two of them, from their haircuts, looked like ex-military. One of them was sitting quietly almost directly opposite me in the circle of desks. Once I had called off the roll, I knew that he wasn’t registered for the class and that at the end of the period he would be pestering me to be added.

Both of my classes were already full and I am always reluctant to give overrides. While most of the freshman level classes at the university are taught in lecture halls of a hundred students or more, writing classes are kept small because teachers are expected to work individually with each student and to pay close attention to the development of each student’s writing. Each student given an override represents not just more hours of work, but an even greater challenge to still spend one-on-one time with each student-writer. I was
reluctant to take an overrides unless the students convinced me they truly needed the class and would be a valuable addition to it. I mentally wished this young man a sardonic good luck and began handing out the course syllabus.

I was surprised when this young man filtered out the door when the rest of the class did at the end of the period. I hadn't thought my syllabus daunting, but perhaps he had decided he didn't need my class after all. I packed up my papers and trundled off to my next class. When my second class let out, I again packed up my papers, shoving them into my bag any which way, so that I could get upstairs to my office on time to hold office hours.

Coming out the classroom door, I nearly ran into someone. It was him, the unregistered student who had sat through my first class. We apologized to each other and I felt some of the stiffness I felt at playing the role of teacher—especially on the first day of classes—dissipate a bit. He introduced himself and we made small talk as we walked up numerous flights of stairs from the basement classrooms to my second-floor office.

Mark struck me immediately as likable and intriguing, a great combination of qualities. He was good looking, but in an ordinary, boy-next-door way. What made him so likable I guess was his manner: he was composed and confident, at ease
with himself. I had the feeling that he was someone I knew already, because I felt comfortable with him. He surprised me by not mentioning that he wanted an override for my class. Instead he told me about the Gay and Lesbian Literature class he had taken last semester and how much that class had changed him. Without willing, I immediately wondered if Mark could be a bisexual, or gay, and then chastised myself for jumping to the idea that because he had taken this class or because he had been energized by it that he would be nonheterosexual.

He had gone into the class very nervous, he said, and emerged confident and wanting to change the world’s attitude toward homosexuality. There was nothing fanatical about his statement, it was sheer enthusiasm and it touched my own zeal for English, for a new way of teaching, and for being myself.

We talked about the issues that the class had explored—the shocking, deadly disease, AIDS, and how gays especially were being blamed for it. The need for medical research and the government’s foot-dragging. We talked about gay and lesbian marriage, about bisexuels and the slowly changing attitude of the gay and lesbian community toward bisexuels. We also talked about “transgendered” people, a term that was new to both of us.

We talked too about the ban on gays in the military, and Mark laughed. There had been lots of soldiers in his outfit
who were gay. How could the military think that it could keep them from joining? Why punish them just for who they were? The only thing that made sense was to judge them by their performance as soldiers. Nevertheless, the military’s policy was to hunt down gays and lesbians and dishonorably discharge them, although it simultaneously denied there were any lesbians or gays to be found.

The semester had taught Mark that there was a whole community out there for him; he was not alone. It had also shown him that there were thousands and thousands of people like himself, isolated by their fear, their internalized homophobia--a term he had learned in the gay and lesbian literature class.

What we most needed, Mark said more than once in that first meeting in my office, was to come out. "We need to communicate with each other and with people who aren’t gay and lesbian; let the world know that we’re here, that we’re people. That’s the only way to end the isolation, the fear, the crippling of self-confidence and self-esteem."

Who was this "we" that Mark was speaking of? Was it personal or general? If it was general, he might be referring to the queer community. This was another relatively new term that implied nothing about a person’s sexual orientation, but did imply a community of people with a deeper and more
thoughtful awareness about sexual orientation and sexual identity issues than the mainstream. It referred to an attitude of acceptance of and support for people of many different orientations. Maybe Mark's "we" meant all queers generally.

But it was equally possible that Mark was speaking personally. This would mean that Mark was bisexual or gay and that he knew I wasn't heterosexual--perhaps he knew I was a lesbian. Perhaps "we" meant both of us specifically. What had the professor who taught the Gay and Lesbian Literature class told Mark about me? He must have asked for a recommendation of some kind. She had to have said something to Mark in the course of recommending my class. Had she implied or said I was queer? That I was a lesbian? Had she said or implied? I was surprised by my curiosity. What did it matter? It didn't matter to me that she had said whatever she had said to Mark. Either label suited me.

I told myself it shouldn't matter. This professor had recommended me and Mark had taken her recommendation. But it did matter to me, if for no other reason than we needed to be clear with each other. But there was something more to it than that. But this was not the moment. I made a mental note to come out when the opportunity presented itself, and shifted back to what Mark was saying--the importance of coming out. I
wanted him to know that I agreed with him that coming out was important.

In 1969 a group of nonheterosexuals had spontaneously rioted against police brutality. The riot became a watershed event forever changing the attitude of the nonheterosexual community. Nonheterosexuals abandoned the practice of staying hidden and had adopted a policy of coming out, of making their collective presence known. This strategy had revealed lesbians and gays, bisexuals and transgendered people to each other.

It was the reason twenty-five years later that new words like "queer" and "transgendered" had entered the language: visibility and voice. Visibility and voice allowed communities across the country—and across town—to connect with each other. With this move came strength, shared experiences, and greater awareness of our actual numbers.

What Mark was saying had become common sense since Stonewall. Only by coming out could we cease being vulnerable to brutality, blackmail, to intimidation, to shame. Mark’s words reminded me of countless conversations I had been part of when socializing and strategizing with other lesbians and gay men about how to raise awareness and end homophobia.

"Gays and lesbians everywhere, bisexuals and transgendered people need to come out. The world needs all
of us to claim ourselves, to be who we are. Only by acknowledging ourselves can we stop living in fear and be fully who we are.”

I was inspired listening to Mark: he was an effective and enthusiastic speaker. I agreed with him and I said so in no uncertain terms. It made me feel good to make a positive statement out loud. I had made my vow earlier to come out, but now I experienced how much more real—and freeing—it felt to share it with someone. It was going to be a great semester.

At the end of the previous semester he had asked the professor of his Gay and Lesbian Literature class to recommend a teacher of Freshman English 2, since he had put off taking the class even though he was a junior.

“Why did you put off the class?” I asked.

“I took the class before, but I dropped out of college eleven weeks into the semester. So now I need to retake the class.”

“Grade problems?”

“I carried an A all the way through.”

Based on the way he talked, his vocabulary and the fact that he could discuss a variety of factors affecting a single idea, his assertion didn’t surprised me.

“The problem,” he said, “was my writing.”
Now I felt even more intrigued.

"It raised all these issues that I couldn't deal with--about being gay."

Part of me had suspected that Mark was gay or bisexual, but another part of me was genuinely surprised. A while before I had chided myself for speculating: now I chided myself for feeling surprised: how could I expect gays and lesbians to look different from heterosexuals, when I knew that lots lesbians and gays don't look non-heterosexual--whatever the "look" is.

I had tried not to let my surprise and mental chastisement show and apparently they didn't because Mark continued his story without a noticeable pause.

Back then Mark hadn't felt he could talk to his teacher. Now he realized, with 20/20 hindsight that it wouldn't have mattered if he had been able to talk with the teacher: his own hang-ups were what he needed to deal with. He had dropped out of school and now he was back, he was on track, and as a result of the Gay and Lesbian Literature class, he was ready to do things with his life.

When he said he was ready to do things with his life, I felt my own blood stir. 'Doing things' included retaking Freshman English--this time as an 'out' gay man. The Gay and Lesbian Literature professor had recommended my class.
I would have felt honored to be recommended by anyone for anything, but I felt especially honored to be recommended in this context and for this purpose. At the same time, I remembered the situations that had arisen for me in the previous semester and I felt disconcerted. I feared this professor's confidence in me was misplaced. But I had also decided that the problems had stemmed from not coming out—a mistake I would not make this semester.

Mark was seeking a class in which he could come out as a gay man and not be hassled by the teacher, and in which he could receive support while coming out. I told him I would be fine with him coming out, and realized after the words were out that this meant I had decided to give Mark the override. Without really noticing my initial skepticism about having Mark in the class had evaporated long ago. I welcomed the prospect of having Mark in my class.

I told Mark that I was a lesbian and that I intended to come out in class. He was pleased.

"I want to come out right away. Like from the very beginning," Mark said.

"Okay. I'll hold off and give you a chance to come out first."

I also told Mark I hadn't come out last semester—although I didn't add that this had been my first semester of
teaching at a new school and with a new pedagogy. I could see from his facial expression and the look in his eyes that he was disappointed, but he didn’t verbalize his disappointment. I tried to explain some of my concerns about coming out—the issues of power and credibility, of safety but I could tell that Mark didn’t really understand or have much interest in what I was talking about.

"When did you come out to yourself," I asked. Mark said that his original Freshman English 2 class had opened up the box that he had kept carefully tucked away. In this English class he had been allowed to write about any subject he wished. He hadn’t chosen to write about his sexual identity, but somehow it had surfaced while writing on another subject.

I nodded my head. "Yeah. You don’t know when you start writing where it’s going to go. But if you have something bottled up inside you, I think you’re writing is especially apt to ambush you."

The whole idea had terrified him and he had run away to the Army—to prove himself heterosexual, a man. It was here that he finally stopped fighting the realization that he was gay. When his four year hitch was over, he felt ready to get back on track with his life, which meant returning to college and finding a career that would allow him to help troubled youth.
He spoke eloquently about how difficult it had been to deal alone with his fears that he might be gay. The anguish that tinged his voice reminded me of my own anguish in my teens and early twenties.

There were a lot of kids who were alone and struggling with all sorts of problems. He wanted to help them. He was sincere and articulate. He was now a junior, a committee chair at his fraternity, a former student senator, and an energetic young man of 24. He maintained a 3.6 grade point average and would be carrying 18 credit hours this semester. It was easy to see he would bring maturity to a class that was often populated mostly by eighteen year olds. I felt pleased as I signed his override form.

Even though I had signed his form, we didn't end the conversation. Instead I asked him a question about his coming out. Although he had finally accepted that he was gay in the last year of his military service, Mark had told no one that he was gay until just a few weeks ago—near the end of the Fall semester. He had been in a student senate meeting where the next year's budgets for campus clubs and organizations were being debated.

The Union of Gay and Lesbian Students, the UGLS, had submitted a budget along with the other student groups. While most student organizations' budgets were passed as submitted
with little or no debate, the situation changed when the UGLS budget came up. Several senators had suggested reducing the UGLS' budget, each suggested reduction larger than the next until the UGLS was not being funded at all. The suggested reductions were accompanied by attacks on the value of the UGLS and its right to exist on campus.

Mark became angered by the obviously homophobic attacks and by the fact that no one was standing up for the UGLS. Mark described in detail jumping up in the midst of the debate and taking a strong stand in favor of passing the UGLS's budget as it was originally submitted, denouncing the homophobia of the student senate, and spontaneously coming out.

Mark had been as startled as anyone by his impulsive stand and revelation. Having come out in a student senate meeting—meetings which were routinely reported in the campus newspaper, Mark realized that he could no longer hide. His fraternity was rocked by the news when he announced it to them that night at dinner. Mark was thrilled to have finally stopped living in secrecy. Now he could be honest with others, he could stop hiding. Mark assumed that his friendship with his fraternity brothers would see him through the shock of coming out, and that his true friends would remain his friends.
The whole campus buzzed when the student newspaper made Mark front page news. Many of Mark’s friends initially stuck with him, while others argued with him before ending their friendship. Although he was sad to lose these friends, the losses didn’t hit him hard because most of his friends had stood by him. For the rest, he felt that he had gotten rid of the dead wood.

As soon as the story appeared in the campus newspaper, Mark began receiving calls—lots of them. He hadn’t heard what most of the callers had to say until several days after the calls were received, because he went home to visit his family over the weekend. On Monday when he heard the messages left on his telephone answering machine, he mostly ignored them—Why did these people who didn’t even know him, call him?—although he admitted that one or two calls had been left by people who seemed to have serious problems. He chalked up these calls to crazies, shook his head about the world today.

From the way he talked it seemed that even now, two months later it hadn’t occurred to him that the crazies could do more than leave phone messages. I was amazed and tried to decide whether Mark was more naive or more brave. Mark talked on about finding and exploring the gay and lesbian community on campus by joining the Union of Gay and Lesbian Students.
Listening to Mark tell his story, I felt that I had heard parts of this story many times before, and that the story fit a familiar pattern. While some nonheterosexuals I know have said that coming out has been relatively painless for them, many do not find coming out easy.

Many nonheterosexuals I knew had lived a long time with fear and pent up anxiety, afraid of the reactions of others if they were to come out. Their fear and anxiety increased until they felt (consciously or unconsciously) they had to come out or face serious consequences to their health and well-being. When they finally came out, a rash of changes followed.

The changes were not simply the result of coming out, but also from finally releasing the fear, the anxiety, and the guilt they had lived with for so long. In my experience, it's not at all unusual for people just coming out to abandon longtime commitments, and important stabilizing factors in their lives.

For family and friends who have just been shocked by the revelation that someone they love is not heterosexual, there is another shock: their loved one seems to change into a different person overnight. In part, friends and family often (at least initially) see the loved one in a new light. But often there are real changes—in looks and social life.
The loved one may seem to dump or neglect old friends in order to socialize with a completely new and alien group of people. Jobs may change, everything may seem—or actually be—altered. I had heard family members and close friends say they felt their loved one (or former loved one) had taken leave of their senses.

For many of my friends—and in my own life—there had been a long lag between admitting to myself I was not simply or solely heterosexual, and admitting this to others. I, like so many others, feared losing what—and who—I loved and held dear. Older nonheterosexuals I knew were often fearful that being gay or lesbian meant losing their jobs, their homes, custody of—or even visitation with—their children. They also feared losing their children’s love or their parents’ love.

Friends and acquaintances who were younger often feared losing their parents’ and siblings love and respect, their homes, their dreams or plans for the future or their parents’ dreams for them. We chose to stay in the closet to preserve these things.

As time passes, however, the cost of preservation becomes higher and higher. Being in the closet means pretending to be something you are not. It means continual deception and lies. It means becoming an impostor. Some
people are able to live a double life with less discomfort than others. But everyone experiences discomfort, and eventually everyone questions whether the things they initially wanted to preserve at any cost are worth the cost in personal happiness and integrity. For many life becomes hollow. The urge to come out, to restore (if possible) one's integrity and sense of genuineness about one's life and identity can eventually outweigh a person's fear of the consequences.

When the center of gravity finally shifts and a person finally comes out, the floodgates release and the old life is often, at least temporarily, washed away. People will often return to the themes of their lives, but these have often been transformed by the coming out experience, and the long pent-up energies must be attended to first.

Another piece of the pattern I had seen had to do with love. I had heard many stories of people in the closet who had allowed themselves to have sexual experiences, but who had deprived themselves of love relationships. Homophobia--feeling an aversion to nonheterosexuals or to nonheterosexual culture--prevented some people who were in the closet from developing on-going, stable love relationships. It had done this to nonheterosexual people I knew and sometimes it prevented them from having sexual experiences at all. Coming
out often liberated people to pursue relationships, rather than sexual encounters or an unwanted celibacy.

Having served most of his hitch knowing that he was gay and keeping this a dark secret, followed by another year of secrecy on campus, I wasn’t at all surprised that Mark had come out in a very public, no-going-back way. I was a little concerned for several reasons. First, Mark was carrying a lot of credit hours even for a semester in which nothing important was happening. To be carrying this many hours when he was coming out seemed ingenuous.

In addition, when people finally come out, they tend to feel two extremes of emotion at the same time: the joy that comes with release and the terror of that comes with taking a significant risk, moving into the unknown. After all, one is finally facing head-on what has silenced one for a long time.

Coming out is often accomplished on an adrenaline rush. Early on, a person feels like making changes in every area of life—changes designed to accommodate rather than hide their sexual identity. Adrenaline often initially carries a person through heavy duty losses: the loss of relationships—both family and friends, the loss of parents’ respect, and of their support emotional and financial, as well as being fired from job, and for older adults, the end of a marriage, losing
custody of one's children or rejection from (some or all of) one's children, status loss, and family conflicts.

The adrenaline rush often drains a person completely--unfortunately, the consequences of coming out have often not yet fully played out and a person can easily feel overwhelmed. The sweeping changes, intended to facilitate a more authentic life, initially result in a shaky support system when a host of consequences sweep over the newly "out" person. It feels like the stability in their life is gone (sometimes it is), and important long-term relationships have been ended or significantly changed. Health is often affected.

A person has often initiated a new life: a new job perhaps, a new place to live, a new relationship or at least a public openness to new relationships, and a new lifestyle, but often the person feels a stranger in this new life. While a person may still feel that some or all of the changes were for the better, at least ultimately, they may first feel overwhelmed by the losses. Stability (blithely abandoned earlier) is now longed for, but absent on every side. Without a strong support system within themselves, as well as a strong support system without, people--especially youth--can feel completely lost.

I pegged Mark as being on the front of the wave of releasing energy. He felt invincible. He had come out to the
student senate and to his fraternity, in November. Now, in January, he wanted to come out in all areas of his life. He never wanted to be in the closet ever again.

It was clear that being something of an activist in gay and lesbian issues would be the main focus of Mark's energy over the semester. He planned to keep writing about some of the issues that had been raised in the Gay and Lesbian Literature class. He felt this would raise the consciousness of people who had not taken the class. I told him he was free to write on any subject he wished and English 2 was the perfect place to work on writing about these subjects.

I had been unhappy with the small groups in the fall. It seemed lots of students didn't know how to respond effectively to each other's writing, so they limped along or goofed off. To eliminate that problem, I had created a new assignment, the Round Robin. It would give students more practice responding to each others' writing, and it also provided a structure for response. Now it sounded like the Round Robin would also be especially useful to Mark for coming out.

"One of the assignments this semester is to read aloud two papers you have written to the class--one paper before mid-term, one after. You ask questions of the class about the writing before reading the piece aloud."
"That's perfect. Can I go early in the semester?"

"Thanks for volunteering," I laughed, "before you're even officially signed up for the class--but the order will be determined by drawing numbers from a hat. If you draw number one you'll go in a week and a half. If you draw number 22, you won't go till just before midterm."

He looked disappointed. "If you get a high number, I'd go ahead and come out in other ways. You can come out to your small group, and who knows? With gossip, you might end up coming out to the whole class before your first Round Robin.

He planned not only to come out to the class, but also to his family. Family was an important subject to Mark and one that we would discuss many times over the course of the upcoming semester. I was reluctant to pry into his situation, but it was clear he wanted to talk about this. I began to probe gently as to what kind of reaction his family might have to learning he was gay. Mark confessed he did not expect it to be easy. Listening to him talk about his family on that first day, I didn't know Mark well enough to be able to assess the accuracy of his opinions.

On the other hand, I could already tell that he was a dynamo, full of energy. The prospect of coming out had heightened his energy and he fairly vibrated. The whole class
would be energized. Mark would certainly be no subdued presence in the classroom.

As Mark left my office, I felt unusually happy about for having signed an override slip and taken on more work. I liked Mark. I felt confident that he would be an asset to the class. I felt that he was ingenuous about coming out. I wish, in retrospect, that I had been more aware of my own ingenuousness.

Mark had said he was looking for a class in which he could come out as a gay man and not be hassled by the teacher, and in which he could receive support while coming out. It was in my power not to hassle Mark. In fact, I wanted to remember to tell Mark the next time I saw him that his intention to come out encouraged me in coming out as well.

These are the things I focused on as Mark disappeared out my office doorway. This was the solid ground of what Mark wanted. But what about the rest of what Mark wanted? What did Mark mean when he said he wanted support while coming out? What did he want from me? Did he want this support from me as a person, an authority figure in the classroom? He clearly didn’t want support from me as a writer. Was he expecting more than I could deliver on any of these levels?
Did he expect the same things of me that he would of a heterosexual professor? Or perhaps more? What did he think was "support"? Was it something I could give or more than I could give? I did want very much to support Mark. I had come out to my peers in my graduate classes just the semester before; it was still stressful, even after three years coming out at my master's institution. I wanted to support Mark or any other queer person, but especially nonheterosexuals because I knew intimately what they faced. But how would I support Mark? What would I say or do? In what arena? Along what lines?

I had never thought about what I could--and couldn't--do to support a nonheterosexual student--or peer for that matter. The subject had never arisen. I had no idea whether it might dovetail nicely or conflict mightily with my various roles: professor in training, authority figure, writer, and so forth.

Could there be conflicts between my responsibility to the class as a whole and any obligations I was taking on with Mark? If so, how would I handle them? Did Mark know where I stood? Or that I had never been in this situation before? What boundaries were there on the support I could offer Mark? If I offered support to Mark that I didn't to other students, was this fair to the other students? Was it enough
justification that Mark's sexual identity meant that he had different needs than other students? Was it enough justification that we shared sexual identity? Was the whole question of justification irrelevant?

I didn't have the answers to any of these questions. In fact, these questions weren't even in my head when I signed Mark's override. I don't think they were in his mind either. We were mutually ignorant. In Mark's case, he may have assumed that because I was the teacher and a lesbian, I would know what to do; perhaps he even thought--like students tend to do, that because I was the teacher, I could make the class do whatever I wanted.

For a moment I thought to myself, I wonder what Mark means by support? But then I thought, I know what Mark wants; I know what I wanted when I was an undergraduate looking for support as a nonheterosexual. He wants the same things I wanted.

But I didn't inspect my own wishes to see what they were and how they matched up--or were mismatched--with my experience of the classroom. I had confided my wishes to my notebooks, but I had never compared my wishes to the realities of life and the college classroom. My wishes had been nourished by desire, not reality.
If I had delved deeper I would have found that I had wanted things that were possible and impossible; things that could be given by any caring person and things that could be given by no one except myself or a confidante. Maybe I wanted things that could only be given by a higher power. They were all mixed up together. In retrospect I wish that I had talked a great deal more with Mark about what kind of support he wanted and what kinds of support I could and could not give. This would have forced each of us to look more realistically at the semester.

We might have realized there could be some difficult situations ahead and—who knows?—we might have strategized in some useful ways. At the very least, we would have communicated more clearly than we did in actuality. Instead we sailed blithely into the semester, unaware. I was a little concerned about how the class might respond to Mark, and even more concerned about how the class might respond to me, but virtually oblivious to how our mutually hazy expectations might add to the stress of the semester.

From the very first Mark became a significant presence in class. If conversation was flowing easily, Mark would wait to speak until the conversation had advanced. When conversation was difficult to get going, Mark would enter the conversation early, often making a comment that stimulated a
variety responses. In either case he was as forthright in public as he had been in private, articulate. Subsequent classes showed Mark to be well-organized, prompt and conscientious in his work. His maturity was not only immediately recognized and admired by the class, but inspired imitation, too.

The way my class was organized that semester, each Wednesday two students (whose names had been drawn randomly from a hat) had the opportunity to read aloud a paper they had written to the class and to receive the response of the class to the piece.

On Wednesday of the first week of classes, I explained that our future Wednesdays would be dedicated to the Round Robin assignment. I explained how the Round Robin worked, and we drew names. Mark drew the third berth: he would be reading aloud a paper in only two weeks. I knew that he had to be pleased with drawing such a low number.

"When we do the Round Robin, we'll have three routine questions: What did you like about the piece? What were you confused about? What reactions did the piece generate from you? In addition to these questions, I'd also like you to add a question or two of your own, so that the responses of the class would be maximally helpful to you."
I required all students to turn in to me a week in advance a copy of the paper they intended to read aloud to the class, so I knew that Mark would be reading aloud his coming out piece.

I had been impressed with the paper he had handed in. He had written the piece with our class specifically in mind. It began by contrasting who he was now—confident and mature, with who he had been his first time in college—someone lost and wandering. The piece then moved directly (and rather suddenly) into realizing while in the army that he was gay. Then he recounted his years of hiding who he was until the student senate meeting, in which he had suddenly found himself coming out in the most public way.

The final paragraph of the paper began with his pledge to never be in the closet again, included reading his paper aloud as part of his pledge, and ended with his intention to come out to his family, even though he expected that their reactions would not be approval or even acceptance. As a piece of writing it was as full of energy as Mark himself, well organized, and sometimes eloquent. Though I could think of ways to improve it, it was fundamentally an effective piece of writing.

Coming into class that day, I felt some trepidation and I knew that Mark did too, although he didn't look anxious.
There would be, as usual, two students reading their papers aloud and Mark’s paper was second. I now waited through the first student’s reading, reminding myself not to slight him by thinking too much about Mark’s upcoming piece. I shut out thoughts about Mark and focused on the piece at hand. The students wrote their responses to the first piece, handed them over to the writer, and we all turned our attention to Mark.

Once Mark started reading his piece the wait would be over: by the end of the first paragraph the class would know that Mark was gay. I alerted myself to pay careful attention to any class response. Mark asked his additional questions of the class, and then began reading without any noticeable trepidation. A ripple of reaction passed through the class when Mark read the last sentence of his first paragraph. People squirmed around in their chairs, others let out gasps.

Mark’s voice had wavered slightly on the sentence, but the waver was immediately swallowed up by the reactions of the class. Mark recovered quickly but wavered twice more: first, when he wondered about the reaction of his classmates to learning he was gay, and again when he speculated about the reaction of his family. While the first waver had been lost in the chorus of reaction, these others were easy to hear in the silence that followed. No one could doubt that coming out to the class was difficult for Mark. Other than these
exceptions, Mark read aloud his words with conviction. It was an effective piece of writing and effectively read.

After Mark finished reading, the class began writing. I allotted the entire 50 minute class period to responding to student writing on Wednesdays, so that the class had about fifteen minutes to respond to each paper. Most of the students wrote only briefly in response to Mark's paper, although they had written only briefly to a paper the previous week as well. It was only the third week of the semester, and so difficult for me to assess what might being going on with the class as a whole or even with any individuals.

Mark lingered after the rest of the class had left, and offered me the chance to read his responses after he had read them, if I'd like. I'd like that very much, I said, wanting to read his responses right then, but unable to because I needed to teach another class, and because I didn't want Mark to see my concerns that there might be problematic responses. But what if it was a big deal?

I stuck with my original notion, which was proceed normally unless there was a reason not to: let Mark read his responses and wait for his report. On the other hand, it was so early in the semester I wasn't sure what normal was, but Mark had already left for his next class, so I packed up my papers and moved on to my next classroom.
The standard assignment for each student after sharing a piece with the class and receiving comments, was to write a report discussing the various responses the class had given to the questions and to reflect on the comments--focusing on what the writer might do next with the piece. In addition to looking forward to getting Mark's report on Friday, I couldn't keep myself from wondering whether I had made a good decision about Mark's responses.

On Friday, Mark was not in class. There was no note in my mailbox to explain his absence, and although I counseled myself to not worry, that he could be sick or something else perfectly ordinary, I couldn't help speculating what had been in Mark's responses. Although my mind still held onto the 'everything is fine' theory, my gut was telling me otherwise.

After my second class, which I taught with some distraction, I looked up Mark's phone number and dialed, rehearsing what I would say to Mark to not let him know I was worried, and yet to find out if things were okay. There was no answer. Over the weekend, still unable to reach Mark, I worried off and on, half the time berating myself for getting worked up over nothing, and the other half berating myself for not insisting that Mark come up to my office after I had taught my second class and read his responses there. How could I have let him read his responses alone?
On Monday my anxiety grew when Mark was again absent. Then, fifteen minutes before class ended, the classroom door opened and a rumpled Mark slid into a seat near the door. I felt my shoulder and neck muscles relax in a single motion. I exhaled a deep breath as if I had been holding it since Mark had left the classroom the Wednesday before.

As the end of class neared, I maneuvered myself close to the door to prevent Mark from slipping away before I had a chance to talk to him. The moment class ended, several students swarmed around me to ask questions, but I managed to tell Mark, “Don’t leave,” before being thronged. I answered questions a bit tersely, wondering whether Mark had another class to go to, knowing that I did, and unwilling to go any longer without knowing what was going on with Mark.

When the crowd cleared out I said, “I’ve been concerned about your absence. How are you doing?”

He could sense I was hurrying, and made his answer one word: “Better.”

“Can you meet me in my office at 3:30?” I asked. He nodded and we both headed out the door. All through the next period I was distracted by the single word “better,” turning it over and over in my mind. Better meant he had been doing worse before. The only conclusion I came to was that I should not have allowed Mark to read his responses alone. I should
have insisted that he wait and that we read them together. I could only assume 'worse' had started last Wednesday after class. How long it lasted I didn't know, but his very late arrival in class suggested that 'better' may have occurred when he had finally brought himself to class. But this was speculation. I would have answers (I hoped!) after this next class.

Mark was waiting when I got up to my office. He handed me the stack of responses and slumped into an easy chair. Finally I was going to get to read the responses. They consisted of a variety of notebook pages, mostly ripped from spiral bindings. Some were written with neat handwriting that could almost have been from the handwriting text that I had been taught from in the second grade, others were written in an almost illegible scrawl; many of the young women wrote in short, fat, round letters, almost illegible because all the letters were so much alike.

I dug into the pile, reading through the responses quickly, having emotional reactions while simultaneously analyzing the responses for problems. The first two questions didn't generate the kinds of responses the third question did. I skimmed through the first two questions and focused on the answers to What reactions did the piece generate in you?
The reactions varied, but all centered on how people felt about homosexuality. I mentally sorted the responses into piles. The first group was the most positive. These responders said they admired Mark's courage in coming out and wondered why people had such a hard time with issues related to sexual orientation. Some expressed the opinion that the older generation had the biggest problem and that their generation would do a lot better. They also wished Mark luck in coming out to his family, hoping that it would go better than he thought it would. There were perhaps five of these.

One of this first group of responses especially caught my attention. Katya had written that she had really admired Mark for how kind he was and how mature. She had noticed that he said things in the discussions to help make them much better, getting the conversation going and then letting it go once it got rolling. Now she admired Mark even more because of his courage. She said she'd really like to be friends with him.

The next group said they didn't know what they thought about being gay, whether it was right or wrong, but they admired Mark's courage in coming out.

The next pile consisted of only two students. These were students who said they disapproved of homosexuality, but whose responses showed they might be rethinking their attitude
because they liked Mark. Both mentioned that Mark was the first gay person they had ever known. They also felt that it took a lot of courage for Mark to admit he was a homosexual to the class. One of these students, not wanting to see Mark burn eternally, had quoted scripture verses to help him make a turnaround.

The two remaining piles I generated were definitely negative. As the attitudes about homosexuality shifted from approving or neutral to disapproving, the language began to change as well. Those who 'had no problem' with homosexuality had used the terms 'homosexual' and occasionally 'gay;' those who were neutral used "homosexual" more often than derogatory terms. The two negative groups used "homosexual" far less often and used other words frequently: fairy, pervert, fag, sicko, buttfucker, cocksucker, and so forth.

Some of these students still felt that it took courage for a person to reveal this kind of information, but their language suggested that his revelation was also a sign of a more advanced problem. They hoped that Mark's revelation would be followed by whatever it might take to "cure" the "problem." One student viewed Mark's paper as a desperate cry for help with a serious mental illness over which he could gain no control. Three expressed concern that Mark was going to hell. The emphasis seemed to be on how
painful this fate would be. Another two focused on Mark’s sinfulness and eternal damnation. The emphasis here seemed to be on paying the consequences for one's behavior.

All of the responses in this category leaned distinctly toward disapproval or flatly stated disapproval of homosexuality without giving me any sense that there was any questioning of their view. While these responses were characterized by the idea that homosexuality was sinful, sick, against God or nature, in none of these responses was there the sense of malice that was the common denominator of my final pile.

This pile contained three responses. In this group, there was a deeper level of distress and disapproval. The responders also seemed to have some animosity toward Mark. Homosexuality was condemned in the strongest possible terms, as was Mark. Heterosexuality was deemed the only possibility and praised. Two of the students advised Mark to kill himself if he could not find a cure, the third said the same, but at much greater length and with much more vehemence.

The third responder also directed Mark to avoid telling his family, because if Mark's family was like his own, they would kill him. If he could not be cured, death would be the best thing Mark could hope for. He would be lucky if someone who hated homosexuals would do the job for him, since this
would be preferable to death by the AIDS virus, which all homosexuals deserved and which had been sent by God as punishment. The other two responses also predicted that Mark would die horribly of AIDS and suggested that he deserved it.

The language of these three responses was dense with strong moral judgments, and curse words in addition to lots of negative slang for homosexuals. Two of the three referenced the Bible as condemning homosexuals to death.

I sat for a while, thinking what it must have been like to read these responses alone. While I could temporarily wall-off some of my emotional reaction because these weren't my responses and because I had a role to play—helping Mark deal with the responses—Mark had had no such "protection." He had felt the full brunt of the negative responses alone.

Mark was sitting in an overstuffed chair in my office not two feet away from me. I had not placed my desk between us, and I realized that Mark was watching me carefully to see how I would react to his responses. Clearly they had frightened him badly. The vulnerability and apprehension were still etched on his face. At the same time I was sure he worried that I would tell him he was being ridiculous—that he should buck up, stiff upper lip, and so forth. But he didn't want to hear things that would reinforce feelings of vulnerability either. He wanted an "objective" opinion.
Perhaps an objective opinion would be a good thing to give
Mark, but I didn't know if I had it in me. I was swirling
with all kinds of reactions to the responses.

I didn't question whether I should set my own reactions
aside or not, I simply did it, although it took effort. I
told myself to focus on sorting the responses into categories
and on learning Mark's reactions. Nevertheless, the reactions
of the two final groups—especially the virulence of the final
three responses—were making knots in my stomach. I could
feel my chest tightening. My solar plexus actually ached, as
if I had just been punched. I felt the urge to cry and to
yell, but instead directed myself: 'Focus on Mark.' I
mentally packed away my feelings and taped the mental box
shut.

After I had managed my feelings, I couldn't organize any
words to say, so the silence lengthened between us for a
while. Mark finally spoke, asking me what I thought about the
responses.

I told him the responses were mixed and that a few of
them were kind of nasty and that one or two of them were
really very sweet. I started to say that I had sorted the
responses into categories, but I could see Mark was not in a
place to hear an analysis, so I dropped it and asked him if he
had had anyone with him when he read the responses. He said
no, and launched into describing how shocked, even frightened, he had been by the ill will in the responses.

If he had known what to expect, Mark said, he wouldn’t have read them alone. He hadn’t foreseen that company would be important. Besides, he didn’t have anyone he could share the responses with. He didn’t want to share the responses with his fraternity brothers, because his coming out had already caused strain within the house. He also didn’t think that they could understand. While he had begun making friends in the gay community--people who would understand--it had only been two months since he had come out: there wasn’t anyone he had felt he could share the responses with. “You’re the only one besides me to read them.”

We talked for a long time about his reactions. His attention was focused, naturally, on how many disapproved of homosexuality and on the strength of their reactions. He had been stunned and alarmed by both. Perhaps most disturbing of all, he said, was that people were so candid, so direct about their feelings, and so judgmental in their comments. Even back in November when the fraternity had held a secret meeting to decide what to do about Mark, he had not felt such animosity--perhaps because his friends within the house had learned of the meeting, crashed it, and stood up for him. Two months later, Mark knew that some of the members of the house
still disapproved, but he felt that the meeting had reflected the first shock of knowing rather than any deep-seated beliefs.

In contrast, the class responses worried and frightened him. Some of the responses made him worry about his safety and I couldn't say I blamed him. Despite my mental efforts to set aside my feelings, in my stomach I could feel fear like a fist, and my solar plexus throbbed.

To help me gain some distance, I figured it out numerically. It was only forty percent of the class, I told myself. But they were so certain and so impassioned, forty percent seemed an imposing number. The possibility of violence from the final group lurked just below the surface. I coached my stomach and chest to relax, but they paid no attention to me.

In the way that he talked about the responses and his fears, I could sense that this experience had cast a new light on the secret meeting in the fraternity. While he maintained his confidence in his closest friends, Mark said his confidence in the house and in the organization was gone. He had also gotten a new perspective about the nasty phone calls left on his answering machine after the student newspaper article. He felt he had been in denial about homophobia; he
just hadn't wanted to admit how pervasive, how strong, or how close to him it was.

"I was so naive," he said. "So innocent. Now I realize that we live with massive homophobia. I feel so stupid. All those calls on my answering machine and I just ignored them. And the frat. God!"

"Hey! Nothing bad happened to you. And you believed the best of people. If you had been worried, would that have been better? Besides, not all the responses are bad. One or two them could be framed."

He acknowledged that not all the responses were bad, but added that on Wednesday he hadn't had any perspective, just fear. He had holed up in his room and stayed there until Friday night when friends he had made through UGLS—a gay man and two lesbians—had finally buffalomed their way into the fraternity. They stayed with him all that night, against house rules, and Saturday morning Mark had resigned as committee chair and moved out of the fraternity. While the friends who had stood up for Mark felt he should stay, he told them he just couldn't stay any longer.

Although he still kept his membership, it was obvious that Mark's fraternity days were over and it was simply a matter of letting time pass before he dropped his membership,
the last vestige of what had suddenly become a past phase of his life.

On Saturday Mark moved into the off-campus apartment of the friends who had come after him. His friends stayed close to him all weekend, talking off and on about the responses (without actually reading them), about discovering their homosexuality, about coming out. They made sure he wasn’t alone for any length of time so that he wouldn’t “freak out” again. Slowly his fears had receded.

On Monday morning his friends had walked with Mark as far as the Student Union before scattering to their classes. Mark sat in the Student Union sipping coffee until finally summoning the courage to return to class, forty-five minutes late. When he had first come in, he felt all eyes were on him. All eyes had been on Mark, and for longer than they would be for an ordinary forty-five-minutes-late arrival, I suspected. Nevertheless, the class had continued without interruption.

I asked Mark how he felt now. He didn’t say he was glad he had come out. Instead, he spoke in terms of coming to grips with having come out. I remembered our first conversation and his eagerness to come out. Clearly the experience had left its imprint on Mark.
I asked Mark if he had sorted the responses in any way and he said no. I told him I had, and began to talk about the various categories I had sorted the responses into. It was a revelation to him to see that there were five students who had no problems at all with him being gay. I suggested that in two weeks when the class changed small groups and people were free to select their own small group members, that he get himself into a group with these people. This would increase his sense of safety. He hadn't thought about the small groups and this plan brightened things for him. At the same time, it made him aware of the prospect of the next two weeks with his current small group.

Students routinely put their names at the top of their response papers before the writer read his or her paper. This meant that there were no anonymous responses, although one student had used his pen to blot out his name. Unfortunately, since he was the only one to do this, process of elimination revealed him. (Amazingly, this student's response had not been one of the three that I had put in the most negative pile.) Because all of the responses had names, Mark knew that his small group currently consisted of one person who didn't know how they felt about homosexuality and two who disapproved of it.
Mark wanted to trade groups and at the same time, didn’t want to do something that would make the class think either that he was scared or that he was getting special treatment because he was gay. I look back now and wonder why I didn’t tell Mark "too bad" and go ahead and shuffle the groups immediately. But I didn’t. Instead I asked him whether he could handle two weeks. He said yes, but I sensed Mark was whistling in the dark.

I told him that I would move up the date we would trade groups. I hadn’t set an exact date for the trade, so there would be nothing revealing about it if I moved the date up. Mark still worried that the rest of the class would catch on, but I assured him things would be fine on that score. I hoped I was right.

As it worked out, only one student noticed that I was shuffling the groups early. He asked what was up, but since the rest of the class felt this student was one who nit-picked anyway, I simply sloughed his question.

In addition to the five students who had no problem with homosexuality, I pointed out that another seven didn’t know what they thought about homosexuality, but thought Mark courageous. We talked about this group quite a bit. This meant there were at least 10 people in a class of 23, who felt to some degree positive about Mark. When we added in the
people who admitted they liked Mark, even though they ostensibly disapproved of homosexuality, just over half the class were potential allies. Mark's face changed visibly at this new perspective on the responses; he took the papers from me and began to read through them again—something he hadn't done since last Wednesday.

As he reread, Mark sorted the responses into piles of his own, creating six piles where I had had five. We discussed differences of sorting so that he could see both how I had sorted them, and how they shook out for him. Mark broke down the "negative-but-not-virulent" responses into two piles to my one, shading some responses closer to virulent. But equally important as the categories was the whole notion of looking at the responses categorically. Once Mark had sorted the responses, he could see there was reason for hope as well as reason for fear.

"I feel like the responses were this huge, overwhelming mass. This shows there's a whole spectrum of responses. Katya's response is really cool. I'd like to get to know her better."

"I think she's really cool, too—pretty astute. She noticed how you get the class discussions going without dominating them. Maybe she'd be a good person to have in your small group." Mark's eyes lit up again. We strategized for a
while about good small groups for Mark and then came back to
his next pile of responses.

For me, the most optimistic part of the whole set of
responses had to be Katya, whose strong, genuine support meant
a lot to both Mark and me. The students who were neutral,
including the one or two students who might be re-evaluating
their attitude about homosexuality because they liked Mark
also gave me hope. These were the people who were open—they
didn't have their minds made up in either direction. I
suspected that prior to Mark's coming out, "homosexual" had
always referred to someone they had never known, someone who
they had stereotyped images of in their minds, someone who was
far away and 'other,' not someone they knew, not someone they
liked. I pointed this out to Mark, too.

He understood the perspective I was offering him; in
fact, I could see that he felt somewhat chagrined. Was I
implying he had over-reacted, blown the whole thing out of
proportion or even made it all up? He picked up the last two
piles of responses, and the tide of the conversation shifted.
I had done my best to direct Mark's attention to things he had
overlooked. He had looked at them; now it was time for me to
see what I had been pointing away from.

As we talked about the rest of the responses, I knew
that I couldn't and didn't want to soft-pedal the disapproval,
even malice that was in them. I didn’t know whether telling him that they caused knots in my stomach (and they hadn’t even been directed at me) would make things scarier for Mark or less scary. I certainly didn’t want Mark to dismiss these responses. We both needed to take them seriously.

In my mind, I had already soft-pedaled a bit: those people who had said they didn’t know how they felt about homosexuality I had suggested to Mark were essentially allies. In fact, they weren’t necessarily allies—supporters, people he could count on. They were simply people less likely to beat up Mark, less likely to leave nasty telephone messages for him, less likely to harass him in class.

On the other hand, their views on homosexuality were perhaps the most likely to change over the course of the semester. The responses represented only what each person wrote in a particular moment. Who knew what shifting had gone on inside people since the issue had been raised when Mark read his paper? The shifting could go in any direction, and could vary from day to day. All this uncertainty was more than Mark needed at the moment, but I couldn’t keep my mind from wandering in that direction and wondering when the same thoughts would occur to Mark.

At the same time I knew that I didn’t want Mark to drop out of my class. Part of my concern was for Mark and his
education. He had already dropped out of college once because of issues that had come up in Freshman English 2. I didn’t want him dropping again—either from my class or from college. I wanted him to maintain his 3.6 grade point average and graduate. I wanted him to get a job and have a successful life, however he chose to measure success.

I wanted Mark to stay in class because I wanted him to strengthen his writing skills. I also wanted him to stay in class because he was the best writer in the class.

Also I wanted him to stay because he was also homosexual and I felt less alone and stronger because he was there. I liked talking with him about what it was like to be gay or lesbian and in school. I wanted him to stay because I liked him. Liked his honesty, his confidence, his caring about people, his drive. Like everybody else in the class, I admired his courage. I couldn’t help comparing myself with him and feeling a coward.

I wanted Mark to stay, but I also realized that I didn’t really know how to handle the three most disturbing responses—I didn’t really know what my options were as teacher of the class. Could anything be done? What? What did I want to do? Did Mark want me to do anything? Was there a way to improve the class environment for Mark, and how might the rest of the
class respond? I set these questions aside for the time being.

I didn't feel that I would be honest if I minimized Mark's fears: he had a legitimate foundation for them. I felt scared too. On the other hand, I didn't want to reinforce his fears either. From the perspective of the teacher, he had already missed two days of class, and we were only in the beginning of the fourth week of a sixteen week semester. I didn't deny that the negative reactions were disturbing, but I pointed out that it was really only three reactions that were scary.

I pointed out that Mark didn't sit anywhere near these three students, so that made things easier. Mark said he had no intention of getting into conflict with another member of the class, but I suddenly had visions of my classroom erupting into shouting matches, creating chaos over which I had no control. The prospect was scary, and I did my best to dismiss it.

I also felt like I was using Mark, that I was safely standing to the side, learning the demographics of coming out to a class, while Mark took the lumps. I reminded myself that Mark had come to my particular class because he wanted to use me: he wanted support in his coming out process. With me as his teacher, he knew that he wouldn't have to worry about
teacher reactions or his grade in the class because he had revealed himself. Part of me knew I was whistling in the dark: I didn't know what "use" Mark wanted to make of me, and that ignorance was part of the situation I was now in.

In addition, I had told Mark on the day I had signed his override slip I would be coming out also. Did Mark have expectations about what the classroom environment might be like when the teacher came out to the class? I remembered that his Lesbian and Gay Literature professor had come out to the class, and that class had been spectacular. Maybe Mark figured that once I came out the environment would be similar to his Lesbian and Gay Literature class. Maybe he didn't have clear ideas about what support he expected. I certainly didn't have clear ideas about what I expected or had committed to. We hadn't explored these issues very much. Like the "Are you married?" question, I felt caught flat-footed. I had the sinking feeling the whole semester might be full of these surprises.

How much support had I been to Mark so far? I'd sent him home to deal with the responses on his own. I wanted to support him, but I was as naive as he was about what to expect. My naiveté had made the class rough on Mark already. There wasn't anything I could do to change the responses that
had been written, but it was just as clear that the results of my ignorance were felt strongly by Mark.

Our conversation ran long and ended on a qualified low note. Mark recognized that he did have support in the class. In fact, Katya had spoken to Mark on her way out of class and told him she was glad he was back, she had been concerned about him. At the same time, Mark was still very nervous, especially about the three responses that were virulent. In addition, although he hadn't quite put his finger on it yet, he was beginning to feel the uncertainty of those who were "neutral," as well as the reality that half--or more--of the class saw him as either sick or a sinner.

Mark wanted me to "do something" about the homophobes in class, especially the most virulent responses. I told Mark that I would talk about the responses with my supervisor, to see what guidelines there were about acceptable and unacceptable classroom behavior and what I could do about it. I would get back to him as quickly as I could.

Mark and I finally ended our conversation and I went home, completely beat. When I got home it was my turn to cook dinner and I focused on this. It wasn't until my partner and I were eating dinner and she asked me about my day that I began to let my reactions out. No sooner had she asked than I
began to cry. After that I became angry and shouted at my partner. Out poured my helplessness, my humiliation, my fear. We talked for a couple of hours, then I went to bed early, and fell immediately into exhausted sleep.

I woke up in the middle of the night, sweating and trembling from nightmares I couldn't remember. An hour later I slept again, only to wake again without images, but with dread. Just before dawn the nightmares eased, but I continued to rise to the surface of consciousness without truly waking up.

In the twilight between waking and sleeping, dread lingered with me, but I also felt regret for having given Mark a rosy view of the class and worry that my soft-pedaling would end up hurting us all. Later, when came fully awake, my mind was filled with images of a class in violent revolt—against me, against Mark, against each other. Complete chaos against which I felt both frightened and helpless.

In that moment I wished that Mark had never come out, that I had never met Mark, that the professor of the Lesbian and Gay Literature class had never recommended me. I heartily wished Mark would drop my class, to never have another gay or lesbian student come out in a class; I wished that I would never have another gay or lesbian student. In that moment I wished to not be a teacher of any kind.
When my partner asked me how I was doing the next morning, I poured out the nightmares I had had. When she asked how I felt about teaching that class, I said I was fine, an answer that was more wishful thinking than truthful. Although I didn't want to be nervous, I was. And bleary-eyed. I argued with myself that none of my students was actually going to create a problem—their responses had simply been expressions of opinions of the moment, and I had no cause to be uncomfortable or afraid.

I had told Mark I would talk to the co-coordinator about the responses. As I walked up to the English building, Mark's responses tucked under my arm, I tried to focus on what I would say to the co-coordinator, what I wanted from him, but I felt too addled to make any decisions.

Did I want to remove three students from the classroom? Did I want to give these students a lecture? Forbid them from making homophobic remarks? Lay a guilt trip on them? Threaten them with bad grades? I didn't even know what my options were. I decided I would gather more information before making up my mind.

I knew as well that I needed to be as objective as possible in our talk, representing my own and Mark's concerns without overstating the dangers. This was difficult for me.
since feelings of dread lingered with me as well as my dream images of the class in revolt. At eleven o'clock in the morning I felt dog-tired. I worried that my red and puffy eyes would give me away.

In the co-coordinator's office I started with Mark asking for an override into my class and the recommendation of the Lesbian and Gay Literature professor. Eventually, I ended up telling the whole story—Mark's first Freshman English class, his quitting college, the Army, the student senate, the threats on his answering machine, and ended with the paper Mark read aloud to the class and the responses it had generated.

After the composition co-coordinator had read the most virulent responses and scanned the rest, we talked about my impressions of the students who had written the most virulent responses. My impressions were vague, since this was only the fourth week of the semester. When asked, I had no clear answer on the potential of the situation to escalate, and I said so, feeling inarticulate. The professor suggested a couple of different potential scenarios for the course of the next few weeks, and asked if I felt one more likely than another. Again I had to say I couldn't say.

I asked if there was anything that I could do, and he asked me what I would like to do. This was a question that I
could finally answer and I did, leaning more heavily toward protecting Mark than I had the day before when he was in my office. Perhaps I leaned more heavily on the potential dangers because I no longer felt like I needed to speak in a way that would encourage Mark to stay in school, to finish Freshman English 2; perhaps it was because of my bad night.

The co-coordinator's view of the situation was even more optimistic than the view I had tried to convey to Mark. He agreed that the three responses we had examined most carefully were unpleasant, but unpleasant was all they were, not threatening, and these were only three responses out of twenty-three. I wasn't sure whether he was not taking the situation seriously enough or whether I was taking it too seriously.

I pointed out that in addition to these three, at least another ten disapproved of homosexuality and saw Mark as either sick or a sinner. He countered that these were opinions which the students were entitled to hold and no direct threat to Mark. Hate speech had not (yet) become a topic of discussion on campus.

Could students be removed from my class if I felt they needed to be, I asked. Could I get rid of the three most virulent students? He pointed out that removing one student from a class usually had a big impact on a class, sometimes
coloring a whole semester for all the students in that class. Removing three students would have a huge impact on a class, making it virtually impossible for anyone to focus on learning. I imagined for the first time being in a class in which even a single student was removed, let alone three. I realized that in all my experience in college—both at the undergraduate and master's levels, I had never seen a student removed from a class. I could see the absurdity of the suggestion of removing three students. Perhaps, if it came to that, my professor suggested, removing Mark might be the least disruptive option for all involved.

I was shocked by the idea of removing Mark from the class—he was not the source of the problem. Yet, from a practical standpoint, removing one student was certainly more likely than removing three. I felt embarrassed to have raised this line of questioning and did my best to cover my embarrassment by going back to a phrase used earlier: "direct threat." What were the guidelines for unacceptable classroom behavior? A student had to directly threaten to harm another student or the teacher, the co-coordinator said, or in some other way directly interfere with a student's ability to learn.

We looked closely at the language of the three most virulent responses, but they contained no direct threats. Nor
did they, from what the co-coordinator had said so far, constitute direct interference with Mark's learning. All three had said Mark was better off dead, that he deserved to die; they felt that if someone did kill Mark that would be for the best, but none of the writers had said that they were going to do the killing. I thought about the two days of class that Mark had missed, about my own disturbed sleep, frustrated that these didn't meet the guidelines.

I could see that there was little the co-coordinator could do. I couldn't help remembering a friend of mine who had gotten an injunction against her violent ex-husband. My friend had gone to court after each time her ex-husband had come to her house in the middle of the night gripped by alcohol or rage or both, shouting curses and threats and breaking in the door. He often smashed her furniture, and she had at least once ended up in the emergency room. After more than a year of this terror, my friend had finally persuaded a judge to grant an injunction.

The injunction provided no protection at all, since the ex-husband was still granted access to the public hallway. When he pounded on her door in the middle of the night, shouting abuse and threats at her, he wasn't even violating the injunction. By the time he actually violated the injunction--by breaking through the door--it was too late for
my friend to save herself. I saw parallels between my friend’s situation and Mark’s. By the time some direct interference occurred in my classroom, it would be too late to protect Mark—the harm would have occurred.

Although I had tried to convey it—apparently without success—I knew that harm had already occurred to both Mark and me. Or perhaps I had been able to make my professor understand and it just didn’t matter—the harm had not been “direct” enough.

It occurred to me, for the first time, that my professor, who I had deemed to know everything of importance about teaching, didn’t know everything. In fact, he knew little about lesbian gay, and bisexual identity, and therefore very little about the intersection of sexual identity with teaching. I was disappointed, and probably let it show.

I asked my professor if he had any ideas about what I could do to lower tension in the class. He suggested that I assign a reading that had themes of tolerance in it. In the discussion that followed the reading, allow students to voice their honest opinions without interference, also bringing out the merits of tolerance. He reminded me that there would be a whole range of opinions, including Mark’s and those of the students who weren’t homophobic as well as those of the homophobes.
By this time in the conversation, I was extremely tired and discouraged. This article sounded like an idea that could easily go either way—encouraging tolerance or polarizing students from each other, or even giving homophobic students a platform. On top of this, since we would be breaking the pattern of the class to do it, I was pretty certain Mark would feel that the class would detect this move as special treatment for him. I was pretty sure he was right. Despite my serious doubts, I asked for suggested articles, but got no ideas. My professor figured I was the best one to know what articles or stories might be helpful since I was more in touch with gay and lesbian literature.

My professor's ignorance confirmed my disappointment, and I left the meeting feeling let down in several ways, but unable to name most of them.

The next day I tried to think of articles I might assign, but I couldn't come up with any. I asked the Lesbian and Gay Literature professor and my nonheterosexual friends for suggestions, but came up with only a few, meager ideas.

I mulled over the few articles that had been mentioned with dissatisfaction. I couldn't think of any piece that would work well. Half of the suggestions were only marginally related to tolerance. I figured the students wouldn't make the connection the article was intended to make.
Other articles were plain enough—in some ways they were blatant—and seemed too narrow. I got caught up in imagining the range of viewpoints that might come out. The more I thought about it, the more the potential for angry confrontation, chaos and polarization loomed before me. I didn't assign anything.

I was disgusted that I had gone from checking out the prospects for removing three students from my class to not even assigning an article for my students to read. I was also perplexed about just how this sea-change had occurred. I was not looking forward to meeting with Mark.

I met with Mark after our next class and told him there was no way to remove a student from a class unless he or she directly threatened a student or teacher, or directly interfered with a student's learning. Mark felt that his learning had already been interfered with. That didn't constitute direct interference, I explained. Mark was visibly upset by what I was telling him. Like my abused friend, he felt the policy was no help at all: by the time the policy would come into play, the damage would be done. I agreed with him, but felt there was nothing I could do.

Mark pointed out that he had taken my class because he thought he would be supported in his coming out. Where was the support? I felt awful. My support was in the fact that I
wouldn’t lower his grade because he was gay. It was in my understanding of the issues and the pressure he was under because I felt it too. It made me feel better to have something to say back to Mark, but I still felt lousy. I told him that he was the first student I had ever had come out in class like this. I didn’t know what to expect and therefore I was probably making a lot of mistakes. I apologized for not being more help to him.

With the apology, Mark switched modes, apologizing himself for expecting more of me than was fair. His comment echoed my disappointment with the co-coordinator.

“It’s disappointing when you go to someone hoping they will have knowledge or solutions you don’t have yourself, hoping that they’ll do what you can’t.” I was talking at least as much to myself as to Mark. “There aren’t any magic answers. We’re going to have to feel our way along this whole semester.”

Mark nodded his head in agreement, but I couldn’t help feeling that the bigger lumps would fall to Mark rather than to me or to any of the other students in class.

By the time of my next class, I would have admitted that I’d had a hard time initially dealing with the responses, but now I was fine. Or at least much better. In my journaling, I had mentioned Mark, but I limited myself to a recitation of
the events and left out the feelings that the situation aroused.

Instead, for the first time, I wrote about Royce. I wrote extensively about Royce. From my earliest recollections of him, to my last knowledge of him, nearly dead in the emergency room. I wrote page after page about Royce; nothing about Mark.

As the semester progressed, I noticed that I seldom made eye contact with the students whose responses had been most strongly negative. When I did look their way, the vehemence of their opinions stood between me and them. While I seldom made eye contact, I would often look toward them when they weren’t likely to be looking back at me. When I finally realized I was doing this—and it took quite a while—I realized I was checking to make sure things were okay—safe. It took me a long time to admit how uncomfortable the experience had left me, how much less safe I felt in the classroom.

I didn’t just feel less safe in this class; I now felt uncomfortable in both of my classes. On more than one occasion that semester I had a sensation that I decided must be claustrophobia. The ceiling seemed especially close above me. I had the feeling I’d been locked into a submarine—a small space from which there was no escape, a space with
enormous pressure pressing in on all sides. A space in which nothing could be assumed, not contact with the larger world, not air to breathe. All these feelings were swirling around in me, but most of the time they were just outside my awareness.

I wasn't surprised when in the next two weeks, Mark's attendance was spotty. He had probably fully realized that more than half the class thought of him as either sick or a sinner. On top of that, while one person in his small group had said she didn't know how she felt about homosexuality, the other two had called him a pervert (among other things) in their responses.

To add to the situation, one of the students for whom Mark's coming out had been strongly offensive, Devon, began to make remarks under his breath any time Mark attended class. Devon was 20, and former military like Mark, having served two years in the Marines. While Devon sat far enough away from me that I often couldn't understand what he said, I could tell that he could be heard by the people sitting around him, by the turning heads. I couldn't make out the words, but gradually I realized the tenor of the remarks was sarcastic and hostile, and eventually I realized he must be making remarks about homosexuals in general and probably about Mark in particular.
I wasn't surprised that Devon was making occasional, but persistent remarks in class—he was one of the three most virulent responders to Mark's coming out paper; in fact, he was the one who had written at greatest length and with the most severity. I had been upset by all the strongly negative responses, but most hurt by Devon's response. I'd had a conversation or two with Devon that had made him more of an individual to me, and I had liked him. And I'd had no clue that he felt so strongly. I was not the only one who liked Devon: Devon and Mark, both former military, had enjoyably swapped stories about military life before Mark had come out. There had been a camaraderie.

I not only liked Devon because he had a nice personality, (although he was also sometimes obnoxious to the women in class), but because we shared an interest: Devon liked to write poetry in his spare time. I had encouraged him to show me some of his poems, and he had responded by bringing me three or four, all of them about the camaraderie of his unit in the marines. His response to Mark's paper had been a blow to me. Now he was muttering derogatory remarks under his breath—behavior I associated with sixth grade rather than college.

I am surprised in retrospect that I didn't immediately let Devon know that muttering in class was inappropriate: he
could either make his remarks available to everyone for response or keep them to himself. I do remember that at first I overlooked Devon’s comments because students do sometimes trade comments with each other even while the whole class is having a discussion. As long as these side conversations are brief, I ignore them. It was two or three classes before I realized the nature of Devon’s comments and their persistence.

When I finally tumbled to what was going on—what Devon was muttering under his breath—I was surprised no one had objected to Devon’s comments or at least to the interruptions, but no one had said anything. Mark must have figured out what Devon was doing more quickly than I had because I noticed that his body language—which had relaxed a little, was once again tense.

I probably should have intervened much sooner than I did, but this was new situation for me and I moved slowly. I definitely did not want Devon to continue making homophobic remarks. Nevertheless, I was unsure what way of dealing with Devon would not contradict my newly adopted pedagogy.

For example, the most direct way to deal with the situation would be parallel to dealing with racist remarks in the classroom. Tell Devon that I would not allow homophobic remarks in my class. At the time, I worried that making a
statement like this would shut down the class when what I wanted to encourage was an opening up.

After I gave up on wishful thinking, I checked out my options. I realized that without censoring Devon I could point out that his remarks were disruptive. Although it wouldn't get at the homophobic content of the comments, it might keep him from making cracks during class.

Was this what I wanted to say to Devon? Maybe I should just tell Devon I wouldn't tolerate homophobic remarks anymore than I would tolerate racist remarks. The social acceptability of racist remarks is far lower than homophobic remarks. But did social acceptability have anything to do with the situation?

How would the students perceive me, if I objected to Devon's homophobic comments on the grounds they were homophobic? Didn't the students have the right to express their opinions? On the other hand, didn't I have the right to express mine? What impact would my position as wielder of considerable power have on my remarks?

If I silenced Devon, when I hadn't silenced Mark, would the students feel I was a hypocrite? Hadn't I said that this class was about expressing ourselves? If I forced Devon underground, would this be a better atmosphere? For who? What did one do with 'hate speech'? What if everyone in the
class decided to mumble remarks? Should I encourage Mark to mumble remarks of his own? Absurd! But my whole thought processes were becoming wild.

Finally, the day neared for the changing of the small groups and I realized that small group work would isolate Devon from Mark. Hopefully the remarks would stop. If not, I would speak to Devon, although at that point I didn't know what I would say. The small group changes would be good for Mark as well and I hoped his attendance would improve.

The night before we would be changing groups in class, I ran into Mark at a UGLS social function. He was with the young gay man who was now one of his apartment mates. The two lesbians who were also apartment mates were nearby. I reminded him that we would be changing small groups the next day and beginning midterm Read Alouds. He looked at me with both guilt and defiance on his face. He told me a transparent lie about being sick recently, but I was reasonably certain he would turn up on the day that the class changed groups.

At the beginning of the semester, before people knew each other, I had assigned students to groups, more or less randomly. I preferred groups of four, but because I had 23 students in that class I had five groups of four and one group of three.
Now that students knew each other, I allowed them to pick their own groups. The only rule I gave to the class when we changed groups was that no foursome could have just one member of a gender—no groups of three females and one male, nor any groups of three males and one female. This policy had been suggested by the co-coordinator, and was based on the observation that often in a group with a three to one ratio, the one was often very quiet, whereas in other configurations there was usually a fair amount of talk even from quiet students.

On the day when we chose new groups Devon and another student were absent, and Mark, thankfully, was present. I was surprised that Devon was gone—this was his first absence—but I also felt relieved that for one day at least we wouldn’t be hearing remarks from Devon. The students milled around briefly and then settled down in their new groups.

I was happy to see Katya, who had written a very supportive response to Mark, had sought him out to form a group. Another supportive student had come along and they had formed a threesome. I felt pleased that Mark had a group that would be a friendly space for him within the larger not-so-friendly space of the class. Sure enough, Mark attended the next class, the first time he had attended two classes consecutively since he had come out.
Even though I had reminded Mark that Read Alouds were coming up, I felt surprised when I looked at my class calendar and realized that I needed to have something for class the next day. Under the gun, I wrote about myself and my friends in high school. The piece profiled our bond of friendship, discussing our different personalities and how we accepted each other despite our quirks and hang ups.

It was only as I was in the act of reading the piece aloud in class the next day that I realized I had written a kind of tolerance piece and that I had once again taken refuge in childhood. I stopped momentarily, while the thought hit me, but I immediately resumed reading with the explanation that I had seen something new in my piece.

I was disappointed when no one asked me about the insight that had occurred to me while I was reading. I also scolded myself about my observation that I was once again writing about childhood: was childhood forever off limits? Maybe I could just write a piece and it could just happen to be about childhood, without my sexual identity being an issue. I only half believed myself.

On Wednesday Devon returned to class. I explained the gender rule and said that in light of that rule he could choose between two groups, a male trio and the group composed of Katya, Mark and another woman. I made sure Devon
understood his choices, then left Devon to draw up a seat with the group he wanted. I was convinced he would feel he had no choice at all. I was completely amazed and baffled when Devon drew up a desk to Mark's group.

Over the next few weeks, Devon continued to make remarks under his breath and wrote in his journal to me that he resented being in the same group with Mark. Mark came to my office one day and asked if there was any way to remove Devon from the class or to make him stop making cracks under his breath.

Incongruously, I found myself explaining again that I could not remove Devon from the class. I also pointed out that Devon had just as much right to express himself in the classroom as Mark. Censoring Devon would mean censoring Mark and everyone else in class as well. I told Mark he had exercised his right to speak, he needed to recognize Devon's right to speak—even when the speaking made him very uncomfortable.

Mark pointed out that Devon's remarks were under his breath—that no one could really respond to them because they were asides. Mark also felt Devon's behavior was affecting the whole class. Mark was right, and for the first time I felt I saw something with clarity. Devon did have the right
to speak, but he needed to do it in a way that was responsible— in a way that gave people the chance to respond.

I agreed that Devon's grumbling was affecting the class and that I would talk to him about it. I thanked Mark for helping me to find some clarity. I had felt paralyzed by the whole situation. Once I felt I had firm ground to stand on, I knew how to act. I made it clear to Mark that I would not ask that Devon change what he said, but that he express his opinion responsibly. Once again, Mark felt disappointed, but there was little he could do.

As it turned out, before I talked to Devon, he asked to speak to me. The class was working in their small groups, and I was meeting with students individually on a volunteer basis. When I finished talking with my third or fourth student, Devon raised his hand to talk with me next. When I came over to his desk, he said he had a problem, glanced across at Mark, and then asked if we could talk somewhere privately. I said "Sure," and we went out into the hall and sat on a nearby bench. "What's the problem?" I asked.

"Mark," he said.

"Why is Mark a problem?" A torrent of homophobic name-calling followed that I ignored. Eventually Devon subsided. "Devon, is Mark doing anything to directly interfere with your learning? Is he threatening you in class or out?"
"Yes," he said, to my amazement. My eyebrows went up, I’m sure. "He’s always watching my butt in class. I can feel his eyes on me all the time."

I was relieved; in fact, I had to turn my head away and cough to stifle a wry smile. I thought, but didn’t say, ‘Don’t flatter yourself.’ This thought was followed by a sense of irony: Mark experienced Devon as a direct interference with his learning, while simultaneously, Devon felt the same about Mark. For the first time I realized how truly threatened Devon had been feeling.

But the irony existed on another level as well: more than one young woman in class had taken on Devon because of sexist remarks he made—remarks that made the young women feel that they were seen as objects rather than people—an idea that had been lost on Devon. They felt that his remarks interfered with their learning. Now, I thought, he has a clear understanding of the feeling, but I wasn’t sure this was the time to point out the parallel. I was also glad I hadn’t immediately shut down Devon: I needed to know more about how Devon was experiencing the class.

I felt confident that Mark was not staring at Devon’s butt, and Mark, like me, was confused by Devon’s presence in the small group, and concerned for his own safety. Fortunately, when they were in the small group Mark didn’t
have to take on Devon’s attitude because Katya and the other woman in the group took him on. Nevertheless, Devon’s feelings were real as far as he was concerned and he was having a tough time in class.

Devon said over and over that he wanted Mark removed from the group. I let him express his discomfort for a while, before I finally cut him short. “Look, I’m sure it’s not easy for you to be around someone who you disapprove of strongly.” Devon agreed emphatically. He was particularly distressed that Mark had served in the army. Devon told fragmentary, headline-style stories about what happened to “faggots” in the Marines. I wanted Devon to shut up, but I also had the feeling that he needed to vent these stories.

When he stopped, I wasn’t inclined to feel sympathy for Devon. I had done as much as I could by sitting still and letting him vent. But then he began to talk about how distracted he felt in class and the antipathy he imagined from Mark. I could see again that Devon, too, felt uncomfortable in the classroom. Like Mark he felt vulnerable. It struck me that Mark and Devon were quite similar—or maybe it was just because they were both coming to me with their discomforts about each other that I began to see these two as so similar when recently I had been seeing them as opposed.
I thought seriously for a moment about Devon’s notion that Mark was having sexual thoughts during class. I had no way of knowing what Mark or anyone else thought during class. But Mark’s spotty attendance was a sign of someone who was nervous rather than lustful. I had noticed that Mark scanned the class—like I did—and I interpreted his behavior as like my own: a defender assessing the directions from which attack might come. If Mark’s sexual self emerged in class, it was probably less often than the younger students who did not have any fears to occupy their time and attention.

I assured Devon that Mark was not staring at his butt, but I was dubious about how much my assurance would mean to him. If other people’s butts or breasts preoccupied Devon a great deal while in class, then my assurance was liable to be contradicted if he measured Mark as like himself. What did I really know about how often men looked at others sexually during class? Nevertheless I explained that Mark felt uncomfortable himself because of revealing something about himself that some people in the class had a hard time with.

I pointed out that in their responses, some people had said things that had been hard on Mark’s feelings, even on his sense of safety, and if Mark thought about anything other than what he was going to do after class was over, it was probably about how other people in the class felt toward him. "It
isn’t easy to be in a class where you know that several people strongly dislike you for something about yourself that you can’t change."

I could empathize with Devon’s sense of vulnerability, and I did. The class was clearly stressful for him. But, I told him, he needed to know that if I moved anyone from the group it would be him. Devon let loose a string of curses in protest. I cut him short with, "Devon, first, I have a group with three people who are fine and one unhappy person. I’m not going to move the three happy people. Second, you chose the group when you knew that Mark was in it. If you don’t like Mark, why did you choose the group? I’m not going to move Mark or anyone else because of a decision you made for yourself.” I heard shades of the co-coordinator in my own voice.

Devon was emphatic that he didn’t want to be moved. Everyone in class would see him as a troublemaker, he said. He would be an outsider in the group he was moved to. I knew that some in the class—especially several of the women students—saw him as a troublemaker already, but I also knew that many liked him.

Despite his homophobia and his remarks objectifying the women in the class, I was reminded of the things I liked about Devon, too. The poems he had shown me were rough, but also
lyrical. He had a nice turn of phrase. I encouraged him to keep writing poems when he could, and to share his poems with his small group if he could bring himself to do that.

I felt uncomfortable liking Devon, and uncomfortable not liking him. When he made homophobic remarks I couldn't help taking them personally and feeling both angry and afraid. When we talked poetry a different Devon emerged. The commonalties between the two Devons, the characteristics that were the same, what carried over, that was what I needed to keep my sight on. It wasn't easy.

In this moment I couldn't help returning to the mystery of why Devon had joined Mark and Katya's group in the first place. When I asked him about it, Devon said he'd felt he'd had no choice, Mark's was the only group available. I didn't buy that explanation and reminded him that I had asked him before he chose if he understood two groups were available, and he had said he understood. I hadn't left Devon to make his choice until I was confident he understood his choices, that much I knew for sure.

For the first time in our conversation, Devon couldn't make eye contact with me. He looked down and at the wall of painted cement blocks behind us. Without looking at me, he explained he had understood he had a choice, but he had also been confused by the change in groups and having to make a
decision quickly. He also felt that he didn't have a choice and he had to join Mark's group. Devon's contradictory statement made me wonder: did Devon have his own issues with sexual identity? Was an attraction-repulsion dynamic working in him? Whether it was or I was babbling pseudo-psychological nonsense to myself, the only thing I could do was be aware of this possibility.

I told Devon that I wouldn't move him to another group if he felt that he could hang on till the next (and final) time we would change groups for the last five weeks of the semester. When I had planned the course, my intention had been to give class members a chance to have a variety of responses to their writing by working in three different small groups over the course of the sixteen week semester. Now I felt like I was playing a game of musical chairs. I wondered how the rest of the class felt.

Next I mentioned that I could hear him muttering in class. Was he muttering because of Mark? He said he was. I didn't ask about the content of the remarks, but instead told him that he had every right to express himself, that that was what the class was about. However, he needed to find another way to express himself than muttering under his breath, because it was distracting to the class.
I could tell he wasn’t happy to hear this, so I strategized with him about ways to let off some steam other than muttering. I reminded him that he could speak his mind about anything under discussion, but he needed to speak so everybody could hear him, not make remarks under his breath. What about writing his feelings down? Or writing a whole paper about his feelings? After all, it was a writing class. The conversation ended with a small smile from Devon, which surprised and relieved me.

I had cringed internally even as I had made my last suggestion. Write a paper about his homophobic feelings! Was I crazy? Maybe I was a masochist. Why didn’t I just tell Devon I wasn’t going to tolerate his homophobic remarks? Should the classroom support others’ prejudices? What about me—was I just a doormat? Didn’t I have any rights in this classroom? Was I so concerned about what other students wanted that I didn’t tend to my own needs? What about other people in the class who might not want to hear Devon’s tirade, his prejudice, even though I hadn’t seen any signs that others were uncomfortable with Devon’s mutterings?

But if the class was about self-exploration and self-expression, didn’t Devon have the right to write a diatribe? Especially if he had sexual identity issues of his own. At least writing my feelings had kept me sane when I needed to
explore my own sexual identity issues. Then again, my writings had all been private—confided to my journal, not played out in public as both Devon and Mark were doing—and I was referee.
Less than a week later, Mark was back in my office, wanting to have Devon removed from class. I couldn’t believe I was hearing this again—we had gone around about this before. Mark must have been able to see that I had no patience for this, because he rushed into saying that he thought Devon had vandalized his car. That caught my attention.

He explained that as part of a small group discussion on Monday—related to something another group member had written, Mark had described his car and the highly unusual place it was parked. The next day, someone had smashed his windshield. It was going to cost him over three hundred dollars to get it fixed, since his insurance wouldn’t cover it. Money that he didn’t have right now. When he asked around to see if anyone had seen anything, some friends had said they had seen someone whose description matched Devon’s. I asked for the description. Brown hair, medium height, medium build. One person had noticed a right bicep tattoo, but he had not gotten more than a glance.

Before I could point out that description could fit a host of people, both students and non-students, even including the tattoo, since tattoos were popular with both men and women, Mark added that only his small group members had heard him describe his car and knew the unusual place it was parked.
I bit. "Where was it parked?"

It was in a tumbled down garage four blocks from his apartment. It had no front door on it, and its roof, according to Mark, sagged like a two-humped camel's back. The gaps between the boards in the walls were large enough that it snowed lightly on his car. The whole structure was densely covered in vines that draped the entire garage and an ancient cottonwood tree that held up one side. In front of the garage, was a pile of rusty scrap metal Mark had to drive around to get in and out.

"From the outside, even when my car is in there, you can't see anything. You have know the car is in there."

"On the other hand, anyone from around the neighborhood could notice you coming or going, right?"

"Yes, but I've parked there for two months, without any problems. Then I told the small group where my car was parked and that very night my windshield was smashed. And Devon has the Marine Corps emblem tattooed on his right bicep."

While I could see why Mark was concerned, it was also possible that Mark's windshield had been smashed randomly. It was true the parking space was quite out of the way, but it was still more or less outdoors and fifty someones besides Devon could have come upon it by coincidence. Even if Devon had smashed Mark's windshield, Mark didn't have anything more
than these suspicions. But somehow I just didn’t see Devon doing this. Then again, I didn’t imagine anybody being violent unless they went out of their way to suggest it to me by their behavior—an uncommon event in a college classroom.

It also occurred to me that another student in class had a right upper arm tattoo. This person had also authored one of the three virulent responses Mark had gotten when he came out back in the third week of class. In some ways, he was a more disturbing student and a better candidate for violence than sociable Devon. I would have described this student as brooding and sullen long before the issue of vandalism had ever arisen. But a sullen attitude was proof of nothing.

Had Mark reported the this to the police? No, he hadn’t. I was not entirely surprised. I had a sense of what was coming and I was right. A week before, two gay men’s bodies had been found by their car. They had been murdered a few hundred yards from a gay and lesbian bar on the edge of town. Since then, the police had done virtually nothing to solve the murders. There were no suspects. For most of the gay community this confirmed the belief that police served and protected the heterosexual community, but not gays and lesbians, not transgendered people or bisexuals.

I urged Mark to report the incident to the police anyway, but I doubted he would. I also told Mark that I would
talk about the incident and his suspicions with the co-coordinator of the composition program, but that I expected that Devon would stay in the class--there was no direct threat to Mark, no direct interference with his learning.

Mark was angry. "I took this class because I thought you would support me, but you've been no support at all! Whose side are you on? You sound like a bureaucrat. You're more interested in following some damn rules than in protecting me. I shouldn't have to put up with this! I should be able to come out and not have to put up with Devon calling me names under his breath all the time, and not have my windshield smashed. I have the right to be as comfortable and safe in class as anybody who is straight!

I felt horrible. In that moment, I felt I had done nothing at all to help Mark. What support had I provided for him? What protection had I been from Devon? Everything he'd said was justified. I'd thought these same thoughts myself. I was angry, too. The university's policy was no help at all. Or maybe it was a matter of interpretation and I was interpreting things wrong. Or maybe the co-coordinator was not supporting me. How could a policy be so utterly useless?

Even through the haze of my self-recriminations, I could think of things I had done--the numerous long talks in my office, if nothing else. But it all seemed paltry. It left

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me supporting a policy against Mark, when I wanted to be his ally.

I had been no help to Royce either. And while I was thinking about last semester, I had handled Deborah's question badly. What had happened to my own vow to come out to my students? There were only a few weeks left in the semester, and my coming out had evaporated like water in the desert. Was I a coward or what? Didn't I have any strength to my convictions?

"I know you're frustrated. I'm frustrated too. I wish there was a different policy. The existing policy is useless. It's designed to get rid of students who are making threats right in your face, not to handle students who are more subtle than that, but who are still interfering with your learning." Mark looked up at me with surprise in his eyes. This was the first time I had come close to agreeing with him about the dangers in class.

"It's possible that Devon vandalized your car. He's certainly making any class that you open your mouth a tense one. I talked to Devon a class or two ago and he's been better about it. The thing is, I don't think that Devon would smash your windshield. He doesn't strike me as that type." Mark started to protest, but I cut him off. "Even if we assume it wasn't Devon, it could be someone else. There's at
least one other guy in our class with a tattoo on his right bicep."

Mark’s eyes moved into scanning mode. "Jason? Jason!"

I was a schmuck. I had succeeded in making Mark feel even more insecure in class. Now rather than focusing all his fear on Devon, he could multiply it—infinitely. "The point is, it could have been a lot of people, not just Devon. And the other point is," abstruse thoughts were forming themselves into words while I spoke, "the policy covers direct threats because they are easy to prove, easy to document. It doesn’t cover indirect threats because they are almost impossible to prove or document. Do you see what I’m saying?"

"Do you think Devon and Jason know about the policy and are taking advantage of it?"

"No, I don’t think they know about the policy. I think they just know that if they do things outside class, no one will catch them or be able to prove anything. And all of this is assuming Devon smashed your windshield."

"What about Jason?" Mark asked.

"This is my point. The policy is not designed to protect students who are being harassed in non-obvious ways. It’s only designed for obvious situations—where someone comes up and yells a threat in your face in front of a bunch of witnesses. I wish I could help you more Mark, but I can’t."
"The university needs a different policy--one that will actually protect students from the kind of semester I've had. I haven't been able to learn much because I'm so worried."

"Well, if you can think of a new policy that could work--that can be documented, tell me, and I'll tell whoever it takes to get a better policy. In the meantime, we gotta live with this one." I felt a little better. At least Mark understood that I couldn't make the policy be something other than what it was.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you. I've been under a lot of stress and it's getting to me."

I told Mark I understood, and I did. My own stress level had been higher than I liked and it had been going on all semester. That was what wore me out the most--there never seemed to be a let up in the stress.

Mark also told me that he had resigned as a student senator, that he had dropped one of his classes, and that he was getting low grades in two of his other classes. He had one other class, where his grades were solid, and this class. He admitted that he had had an inordinate number of absences, and promised to attend class faithfully and prioritize his schoolwork for the rest of the semester.

That night I couldn't get to sleep. I tossed and turned. The smashed windshield and Mark's angry accusations
came back to me. I couldn’t help feeling that Mark had been right about everything. Although I tried to think of ways to counter his accusations, I was too confused about what was happening. Was I way over-involved with Mark? Using him? Did I lack good boundaries? What did it mean to support a student in his or her coming out process?

When I finally dragged my mind away from endlessly circling on these questions, I thought about how I would put things to the co-coordinator when I saw him. I hadn’t come to any decisions before falling asleep sometime after 3:30 in the morning.

I met the co-coordinator in the hall the next day and we went back to his office. The co-coordinator mentioned that I had been fortunate: I had caught him during the only fifteen minute time slot he was likely to have open all week. He was booked solid. This made the decision of what to say easy.

I outlined the story Mark had told me about his small group and the smashed windshield, including its unusual hiding place. I added the description Mark had of the vandal, admitting it was general, but that it fit. I added that Devon had been making remarks under his breath persistently.

“Do you believe Devon smashed Mark’s windshield?”
"I find it hard to believe that Devon would be a vandal," "but I also find it hard to believe any of my students would be a vandal."

When he asked, I admitted Mark had not told the police, and explained that Mark, like many homosexuals, didn't trust the police. I compared this distrust to the reservations toward police of many women around the issue of rape. I wasn't sure the explanation made any sense to the co-coordinator. I wished I could talk over the whole semester, but there was no way for it to happen in fifteen minutes. Anyway, the co-coordinator was a professor, not a counselor.

"Has Mark been attacked in the halls?", the co-coordinator asked.

"No."

"Is Mark being harassed in class?"

"Devon's constantly makes remarks under his breath."

"Aloud?"

"They're muttered; only nearby students can hear them clearly."

He concluded as I had expected him to--there was no reason to evict Devon from the class.

"The situation sounds tense, but coming out in class was Mark's choice, and he had to have known it wouldn't be easy."
Leaving the co-coordinator's office, I was frustrated. Why hadn't I presented the situation differently—in a way that would show up Mark's fears more strongly? Why hadn't I pressed for Devon to be removed from the class? I had felt that the professor's statement—essentially that Mark had made his bed in the third week of class, now he had to spend the rest of the semester lying in it—was crucial to the whole semester.

Mark felt that he had the right to take the class as an openly gay man, and enjoy the same kind of environment as all the openly heterosexual students. Which story was playing out here? Did a clear-cut answer exist? How had I gotten caught in the crossfire? I spent the rest of the day wrangling between Mark's accusations on the one hand and my training teacher's assessment on the other.

I didn't come up with any answers, and I slept poorly once again, caught by bad dreams from which I never fully woke, but that left me red-eyed and oppressed the next morning. I did feel that I had finally identified one of the important issues of the semester.

I decided to move up by a week the date the groups would change. This would help everyone, not just Devon and Mark. I could tell the women in Devon and Mark's small group were tired of taking on Devon, tired of tension in their group.
suspected that some of the small groups were oblivious to the tension in Mark's group, but at least the nearby groups could also see what was going on. I knew that having Devon and Mark in the same small group was certainly wearing me out. The whole semester was wearing me out.

There were class days when tension was low. Usually these were days when Mark was absent, but some occurred even when both Mark and Devon were in class. On these days Mark was silent, a far cry from the subtle but potent class leader he had been back in January.

There were also tense days--days when we had class discussions and Mark contributed to the talk. These were days of muttered remarks from Devon, despite the strategizing we had done, days when Mark must have felt incredibly frustrated and unsafe. I know that Devon's muttering renewed all my discomfort in the classroom. Despite the rational knowledge that Mark's car could have been attacked by anyone, I found myself watching closely the other virulent tattooed student.

The rest of the students seemed to bounce back more quickly than I did from days when tension ran high. I was glad that they bounced back quickly, or at least appeared to. I had wondered how all the tension was affecting the rest of the class, and prayed that this was not yet another complication I was going to have to deal with.
The quick return to normalcy I took as a sign that they were aware, but able to ignore the tension when it wasn't immediately present. Mark attended fairly regularly—a relief to me because he had racked up the limit of classes that could be missed for the entire semester and we still had several weeks to go.

I was glad that I had a class structure that allowed the class to pretty much run itself. Between Mark, Devon, and my own reactions, I was feeling pretty ragged. Were the remaining students in the class feeling neglected? I reminded myself that I had volunteered for this. I did spend time with other students, it just seemed like it wasn't much because so much of my emotional energy was absorbed with handling the general classroom environment, that indirectly threatening atmosphere.

Mark stuck his head in my office one day, just to let me know, he said, that this was the weekend he was going to come out to his mother and probably his little sister. Come in, I said, and we ended up talking about coming out to family for a long time. Mark had no intention of coming out to his father—they had never been close, and in fact, there had been a long history in his family of his mother, his sister, and Mark not telling his father certain things. These 'things' were situations and events Mark's father was certain to object to,
but that would ultimately be done anyway, although with much greater tension if Mark’s father knew about them.

On the other hand, Mark had always had a close relationship with his mother and younger sister, now eleven years old. The time he had spent in the closet had been rough on Mark because he had not liked lying to his mother and sister, nor had he liked losing a significant amount of his relationship with them. He was looking forward to restoring these relationships, even though he knew his mother would not approve.

“How do you think your mom will react?”

“She’s a devout Catholic. She’ll freak,” he said. He went on to say that he expected that she would be very upset and cry, but he hoped that once she was over her initial reaction, she would get better with it. In addition to her disapproval, Mark was the eldest and the only son. For years Mark’s mother had hinted that he should start giving her grandchildren. She would take this loss quite hard as well.

This statement opened up a discussion detour into Mark’s feelings about children—he wanted them, but knew of no cases where a gay couple had been given custody of a child. We talked about the emotional and legal ins and outs of being a gay parent for a while.
“What about your sister? How will she react do you think?” Mark wasn’t sure he should even tell her—she was only eleven years old.

“But it’s not like it was when I was little,” Mark said. “Kids grow up so much faster these days. They have to.” She already knew about sex, for example. She worshipped the ground Mark walked on, and he wanted to tell her, but he just wasn’t sure that she was old enough to be told. We talked about this for a while, and I could see that Mark’s relationship to his younger sister was a close one.

Anytime he went home, he said, they spent a good deal of time together. They often went down to the pond to horse around, to collect bugs and wild flowers. Mark helped her with her school work and gave her social advice as well. Mark had gone home much more often before he had finally admitted to himself he was gay. Then he had gone home less often, mainly because of his discomfort with actively deceiving his sister and mother.

I had a bad feeling about Mark’s plans to come out. He had already dropped a class—something that hadn’t happened last semester when he had also carried eighteen credits. In my class—a class that he clearly had to the potential to ace—he was jeopardizing his grade through his absences.
Apart from these teacherly concerns, I remembered how painful my own coming out to my family had been—and how long it had taken for those relationships to heal. Most of my family had not had the deep religious convictions of Mark’s family and it had still taken more than a year for these relationships to return to some semblance of normal.

I had made a different choice from Mark. I had chosen not to come out to the members of my family who held strict anti-gay and lesbian religious beliefs. I felt somewhat cut-off from these members of my family, but also felt that disconnection was preferable to open and on-going hostility—especially since all of us were out of the nest, and since I lived several states away from the rest of my family and didn’t see that much of them. But I didn’t feel comfortable with this state of affairs. I just wasn’t brave enough to change it.

Though I had chosen to sacrifice some relationships, I felt that I couldn’t sacrifice others. I had to come out to my mother and older sister. Just like Mark felt—and even the same relationships, mother and sister. When I had this thought, I knew that Mark would come out to his family even though it meant trouble with a capital T. My god, I thought, the strength, the persistence, the foolishness, the courage of
the human heart! I cautioned him as best I could without actively discouraging him from his choice.

The following Monday, many members of the class were upset when I announced we were going to change groups again. Most of the groups liked each other and had no desire to change. The groups grumbled but changed, and I felt bad because if there hadn't been this on-going tension between Mark and Devon, I might have let the groups stay as they were.

Mark missed the following Monday and the Wednesday as well. I suspected that Mark had told his family and that things had not gone well. Finally Mark showed up during my office hours, promising not to miss anymore class, and explaining his absences. I had been right, telling his mother had not gone well at all. Mark's mother had screamed at him, calling him all sorts of names. She had said things to him that, several days later, I could still see had hurt him deeply. The shouting match had gone on until the wee hours of the morning. She had threatened to commit Mark to a mental hospital, suggesting electroshock therapy to snap him out of his homosexuality, or a round of drug treatments. She had threatened to tell his father and had forbid him to tell or even see his little sister.

Mark had finally gone to his bedroom, but had not slept, uncertain what his mother might do, but unwilling to argue
with her anymore about it. The next day, Sunday, his mother had become firm in her plans to have Mark committed. Fortunately, as a devout woman, his mother had also gone to church and after mass had sought solace from a priest.

The priest had been able to persuade Mark's mother not to commit Mark, nor to tell Mark's father, without first bringing Mark to the church for counseling.

Although he had felt dubious, on Monday morning, Mark went. The priest was understanding—a welcome surprise to Mark. Mark had poured out what had happened over the course of the weekend. Even several days later, Mark took a big gulp before telling me he told the priest he was gay. Father's initial acceptance was followed by efforts to get to Mark to commit to counseling sessions aimed at helping Mark with his homosexuality.

I didn't see how the priest's help could lead anywhere except trying to convince Mark that either he was not gay or that he was gay, but should lead a celibate life. Mark hadn't explored what the priest meant by 'help,' but hoped that it meant helping him and his mom to reconcile. Mark told the priest he was afraid his mother would try to have him committed. The priest assured him that his mother wouldn't do it, that she had allowed him, the priest, to counsel them both.
Mark had left the church still not certain his mother would not commit him. Mark nearly broke down in my office, simply trying to get the words out. I was shocked that a mother would want to commit her own child simply for being gay. I wasn't shocked because the idea was new to me: I had met more than one person who had actually been committed and given electroshock treatments. I also had friends who had been beat up by their fathers, ejected from their families, and disowned. Every time it is still shocking. I expect--I want--parents to love their children no matter what. I want that, even though it might be mythical.

Mark's mother had not tried to have him committed, although she still threatened him with it, and promised to tell his father. She constantly chastised him for continuing in his "sick path."

Mark had left home without seeing his sister, without saying good-bye to his mother. When he returned to his apartment, Mark had called home, hoping to at least speak to his little sister, but his mother refused to let her speak to him.

Mark's first absence had been Monday, the day that he had gone to the church and talked with the priest. Mark had returned to town on Tuesday, but had been unable to bring himself to class on Wednesday.
I asked Mark if he felt he could immerse himself in his school work and his part-time job. He didn’t think so, the tension was having the opposite effect on him. He found it difficult to concentrate on anything. He told me that he had dropped one class already and was thinking of dropping another. Should he be dropping this class, he asked.

It made things easier for me that he had raised the issue. I told Mark that he was over the allowable number of absences for the semester. Mark admitted that he’d suspected as much, although he’d actually lost count. He asked me to let him finish the course. He pointed out that he had already taken ten weeks of the course before.

I thought about how to respond. One response was the "these are the rules" speech. If I followed that path, I would say he had made his choices and that coming out had been more important to him than his schooling. I just couldn’t bring myself to play that role. For one thing, Mark was already a very good writer. In addition, he had taken two-thirds of the course already. How many "laps" of Freshman English 2 did it make sense for Mark to take? It seemed clear to me that Mark needed to move on, not spin his wheels in taking this class continuously.

Most important of all, perhaps, I knew from my own experience what Mark was going through. I knew that it would
be terribly disruptive to the rest of his life whenever he chose to tackle these issues. I knew that something major like this would supersede—temporarily—his schooling, and pretty much everything else in his life. I told him he didn't need to drop this class, but that I expected him to do his best to keep up with the class, and that included coming to class faithfully. I wondered what my supervisor would say, if he knew what I was telling Mark. Would he be shocked? Would I be in big trouble if anyone ever found out? I decided that in some cosmic way it just didn't matter what anyone else thought, although it would be easy for me to feel this way now and repent later.

When I heard a knock on my door during my office hours, I expected it to be Mark. It was rare for students to take advantage of office hours, and had Mark not shown up, I would have spent virtually all my office hours without a single student visit. So I was surprised when not Mark, but Katya walked in and sat down.

"Do you have a minute?"

"Sure. Have a seat." She sat, with her head hanging down. She said nothing for a while, so I thought about Katya and what I knew about her. She was a different kind of student. She was American, born not just in the state, but in
the city. What made her different was that her family was Russian. She was the third generation Russian-American, the second generation to be born here. Her first language was Russian, although she spoke English with only the tiniest trace of accent. Her first paper of the semester had been about experiences connected with being Russian-American--how it made her both different and no different from everyone else.

There was a significant population of Russians in town. They had come early in the century--large families all moving to the United States and settling together. They had become citizens, but they had kept their Russian language and customs. They were hard working, scrupulously tidy, and a close knit community within the larger community or the city. Katya dressed like the other kids, although without the designer labels, and she wore her hair in a popular style. Yet her facial features were different from the others in class, and with long thick, dark hair: she looked distinctly Russian.

Katya did her homework without fail, attended faithfully, and seldom spoke in class. While a few students in class had initially made overtures to her, she remained quiet and pretty much to herself, although there were times
that I spotted her in the hallway, laughing with a young man or a girlfriend, also Russian looking.

When she finally looked me in the eye, I could see that she was on the edge of tears. She apologized for having missed so much class lately. I had noticed that Katya had been absent more than once, but I hadn't noticed just how many classes she had missed. I felt bad: obviously, I had been so absorbed with the Mark-Devon situation I had neglected to notice other things. When I looked later at the attendance book, I discovered that she had been absent five times—missing one whole week and then spotty absences after that.

It took a long time, but it finally emerged that she was pregnant—by her fiancé or rather her ex-fiancé. She had been engaged to him until just three weeks ago. It was because they were engaged she had let herself have sex with him. Now she was pregnant. The tears flowed.

Katya had told no one that she was pregnant. In fact, she had told no one but her sister that she was no longer engaged. Her boyfriend—another Russian American—had not told his family he had broken off the engagement either. She had been trying to think how to break the news to her family when she found out she was pregnant. The tears spilled over and for a while I waited, then talked quietly, in a soothing voice. After a bit, the tears subsided, but I fished around
in a desk drawer for tissues, because I could tell this would
be a long conversation and Katya would be crying again before
the conversation would be over.

"Holy Cow! That's a lot to be dealing with," I said.
Katya nodded in agreement, adding she had briefly (but not
seriously) considered suicide.

"You know what has helped me with everything?"

"What?" I asked.

"Mark."

"Mark?" I was a bit surprised.

"Yes. His situation is so much more difficult than
mine. He is so brave, so courageous. I know I could not
handle what he is handling. Every time I get really
depressed, I think about Mark and he keeps me going."

I was amazed by Katya's words. How could she think that
Mark's situation was worse than her own? Her situation
sounded pretty serious to me. How could she think she was
less courageous? To be pregnant as a single woman, and a
college student presented complications enough. To have just
recently and secretly lost her fiancé on top of it,
constituted yet another challenge. Finally, it sounded like,
in her culture, breaking off her engagement was a large enough
issue by itself, without being pregnant before marriage on top
of it. I wondered how she would handle everything.
Distantly, in the back of my head, it occurred to me this was the first time I had ever heard anyone say that Mark's coming out had been beneficial in any way. Of all the ways it might be beneficial, I was glad it was helping another student keep going—to stay sane and functioning.

"I think I will be absent one or two more times," she said. "I think I am going to get an abortion."

"You think?"

"I don't know! It's the only thing I can do! I just think, how can I do that? I have a life inside me, growing within me. Part of me. How can I get an abortion? Do you think abortion is murder?"

How in the world could I answer a question like that?

"What do you think?"

She didn't say anything for a while. "I don't think it is. I think it's a potential life. My older sister had a miscarriage and my sister wanted to have a funeral. Our priest told my sister that because the child had never been alive outside the womb that it really hadn't had a life. There wouldn't be a funeral like there would be if the baby had been born and then died. When my sister's husband said no funeral, my sister asked my parents for a funeral, but they said no too.
Sometimes I think about the future. What if I can’t have anymore children? Or what if I never do get married? Or if someone finds out and I can never get married? Even if I do this, I’ll be thinking my whole life, it would have been however many years old now. I’ll always wonder whether it’s a boy or a girl.” She began crying again, and I handed her a box of tissues, and let her cry, while I tried to get beyond the shock of the whole situation and focus on what help I might be, if any.

“Have you thought about it carefully? I don’t want to tell you what to do—you have to make this decision, but I do want to make sure you have checked out your options.”

She had gone to Planned Parenthood originally for birth control, so she had gone back there for advice; they had discussed all the options. Katya added that she thought the counselor at Planned Parenthood wanted her to keep the baby, but she said the counselor just didn’t understand about Russian culture. She couldn’t let anyone know she was pregnant.

“Back up a minute,” I said. “Did the birth control fail?” It didn’t matter; she was pregnant. Yet I asked anyway, surprised by my question.

“I didn’t always use it; I had a diaphragm and it wasn’t that easy to get in. My fiancé said it spoiled the mood.
Besides, we were engaged. I wouldn't have had sex with him at all, because you can get in so much trouble in my culture—so can he—except that we were engaged. Well, he won't get in as much trouble as me, but he could still get in a lot of trouble if I told. He kind of said that if I loved him, I wouldn't let anything come between us. That is so stupid, but I fell for it. It was only a couple of times. You know how it is."

I didn’t know how it was. I had never had intercourse with a man. I felt deceitful. Katya assumed I was heterosexual, assumed there was a bond of common experiences, common concerns between us: the concerns of heterosexual women with preventing pregnancy while enjoying a sexually active life. This was definitely not the time to come out.

"What broke off the engagement?" This didn’t matter either: it was done. But I felt like I needed to have as complete an understanding as I could get.

"First my fiancé said we should wait a year. I think he was afraid of the commitment. Then, he said maybe we should date other people. I think he had met someone new. I heard later on there was someone else. Then." She cried again, and I handed her back the box of tissues. After a few minutes, she dried her eyes and took a deep breath. "Then he came to me and said he had to break off our engagement. That it just
wasn't real and we couldn't go through with it. Neither of us has told our families."

"Can he do that?" I asked.

"He'll get in trouble, but not that much because sometimes it happens, it can't be helped."

I digested this for a bit, and then asked, "What makes you choose abortion?"

"In my culture, a woman cannot have a child out of wedlock." Her eyes grew large. "I know that in your culture, I mean regular American culture, it's not accepted either. But in a lot of families, they get over it. Or even if it's horrible, it's not that horrible. But in my culture, not only is a woman ruined, so is her whole family. My father would lose his restaurant. All my uncles and aunts would be humiliated, my grandparents, my cousins, even my distant relatives. If I were to let my family know I was pregnant, I would be disowned. No one would speak to me, I would be thrown out, forgotten, no one would ever speak my name again."

"There are programs---" I started to say, but it was clear that Katya couldn't even contemplate the possibility of being thrown out of her family. I wasn't sure I could either, if I had been in her shoes. It didn't occur to me till I was getting into bed that night that I had considered the possibility of being thrown out of my family. It had been
horrendously painful even allowing the subject into my mind—and I had been in my mid-twenties and on my own for a few years.

"Are you sure you would be thrown out, or do you just fear you would be?"

"I am sure," she rolled her eyes. "You just don't understand my culture." She was right about that. I knew virtually nothing about Russian or Russian-American culture. I accepted what she told me; I couldn't do otherwise.

"What about your ex-fiancé? Have you told him? What does he think?"

"He agrees I should get an abortion. He offered to come with me, but I am so hurt by him. I don't want him around me." She paused for a minute. "Do you really think I should do it?"

This whole conversation was way over my head. How had I gotten into it? "There's no way I can answer that question. I do think that you should be as certain as you can be before you decide on anything."

"Well, I have to decide really fast," she said, "I'm already five weeks along." Another little shock. "I wish I could talk to my mother and get her advice. But there's no way I could. Besides I already know what she would say."
"If you could somehow tell your mother, without her going ballistic on you, what would her advice be?" I asked.

"Without her going ballistic?" I nodded. "She'd say get the abortion. She'd say think about your family and don't punish them. She'd say never ever do anything like this ever again."

Katya cried again for a while, before she came back to the question. "What do you think I should do?"

"Katya, I can't make up your mind for you. You have to decide this." I was extremely glad for a responding technique I had learned in my teacher training class—say back. "I hear you saying that you have to get an abortion. It's the only option you have discussed since you came. At the same time, I hear you resisting it. Maybe you feel like you have no choice, you have to get an abortion, but at the same time, you don't want an abortion, you just can't find any other option."

Katya looked up at me and moved to rise from her chair. "You're right, that's exactly how I feel. I just keep going around in circles about this. I need to make up my mind and do it!" She started toward the door.

I was frightened. I didn't want any responsibility for Katya or the decision she made about her pregnancy. And I wasn't responsible, exactly—but while I wasn't responsible, I
was involved. "Look, I don’t want you to rush off. I don’t want you to think I’m trying to get rid of you. I just can’t tell you what to do."

"No, I understand. I just haven’t been able to make up my mind to do it. Now I know I need to."

How had I suddenly become so deeply involved in this young woman’s life? What had I done? I wanted to wave a wand and make the whole situation go away. Make Katya not pregnant in the first place. I wanted her to stay, not to leave. I had the feeling that we were somehow out of time here in my office (and yet we were hyper-aware of time, too), and the moment she left the world and all its consequences would come rushing back to meet her. I had the desire to protect her. I knew rationally it was silly, but the feeling was there anyway and strong. She had returned the chair she had been sitting in for our whole conversation. Now she got up, grabbing her backpack and walked out the door, gone too quickly for me to take in.

I sat for a long time, thinking about choices we feel we have and we don’t have. Choices that change the course of our lives. I thought about Mark, too, and somehow his situation seemed less pressing, less important. One way or another he would finish the semester, with or without Devon’s muttered comments. He would replace his smashed windshield.
At the same time, it seemed that Mark and Katya were the same—both faced social ostracism, both faced the possibility of losing their family. But with Katya, there was something more, something different. Mark's life was still his life, nothing beyond his own life and that of his family was affected. But if Katya's life was already being shaped by this new potential life—and if she chose to continue the pregnancy, her life would be forever altered by the presence of this new life, whether she chose to raise the child herself or gave it up for adoption.

On Monday and Wednesday the following week, Katya was absent. On Friday she came to class, looking somber and pale, but otherwise surprisingly ordinary. She remained quiet for the rest of the semester, although she was again absent a week later. When she returned to class, she stopped by my office and we talked. Katya told me that she had had the abortion, her girlfriend had gone with her. It had gone okay. Her most recent absence had been because her ex-fiancé had finally told his family that they were no longer engaged. There had been an uproar at home, which had just reinforced to Katya that the abortion was imperative.

It was funny, she said, she had been so hurt and so worried when her ex-fiancé had broken off their engagement. Now she felt like all of that was old and far away. She no
longer really cared about him. Now she was angry at him, really angry. But at least she no longer had to pretend to be normal around home. She could let herself show how she felt—both angry and depressed. She sounded depressed, but she also sounded relieved. Once she had made the decision, it had gotten better. Doing it—getting the abortion had been rough. But now that it was over, she felt so much relief. She felt she had her life back. She thanked me for the help repeatedly, saying how much it meant to talk with someone—someone who also faced these issues. Her thanks just stirred up my own guilt.
I was still trying to sort out my own feelings about Katya's situation—and the way that she thought I was a heterosexual woman—when I started hearing new gossip through the lesbian and gay community grapevine.

Soon after he had returned from the weekend when he came out to his mother, Mark had become very active in the UGLS and in gay political activism. He had been reading The Advocate, a national gay magazine, about the efforts of activists across the country to end the U.S. military's ban on gays in the military. Since he had come out to himself while in the Army, it didn't surprise me to learn that Mark had gotten fired up about the issue.

Across the country, college student groups like the UGLS were adopting similar forms of protest against the ban. The strategy was simple. Many colleges had policies which prohibited any person or group from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation. Since ROTC programs discriminated against lesbians and gays, activists pointed this out to college administration and demanded that ROTC change its policy by a specified date. If ROTC didn't change its policy, it should either be removed from campus or lose its accreditation.

Since there was an ROTC program on campus, Mark thought it would be a good idea for the UGLS to join the national push
to end the ban. Fueled by Mark's enthusiasm and effective arguments, the UGLS drew up a letter and sent it to the administration. To draw public attention to the issue, the UGLS decided to hold a demonstration and "kiss-in" in front of the ROTC building.

Mark and his gay apartment mate went to the protest, along with about 20 others. After walking slowly in a circle in front of the military sciences building carrying placards with slogans against the ban, and making speeches, lesbian couples kissed, and Mark and his apartment mate held hands. Mark and others were interviewed both by the campus newspaper and by the city newspaper. TV cameras shot footage of the protesters walking with their placards for the six o'clock news, and interviewed Mark among others.

Mark was again absent for two class days following the protest, but he caught up with me during my office hours and again we talked for a long time. I had not attended the protest myself, and couldn't have if I had wanted to because I was teaching at the time of day they were holding the protest. I had read about the protest in the newspaper, and heard that it had been shown on television, but Mark had more to say: many of the UGLS protesters had received numerous rude and threatening phone calls for several days afterward.
Mark himself was receiving especially threatening phone calls, including death threats. At first Mark had moved out of the apartment and stayed with other friends. He didn't want to report the threats to the police because he didn't think the police would help him because he was gay. I understood his reluctance, and even felt it was to some degree justified. Yet there were no alternatives. To circumvent the police left nonheterosexuals with nowhere to turn.

In this situation though, Mark was too frightened to keep hiding out. Several of the protesters had received death threats the day of the protest, and even the next day, but for Mark, the death threats had been different. The same male voice called persistently for more than a week. Each day he left different messages. One day he described the shrubbery around Mark's apartment in detail and explained all his alternative hiding places.

Another day he recited in detail Mark's schedule for leaving and returning to his apartment each day of the week. Further calls reviewed the weapons the caller planned to use and his knowledge of the weapons. Eventually Mark had called the police. Because the caller's plan for killing Mark was so detailed, his calling so persistent, his plan viable, the police had assigned a 24-hour guard to Mark's apartment.
I was stunned that Mark was getting death threats. I chastised myself for my reaction: I had heard too many people's stories—and had too many acquaintances who had been bashed, electroshocked, or thrown out of their homes—to be very surprised. Yet having it happen to Mark brought it into my life, onto the campus, the ivory tower, the cloistered halls of academe, place of the nourished illusion of difference: not the 'real world.'

By this time I felt I could predict what was coming next and I was right. Mark said he suspected that Devon might be the one leaving the threats. In fact, when the police had asked Mark if he had any idea who might be behind the threats, he had immediately named Devon. Once again Mark asked me if there was any way I could remove Devon from the class.

I was not at all surprised that Mark felt Devon was behind the threats. From the perspective of direct threats, the situation in class hadn't changed, there was nothing I could do. Although Mark said the police had promised to investigate, I didn't think they took Devon to be a serious suspect, or they would have acted—I hoped. Nonetheless, my assessment of Devon had been more conservative than Mark's all semester.

Mark was right that Devon could be behind the threats. Devon was certainly upset about homosexuality in general and
had an antipathy for Mark, but I didn’t think—or didn’t want
to think—he had smashed Mark’s windshield. Nor did I think
he would go so far as to stalk Mark, and plan to murder him.

On the other hand, as an Marine, Devon had been trained
to kill. Devon had been trained in the garrote—strangling
someone using a wire or a cord. Devon had mentioned this in
class one day—and this was a method for killing Mark that had
been named by the caller.

While I didn’t think Devon was stalking Mark, I didn’t
have any certainty that he wasn’t. I didn’t know Devon—or
any of my students—well enough to say what he—or they—might
be capable of. It occurred to me that while Devon had been by
far the most vocal in his resistance to Mark’s homosexuality,
there had been two other students—Jason and another male
student—whose responses to Mark’s coming out paper had been
scary. These two students were just as good candidates for
leaving threats as Devon. Perhaps their silence made them
better candidates—Jason and his sullen disposition came to
mind again. My earlier questions were revived: Had Jason
smashed Mark’s windshield? Having gotten away with that, had
he now escalated into stalking Mark and threatening his life?

The death threats scared me. They alarmed me. I felt
out of my depth. How should I handle this situation? I was
uncomfortable thinking of class members in terms of their
potential for violence. And what if I was wrong and Devon was the one behind all these incidents, as Mark believed? Or Jason? Or the other student? Or someone else who had decided to escalate his disapproval of homosexuals? I knew that Mark felt both frightened and helpless. Although Mark had had his phone number changed and had gotten an unlisted number, unless the police caught the caller, Mark could go on with this threat on his life indefinitely. Police protection could not go on for more than a few days; it was simply too expensive.

When I pointed this out to Mark, he agreed. In fact, he was cynical. He didn't think the police were actually very interested in his case. They hadn't interviewed very many people and seemed inclined to let the whole thing drop. Since the police hadn't called me to talk about Devon at all, I suspected that Mark's judgment was on target.

After we had talked about the death threat some more and I had told Mark that there was still no reason to remove Devon from the class, appealing as that seemed, we gave up talking about Devon, the death threats, and the fear Mark was living in. It was too scary for either of us to talk about for very long, too frightening to keep our attention on. Mark asked about his grade in the class because of his new absences.

It was difficult to switch from talking death threats to talking grades and attendance, and I wondered fleetingly if
Mark had anticipated this and was using it to give himself an advantage in talking to me. Then I realized my thinking was absurd: Mark was preoccupied with things that were far more important than ways to psych out the English teacher. But the threats did incidentally give Mark some leverage in talking with me: how do you tell someone whose house is under 24 hour police protection that they should have come to class anyway?

Still, I tried to set aside the death threats and decide what to do in regard to Mark's grade. The effort was futile. Objectivity was an illusion; I knew that. Sometimes, it was a useful illusion. Unfortunately, objectivity's usefulness had disappeared a long time ago. Had it been a few short weeks ago I had told Mark not to drop this class? I had felt compelled to not let Freshman English 2 be a stumbling block for Mark, since he was already an able writer, since he had already substantially taken the class--and had substantially taken the class once before. But that had been about four absences ago.

I understood what was behind the absences--as I had understood Katya's absences--but I also felt compelled to come back to the question of what Mark had learned from the class. Mark hadn't learned much from my class. He had been absent too often from my class to improve his writing skills significantly. Who was I kidding?! Even if Mark's attendance
had been perfect, was there any way he could have learned in
this environment? There was too much tension, too much going
on. From the point of view of self-expression—understanding
its benefits and costs, I suspected that Mark and the whole
class—including Devon and myself—had learned a great deal.
Where was supposed to be the basis of a grade? I didn’t know
what to do.

I adopted a stern voice, hoping that Mark wouldn’t laugh
in my face, and told him that if he attended faithfully, did
all the work, and made excellent contributions to the class
discussions, I would minimize the penalty for his absences.
If he had even a single additional absence, the deal was off.
Mark didn’t laugh. He looked as serious as I was hoping I
looked, and agreed to the conditions.

For the next three weeks, Mark lived up to the bargain.
It struck me that three weeks in a row was the best attendance
Mark had had since he came out in class. Then it happened:
the day before the last day of class, Mark was absent again.
What was I going to do now? I felt I had no choice, much as I
hated to do it, but to fully penalize Mark for his absences.
I hated being in this position. I didn’t really want to
penalize Mark. On the other hand, how could I avoid it? How
much of all that had happened was my fault? The result of my
ignorance and allegiance to university rules?
Mark returned to class on Friday, the last day of the semester. At least he had his work done, and he contributed to the discussion in meaningful ways. I was hoping he would show up at my office hours and explain himself, and eventually, he did.

He looked pale and tired. There were dark rings around his eyes. He sat in the chair across from me and supported his head with his hand. His natural vitality was gone.

Things had reached the crisis point with his family around his having come out to them. In the weeks since Mark had initially come out to his mother, he had been going back home each weekend to meet with the priest. At first the sessions with Father had been very helpful. Mark hadn't realized, he said, how all the stress and tension had been weighing on him, not just from his family, but the whole semester.

"I think if I were doing it again, I'd do it differently," he said.

For a few seconds I feared he'd say he wouldn't come out. I was afraid that I'd done such a poor job that he'd decided that coming out was a mistake.

"I would still come out," he explained, and I felt relieved, "but I'd do it differently."
I made a mental note to ask Mark how he'd do it differently, but didn't interrupt his explanation of what had caused his latest and last absence.

"Anyway, eventually Father started telling me that I was responsible for all the turmoil and problems in my family. And that I wasn't really gay, just confused." Mark made a face that was a cross between incredulity and disappointment. "He wanted me to confess my sins and repent from being gay."

Mark had explained that he didn't think that being gay was a sin, that God had made him this way, but the priest wouldn't listen. Eventually Father had reminded Mark that he was in a state of sin, and that unless he expressed remorse and swore to abandon this lifestyle, Mark could never take holy communion and he would go to hell.

Mark tried to explain to the priest how he had struggled against recognizing his homosexuality for years, but had finally had to acknowledge it. Even after he had admitted that he was gay, it had taken him a long time to accept himself, to believe that he could still be a decent human being. The years when Mark had believed he was doomed had been dark ones--painful, self-punishing. Mark had finally put that destructive way of being behind him.

"I told him, I tried to explain that I was not against the church, and that I wasn't against counseling, but I would
not take part in counseling aimed at 'curing' me or getting me to live celibate. Can you imagine that? I don't think he understood though, because priests are celibate. I don't know."

The priest must have called Mark's mother immediately after the session was over, because when Mark drove into his parents' driveway, his father was standing on the front porch. He shouted that Mark was no son of his, and that he could just go to hell. Mark's father told him never to return and never to speak to any of the family.

He had wanted to go in the house and talk about it with his parents, but they wouldn't even let him on the porch. Mark didn't know what his sister had been told—he was certain it was not that he was gay. He suspected that his parents had said that he was living in sin and that he refused the counseling of the Father. She had shouted at Mark in angry tones—why didn't he quit doing this so that everything could be okay again? Why was he doing this? Sin was wrong; he should listen to Father.

Mark had left, and driven around in the country for hours, before finally running out of gas near the outskirts of the city. He had cried the whole time. Eventually he got gas, and drove back to his apartment, arriving in the wee
hours of the morning. He hadn't slept until sometime the next afternoon.

I listened to Mark but his words came to my ears from a long way away. It was too devastating. I couldn't let myself think about losing my family's love. Tears welled up in my eyes, but didn't brim over. I told him not to worry about his grade, to not worry about anything. I almost told him not to think, I wanted so much to ward off this latest blow.

It was May, the end of my first year in the Ph.D. program. I remembered my first weeks at the university. A new state, a new city, a new level of education, a new program and a new philosophy about teaching writing. I had felt excitement; I had hope. Finally I would do the kind of teaching I had wanted to do back when I had been working toward my Master's degree. That had been a mere nine months ago.

Now I felt emotionally swamped, yet simultaneously emotionally drained. And dog-tired. I felt powerless; that I'd used any power I had to mess things up. I didn't want to punish myself for everything that gone wrong this semester—or even decide what had gone wrong. I didn't want to think at all for a while. Perhaps Mark knew how I felt because he said nothing for a while, then stood, slung his backpack over his shoulder and left my office. Slowly, I packed up my backpack.
and locked the door. I hoped that in a little while I'd turn numb.

Down on the ground floor, I could see the late Spring afternoon waiting for me just outside the building doors. Soft spring grass, a shade too full of life to last more than a few days, and tender new shoots on the trees. The bright sun outside made the dimness of the hallway that much darker.

I walked toward the patch of green. With my hand on the door, I ran into Devon entering the building. We stopped, but I kept my hand on the partially open door.

Devon just wanted to let me know, he said, that he had just come out of the Marines and this had been his first semester in college. I had known this all semester, and I simply waited for Devon to get his thought out. In the beginning he had been afraid that he couldn't handle college. Now he felt he could handle it.

Having a student like Mark in class hadn't been easy on him, he continued, and at first he had been angry with me. But he eventually realized that I couldn't be responsible for Mark coming out in class. I had simply taught the class and I couldn't help it that Mark had chosen to come out.

It sounded like he was forgiving me for . . . what? For allowing Mark to come out? I reminded myself that I wasn't going to think.
It wasn't something I could have foreseen and prevented, he said. Having a student like Mark couldn't have been easy on me either, and he thought I was a good teacher.

I felt too many things at once. I was angry with Devon for his patronizing attitude. For making me feel claustrophobic all semester. For assuming that I shared his homophobia. For living in a simplistic black and white world. But he was also heaping coals on my head. If had come out, as I had said I was going to, then I wouldn't be standing here now, listening to his homophobia.

If he only knew I was a lesbian! If he knew how much having Mark in class had meant to me. That I felt guilty, that I had let down Mark. That I had been hurt by his homophobia. That I had wanted to like him, and some part of me did, and some part of me resented him. If he knew all this would he be extending his forgiveness to me, telling me I was a good teacher after all? Hah!

If I had come out, Devon might really have been challenged to grow beyond his black and white thinking. Or maybe not. Maybe it would have made absolutely no difference. Maybe the class would truly have erupted into a free-for-all. Even now, when I was exhausted, I couldn't avoid the internal argument. I was still speculating on what might have been.
If I had had any energy at all, I might have laughed at the irony of Devon’s remarks. Instead, I said I was glad he had decided he would stay in college, and walked out the door.

I still don’t know whether Devon was stalking Mark or not. I know that I don’t want to think Devon was stalking Mark, that he had smashed Mark’s windshield, that he had left death threats on Mark’s answering machine. And really there is no reason for me to believe Devon had been the one to do these things. It could have been someone from outside of class; it could be that Mark’s windshield was a random act of vandalism that just happened at a time when other events were going in Mark’s life that made it seem like stalking.

Perhaps it was more likely to be one of the two other students who wrote virulent responses to Mark’s coming out piece. Their silence makes them better candidates for stalking than Devon. The fact that Devon was so vocal in his objections to Mark makes me think that he dissipated his feelings through muttering in class, and through talking with me in the hall, and probably through talking about Mark with his buddies, and so forth.

But even though the two students who were just as virulent in their responses to Mark were just as good candidates, I seldom entertain the notion that either one of them could have been harassing Mark. In fact, looking back on
that semester, while at one level I believed Mark, at another level, I seldom allowed myself to truly believe Mark. I never saw Mark’s smashed car windshield, and I think that when I talked with him about it, I was seeking a way to dismiss the incident.

I didn’t want to face the reality that some people feel that it’s okay to harm others—for whatever reason, but especially because they are not heterosexual. If I admitted that Mark was a target, it meant that I could be a target, too. I am no different from Mark.

I also know that as a teacher, I don’t want to discover violence, criminality, hatred, or prejudice in my students. I want to believe that they are free from beliefs, habits, and conflicts that would lead to hatred and violence.

I remember that in the same semester that Mark was a student of mine, I had a peculiar student in my other class. His name was Tommy—an odd name for a well muscled young man of about 24: it sounded like a little boy’s name. Yet, despite the age, muscle, and five o’clock shadow there was something little-boyish about him. In the tiny movements of his face I fancied a vulnerable boy, half hiding from, half peeking out at the world.

Tommy routinely hinted to me that he held some secret. For example, one time when I asked him if he would have time
to get caught up on a missed homework assignment and keep up with the current work as well, he had smiled lopsidedly and responded, "Time is no problem. I've got plenty of that."

Tommy also hinted at a terrible temper, something he regretted but couldn't seem to change.

In a one-on-one conference in class he said, "If you really knew me, you would be blown away." He said the same to the class one day, and both times I felt challenged: I dare you to ask me what my secret is. He wanted the titillation of seeing all of us shocked, I think, but also he wanted to see us not be shocked, and instead be accepting. If we could accept him, it would be a big help somehow—help not to carry around his secret, help living with whoever he was or whatever he had done.

I ignored Tommy's private challenges. I felt baited and refused to rise to it. When he baited the class, I ignored this, too, mainly from not knowing how to handle the situation and not being prepared. I could have guessed, though, that he would eventually come out with it.

One day during class discussion Tommy again tantalized us with hints, and this time I had the sense that he would keep pushing until his secret came out. There was no way we would escape knowing what he wanted to tell us. I asked Tommy if he was willing to tell us his secret. He responded with an
elaborate maybe—which irritated me because I knew he was just toying with me and the class. I told him that the class needed to move on; I'm sure he could hear the irritation in my voice.

"I'm doing eighteen months in jail. I'm let out each day to come to this class. After it's over I have to go right back to jail."

The class was shocked into complete silence by his revelation. I was stunned myself. Despite his numerous hints, I hadn't expected this. Even while all the little comments were adding up in my head and I was moving toward an "aha!" conclusion about the nature of his crime, one of the students asked if he would say what he was in for. At this point, I wanted to derail the conversation, but it was too late. The question had been asked. Besides, we were all too curious not to know. Perhaps the class had a right to know, since Tommy had brought it up. He said he didn't mind, but figured the student would regret asking. He had beaten up and knifed someone, "a guy who pissed me off." He had been arrested for assault with a deadly weapon, but had actually been convicted for a lesser charge.

He could go a long time without any problem, he said, but he knew sooner or later he would blow his stack. He also admitted that he wouldn't "take any guff off anyone"—not even
about little things, and the cops had done him a favor, although he hadn’t felt that way before he went to jail.

There was more silence and then someone asked what had led up to the fight, and whether he had really stabbed the guy or whether it was more a case of a regular fist fight getting out of hand.

Tommy described a “slow burn” started by a guy at a party with a “shitty attitude.” Although the guy had never spoken to Tommy, Tommy had eventually flown at the guy with sheer, out-of-control hatred. He knew he needed to get a hold of his temper, he just didn’t know how and he wasn’t sure he could.

All the way through his explanation, his mood had seemed to be shifting. By turns he was amused by the class’ shock and by mine, and yet ashamed of his behavior and where it had landed him. He seemed to need our acceptance of him despite his actions, and yet to fear asking for it. Through all of it, it was obvious that he loved being the center of attention.

Despite the numerous hints, I hadn’t allowed myself to suspect anything about Tommy. I felt embarrassed, in retrospect, to realize the extent of my denial. Perhaps if I had been willing to recognize what Tommy hinted at, it
wouldn't have had to become a whole class discussion. Who knows, maybe it would have anyway.

In either case, this experience made me aware of how I didn't want to acknowledge the uncomfortable or scary, the potentially violent. Somewhere along the way I had lost my sense that even if the world was violent, there would be no violence in the classroom. I felt I rubbed shoulders with violence as I moved through the classroom; I felt too vulnerable to bring it to the surface.

When I look back at this semester, I often think about Tommy in connection with Mark, although it wasn't until recently I realized this. I think about how much I wanted to deny, water down, dismiss, or chalk up to exaggeration all that was uncomfortable and scary with Mark: those students who disapproved of homosexuality and those whose disapproval was virulent—and the fact that they totaled more than half the class; Devon's constant mutterings; the smashed windshield; the death threats, (both before the semester began and following the ROTC protest); Mark's family's rejection of him because he was gay. I wanted to erase all of it. All through the semester, as Mark told me about new fears, new incidents for concern, my reactions had been silently undercoated with my desire for the unpleasant go away. I didn't know I was doing this at the beginning of the semester, but at some
point I realized I was not taking Mark as seriously as I should because I felt scared, threatened. It was Tommy who made me aware of the game my mind was playing. I needed to deny, soft-pedal, water down, dismiss, in order to endure, to get through the semester.

After the semester was over, I felt riddled with guilt. I had gambled Mark’s physical safety and emotional well-being in order to perpetuate an illusion of safety for myself. It had been sheer luck that nothing had happened to Mark beyond a smashed windshield and four months of living in fear of something worse. Mark had chosen to come out, but I had made choices, too. Regardless of particular identity, whether it was Devon or someone else (in class or out of class), there was a person (or perhaps there were people) upset enough to commit acts of violence against Mark’s property and to threaten Mark’s life because he was not heterosexual, and I was not willing to really acknowledge this and the full danger of it.

Perhaps the murder of the two gay men earlier in the year contributed to my sense of fresh, immediate danger. Maybe it should have had the opposite affect on me—making me more wary for Mark, for the whole class.

Immediately after my last class dispersed, I felt oddly depressed. I went to my office and wrote about it. I
realized I felt ashamed of how I had acted and conducted the class in regard to Mark. I also felt relieved it was over and felt guilty about that. I decided I didn’t want to think about my fear, my shame or my relief. I quit writing and packed up my knapsack. I wanted to forget. Forget Mark, forget the lesbian professor who had recommended my class to Mark and who would undoubtedly be ashamed of how I had conducted myself, forget Devon.

This was when I admitted to myself for the first time that I was not going to come out to my students and that at some level my not coming out had nothing to do with the student-centered classroom, or forcing my agenda on my students. It had nothing to do with privacy or relevance or anything else. It had to do with fear. Pure, simple, gut-quivering fear.

Fear that made me break out in a cold sweat when I heard students say ‘kill all the fucking faggots’, the homos, perverts, dykes, the queers. Nightmare fear, crying fear. Half the class disapproved of homosexuality and three members of the class disapproved strongly enough to call names, to instantly transform liking into wishing a person dead. Basic, animal instinct fear.

Deborah and her innocent wondering didn’t matter anymore. Royce and his attempted suicide didn’t matter.
anymore. My future students who were something other than simply heterosexual, or who had a cousin or friend, a brother who was gay. They didn’t matter. The logical argument— that as long as we don’t reveal who we are, we are vulnerable to intimidation, to attack, that we are victims waiting for the inevitable— didn’t matter.

Beneath good intentions, beneath my beliefs about the world, beneath career aspirations, social and political awareness, beneath pedagogical theory and practice lived fear. It became my unacknowledged companion, because my shame kept me from admitting it to anyone for a long time.
CHAPTER FOUR
I was clearing last year's debris from my desk on the first day of the fall semester, when Mark stuck his head through my doorway.

"Hello."

"Hi, come on in." I looked him over. He looked the same as he had when I had last seen him, yet different. He sat in the same dusty, overstuffed chair he had all last Spring, while I puzzled on the change. He looked older, I decided. This thought and his presence awakened all my guilt.

We sat in silence for a while. Maybe he felt as awkward as I did, sitting in these familiar and painful places again. I decided I would break the ice. I began with the Support Phone—a new organization—a telephone line for youth questioning their sexual identity. I had volunteered eagerly and only afterward discovered that Mark was the originator and moving force behind the idea. The Support Phone had only gotten into full swing a few days before the semester began.

During the training classes a month before, I'd heard rumors that Mark had been offered the Assistant Director position. With his talents, I wasn't at all surprised by the offer. When a couple of fellow trainees asked me if I thought Mark would accept, I simply said I didn't know what Mark intended to do. They looked disappointed that I hadn't shared my insider information with them. A week later another
trainee and a couple of friends asked me what I thought Mark would do. I said the same thing—and realized that Mark had attained some kind of celebrity status.

I heard rumors he was certain to accept, and then that he had accepted. I think I was the only person who wasn't startled when Mark bowed out of the Support Phone almost before it was established.

I knew Mark well enough to figure that he was handling his sexual identity the way that was easiest for him to handle everything in his life: by being a leader and organizer in relation to it. His natural talents had been enhanced by the wave of coming out energy that Mark had been riding since last fall when he had spontaneously come out at the student senate meeting.

I also believed Mark wasn't at the place in his own life where he could support others who had issues around their sexual orientation. If anything, he was more likely to make use of the Support Phone.

So now, since Mark seemed to reluctant to speak first, I asked Mark how celebrity felt.

"A burden," he said. "Were you surprised when I turned down the Assistant Director job?"
"No. I figured you’ve got enough on your plate. Besides there are probably times when you feel like you’d like someone to talk to yourself.”

He looked grateful for the understanding, and added that it would be too awkward for him to use the Support Phone since he was its founder. That was why he had bowed out of it completely, despite the fact that his closest friends and other leaders in the community had practically begged him to stay.

I felt bad for Mark. Most people just saw a talented leader and organizer. Organizing the protest against the campus ROTC in the Spring had brought him kudos from the “out” and active bisexual, lesbian, and gay students on campus. The Support Phone had sealed Mark’s reputation on campus and brought him kudos from the larger community.

The rep was deserved—but came packaged with the assumption that Mark must be exempt from the same complex and painful coming out issues as everyone else. He wasn’t exempt. Nor did he have any more insight about how to handle his own coming out issues than the next person.

As if he had read my mind, Mark mentioned that his family was still a source of stress, and that he and his apartment-mate, with whom he had held hands at the ROTC protest in April, were no longer seeing each other. So they
had been more than roommates. It didn't matter anymore. Mark had moved into an apartment of his own. He felt it was time to buckle down and focus, time to get on with his life. I felt that in only five minutes time, our conversation had come to a low point that encapsulated all of last semester's frustrations and failures.

I couldn't help but be struck by parallel Marks. A year ago, this young man had walked through this same doorway a stranger to me, bursting with naive enthusiasm to change the world's attitude about sexual identity. I had been pretty naive myself. Probably still was, if I only knew it. I couldn't help wondering who this new Mark was, perched on the edge of my dog-eared and dusty easy chair, a year older and no longer so naive. And who was I?

"Weren't you planning on taking a course with Joe Morton?" Mark asked me.

I was puzzled by the turn of the conversation. Joe Morton was a professor of Communication and one of the three "out" professors on campus. "Yes," I said and remembered a conversation from last Spring when we had talked about how many classes we had left to take. "I'm taking a class with him this semester, 'Social Change Movements in the Twentieth Century.'"

"Would you help me get into his class?"
"Huh? It's a split level class—open to seniors and
grad students. I have no idea how full it is."

"But I'm still a junior."

"Really?"

"Two credits short."

I was surprised by Mark's request, and this must have
shown on my face, because Mark launched into an explanation.

He had benefited, he said, from having taken classes,
both from the lesbian professor, and (he hesitated for a
moment) from me. He named a few of the things he had learned
from the lesbian professor's class, and I felt my face flush.

All my feelings of having let Mark down in critical ways
returned on a tide of guilt.

"I've learned a lot from both of you, but I feel like
it's time for me to have a gay professor. While we have a lot
in common, there are ways that we're different, just as men
and women, let alone as gays and lesbians."

I nodded.

"It's time for me to work with a man and learn from
him."

"What can I do?"

"You know Joe."

"I met him once." By coincidence we had both served on
a panel of undergraduates, graduate students and tenure track
professors, talking about academic transitions. We had each advocated for greater outreach to diverse students of all kinds. We had chatted with each other afterward, and I had come out to Joe. I felt reasonably sure Joe would remember me. In fact, I wondered if Joe would act differently toward me as a student in his class. Would I be taking advantage of Joe if I asked for Mark to be let in?

But how could I turn Mark down? Didn’t I owe him something after he had endured so much because of my fear and ignorance last semester? I felt tempted to tell him ‘yes’ without even thinking about it. On the other hand, it had to be a bad idea to do something out of guilt. Even through my guilt, I knew it. I didn’t want to admit to Mark just how guilt-ridden I felt, but he must have been able to read my conflict.

“What do you want the class for?” Mark asked.

“Like you, I thought it’d be good to work with a gay professor--broaden my perspective. I figure two non-heterosexual professors in a lifetime isn’t going overboard or anything!” Then I got down to the real reason. “And I want to do a project--if I can talk Joe into it.”

“All I’m asking is that you tell him about me and see what he says. If I go to him, I’m a stranger and a junior. But he knows you. Besides, this is my last chance to take a
class with him. After this semester I have to take 18 credits of required classes so I can graduate and get on with my life."

"Okay. We'll try it." No sooner were the words out of my mouth than doubts flooded in. What was I getting myself into? I didn't really know this professor. What made me think I might have any leverage with him? What if he felt I was presumptuous? What if he didn't remember me?

Mark smiled broadly, and sat back in the easy chair. His doubts were over: mine just beginning. Maybe when we got to his office, Joe wouldn't be there. The more I thought about the possibility, the more relieved I felt.

"Let's go see him right away," I said.

"Great! You introduce me, and I'll do the rest."

Mark and I walked together across campus; stopping on the way to pick up override forms. I knocked lightly on Joe's door, then, with Mark urging me, knocked again, louder. The seconds we waited felt long. Almost immediately, Joe opened his door to us. He was tall and broad shouldered. He wore a checked sportcoat with suede elbow patches. His hairline receded and thinned into bald in front, but I knew a long, thin ponytail fell down to the middle of his back.
I could tell that Joe didn’t remember me, then recognition flashed across his face. He smiled.

"Transitions, right? Last fall?"

"Yes," I said, pasting on a smile to match his.

"Come on in. Have a seat." Joe pointed us to plastic and steel chairs across from his cluttered desk. I told Joe I was taking his class.

"I thought your name looked familiar when I saw it on the roster, but I couldn’t quite place it."

I gave Mark a good introduction and explained he was two credits short of being able to take his class without an override.

Mark jumped in, explaining his interest in the class. I hoped Joe would add him.

"I’d expect the same from you as every other student in the class," Joe warned. He looked at both of us. "No special treatment."

I nodded, hoping that 'no special treatment' didn’t mean I had just killed my chance at my project. I really wanted to do it, and I wanted Joe’s point of view, his experience as a gay professor.

Mark reassured Joe. "I already have a project in mind. I really want this class."
Reaching across the desk for the override papers in my hands, Joe signed the papers and handed them to Mark. "See you Thursday."

"Thank you so much."

Back at my office, Mark thanked me for getting him into the class, then took off. I didn't even stop to ask myself if this canceled my guilt toward Mark. I had two classes to teach back to back—first, a Freshman English 1 class and then an Introduction to Short Fiction. I stuffed syllabuses and books into my back pack and hustled for class.

English 1 didn't excite me. The students seemed familiar, even though I had never met them before, and less interesting than last spring's students. Their questions, new to them, were repetitive to me.

I described free writing to my students in the same words that I had the two previous semesters. And with the same sincerity that I had witnessed to my students back in the days of the old pedagogy. I felt vaguely dissatisfied.

I told myself that I still wanted to come out to my students. Last semester, I rationalized, I hadn't dared find out just what would happen. This semester I wouldn't take big risks until I had conducted my interviews and found out how my queer peers saw the lay of the land. I knew that I couldn't be neutral, so I would have to be closeted—but only till I
had my peers' advice. Then I would be able to do the kind of teaching I wanted to do.

The creative writing students excited me. Three seniors and two juniors had signed up for the class, and the bulk were sophomores. I had only two freshmen. I had spent a great deal of time on my syllabus, but the only real difference between my section and the other sections being taught was my decision, despite the unwritten policy of the creative writing program, to allow students to write "genre" short stories—science fiction, romance, and so forth, not just "literary" stories.

My decision was an extension of student-centered pedagogy: writers needed to be free in both form and content. Only then could they explore and express themselves freely, and to the best of their ability. Shutting students out from genre fiction when they felt drawn to write it meant creating an unnecessary obstacle; besides, quality genre fiction is as challenging as quality literary fiction—whatever "literary" fiction is.

At first I thought none of my students were interested in genre fiction. But several students declared themselves to be fantasy, cyber punk, or romance writers. As I had with English 1, I looked around the class, wondering which students
might be gay, and whether or not they would choose to come out in my class. The idea both pleased me and made me nervous.

Retrospectively I think some of my excitement about teaching creative writing came from my rationalizations. I had decided that in this class I didn't need to model writing for my students: none of my own creative writing professors had—although I had sought out their work on my own. I told myself that fiction writing was too individual and the fictions writer's processes of creation were too idiosyncratic to be of any use to other writers. In addition, I wasn't writing short stories in my free time, I was writing poems, so I could safely rule my own writing irrelevant. I had no intention of resurrecting my M. A. short stories. They were ancient history.

The quiet was broken by someone's arrival in the office. Carrie—a woman who had been in one of my classes last fall, a woman I suspected might be lesbian or bisexual—walked through the doorway carrying a box. She set the box down on the empty desk in the office and turned to me. I had heard we were assigned a new officemate. She must be it.

"Hey," she said with a grin, "you were in my Modern Feminist Literary Movement class last fall, weren't you?"

"Yeah," I said. "That was a great class. Carrie isn't it?"
"Yeah. Hi." We shook hands. "Cool!" She started taking knickknacks out of the box and arranging them on the desk top. "You guys don't have much on your door; do you think anybody will mind if I put up some quotes?"

"Love it," I said. She had an elfin face, both feminine and boyish. She wore a retro skirt and blouse and Doc Martin boots. Her startlingly blue eyes could only come from tinted contacts.

She taped several quotes to the door, then I walked over and read them. A long quote from Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, a favorite passage of mine from Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals*, and a poem by Adrienne Rich. Three twentieth century lesbian writers. Cynicism, assertiveness, and beauty. It was obvious she was a lesbian, interested in twentieth century lit, and also sharp.

"I hope you don't mind the quotes," she said as she pulled out some black and white photos.

"Are you kidding?" I took books off the gray metal bookshelf and shared some current-favorite passages of Audre Lorde, Walt Whitman, and Baba Copper.

She grinned. "I thought you were probably lesbian. But I didn't know for sure."

"Same here."
She left to move her car before she got a ticket, and to bring up another box.

Holy Cow! I couldn’t believe it. I was going to have a lesbian office mate!

Over the summer I probably should have spent a lot of time writing about Mark, sorting out the spring semester. I should have thought about what I liked and didn’t like about my first year, but I didn’t. It was too freshly painful. Instead I wrote about the biggest contrast between my master’s institution and my Ph.D. institutions—the atmospheres.

Only retrospectively could I see how isolated I had been at my master’s institution. There had been so few non-heterosexuals in my department. In addition, for the first two years of the program, to be my friend was an act of defiance against everything conventional. Only those who were willing to flaunt convention dared be my friend. After three years, I had unconsciously worn a badge of isolation and defiance into my Ph.D. program.

But what a difference in environments! Over the course of my first semester, I re-wrote my understanding of what it meant to come out to peers. Here, I was simply a person—at least to enough people that it was easy to ignore the people who felt otherwise. I made friends easily! My friends who were heterosexuals liked me not because I represented
rebellion and danger, but because they just liked me. As I journaled over the summer I realized I had initially doubted their sincerity, but had eventually trusted my new friends.

At a lesbian potluck dinner last spring, I had seen a lesbian who looked familiar to me. She had blonde curly hair and wore blue jeans and a button-down Oxford shirt. I stared at her, while I tried to place how I knew her. Aha! She was an English graduate student at the university. I was stunned. Her name was AnneMarie and she was three years ahead of me, a nineteenth century British major. I hadn’t recognized her because at school she wore dark colored suits and draped bright colored scarves around her throat or shoulders. I’d had no idea she was a lesbian.

I introduced myself.

"I’ve seen you around the department once of twice. I’ve been meaning to come over and introduce myself," she said. As we talked, she told me about another lesbian and two bisexuals in the department. "I’ve also heard rumors that there is a gay man in medieval studies, but it’s just a rumor.

"Has there ever been a gathering of all the gays in the department?"

"I don’t think so. But there may have been."

"Really? Why not?"
"Once you get past your coursework, there really isn't much time for socializing."

"There isn't much time for socializing now." Despite the time constraints, I decided I would make friends with all the non-heterosexuals in my department, and throw a party for us.

In spite of my good intentions, I had only spent time with AnneMarie once or twice since the potluck. I met the other lesbian, Tamara, but we had done little more than exchange small talk and establish that I was a lesbian, too. Between adjusting to the new program, and to the new pedagogy, as well as adjusting to a new state, I hadn't had many opportunities to widen my social circle beyond other first year teaching assistants and the occasional classmate.

There had been one young woman in one of my graduate seminars, who I thought might be a lesbian or bisexual. I couldn't say exactly what made me think so--maybe it was comments she made that I heard double meaning in. I had decided if I saw her around the halls in the fall, I would get to know her and find out if she was indeed a lesbian. Now I had my answer. She was a lesbian, her name was Carrie, and we would be sharing an office! This was a good omen, I decided.

When I had met AnneMarie in the hallways at school, I smiled and said "hi," enthusiastically, but she seemed to feel
awkward about this. I decided I was too effusive—a result of finding out I was no longer alone nor deemed a threat to the American family.

On Thursday, I waited at my office in case Mark came by before class, but left when time got short. When I walked into the classroom, Mark was already there, along with a dozen others. I recognized the graduate students. I noticed Tamara sitting at the edge of the group and sat down next to her; we chatted until Joe came into the room.

On break, I asked Tamara what she was going to do her paper on.

"Beginnings of the domestic violence movement in the seventies." She talked at length about the numbers of women who were assaulted, raped, and murdered every day, every second. I felt overwhelmed by the statistics, almost bruised by them and at the same time, impressed by her obvious deep interest in the subject.

"Do you know what you're going to do?" she asked.

"I'm hoping to talk Joe into letting me interview the lesbian, bi and gay teaching assistants in the department."

"An in depth study within the gay movement?"

"Yeah. Kind of an intersection between the gay movement and the new pedagogy. That's kind of a social movement, too, within education."
"I hope he let's you do it. What's you angle?"

"Coming out. What goes into teacher's thinking about whether to come out to students or not."

"That's easy. Almost nobody comes out until they have tenure. And then, by the time they get tenure, people have gotten so used to not rocking the boat that they never do come out."

"What about you?"

"Once I get tenure? Absolutely."

Before I could follow up, Tamara glanced down at her watch. "Time to get back."

"Let's talk again," I said. Tamara nodded and we headed back to class.

Two weeks later, I was sitting in a plastic and steel chair across from Joe. He had serious doubts about my project. Boiled down, he worried that I wouldn't be able to get enough interviews. Without the interviews, the project would fall apart. Joe began by rehashing what we already knew. Then he switched tracks.

"How many gays do you think there are in your department?" he asked dubiously.

"I don't know. I know three people. But I've heard of others. Maybe ten altogether. Maybe more. It's a big department and there are lots of people I've never met."
"How are you going to get interviews?"

"I'll get introductions through the people I already know. I feel more comfortable with face-to-face. I think that a letter might feel more impersonal—easier to turn down."

"How many interviews do you think you can get?"

Good question. I needed to pick a number high enough to make Joe decide the project was worthwhile, but not unrealistically high. "Six?"

"If you can get five interviews by—" he flipped through his calendar, "three weeks from today, then you can do this project. If you haven't got five interviews by then, I want you to drop this project and do another one. I want your second proposal on Monday."

I told myself I should be happy with this. Joe was going to let me try. But other words tumbled out of my mouth.

"I had hoped for some encouragement. I think we need to talk to each other about coming out to our students whether we come out to our students or not. Talking about what we think would be really helpful. People might not feel so alone or confused. Wouldn't everybody—gay and straight alike—benefit from thinking about the boundary lines they draw—where they draw them and why? Like what's private and what's public, or
the kinds of risks they’re willing take? Or what kind of responsibility they have to their gay students?”

“I’ve got nothing against the project itself. I support all these things. That’s why I believe the university needs a diversity outreach program. Of course I think about whether or not to come out to my own students. This is my tenure year, you know. I want to be encouraging, but I can’t be when I think a project isn’t realistic.”

It seemed like the perfect opportunity, so I asked Joe whether he came out to his students. Joe shifted around in his chair, not quite finding a comfortable spot.

“Sometimes,” he said, “It depends on the student, on a lot of factors.” I nodded my head. I knew exactly what he meant—and felt. “I’m not tenured yet, either,” he said.

“Do you think that will make a big difference?” I asked.

“Well, yes,” he said, as if that was obvious, but lately I thought it might not be that much help after all. It depended on the way I thought about it. Maybe Joe was thinking along the same lines, because he backtracked somewhat on his answer, and then shifted the focus back to my project.

“What’s your second proposal?”

“I haven’t really thought of one.”

“Even if you end up not needing it, I want you to have a back-up proposal.”
"Okay. Monday."

It was the time of semester when I shared with my students a writing of my own. The first writing I had shared—a year ago—had been my most successful. The piece had had an energy to it that had come across to the students. The writing I had shared in the spring didn't have it. Now, as I sat at the computer, reading over the draft of what I would be sharing with my students this semester, I felt inexplicably dissatisfied.

The next morning it occurred to me: I was back to writing about my childhood. I scrapped the draft and roamed around the house, wondering what piece of my present life to share with my students. I finally thought of a subject, wrote a new piece and felt relieved.

The next morning as my students read my piece, I read it through their eyes. It lacked energy—just like the piece in the spring had.

"Look, I've been reading this piece over, and I feel like it has no energy. Last night I felt pretty good about it, but today it just feels dead."

My students made polite responses. One or two consoled me.

When I returned to my office, Carrie was sitting at her desk grading papers. She looked up when I came in.
"Howdy! Want to have a beer at L. L’s? I need to get away from papers for a while."

"Sure. What’s ‘L. L.’? Lavender lesbians?"

She laughed. "Lounge Lizards. Bar on 8th street."

Over beer I told Carrie about my project and Joe’s doubts.

"I’ll be your first interview. I’m thinking pretty seriously about coming out to my students," she said.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Not only did she plan to come out to both classes, but she was going to be a speaker at Affirmation Day—yet another activity organized by Mark—designed to promote awareness and acceptance for the gays and lesbians, for the bisexuals and transgendered people on campus.

"Yesterday, this reporter with the campus newspaper interviewed me about coming out." She had told the reporter she would come out to her students before Affirmation Day so they wouldn’t find out through the newspaper. "I’d rather tell them personally."

"Yeah. Holy Cow!" We both laughed nervously.

"The article will run on Affirmation Day—next Tuesday."

"So you are definitely coming out to your students!"

"To everybody!" We laughed again.
"Makes me nervous just thinking about you," I said.

"When are you going to do it?"

"Probably tomorrow," she said. "Thursdays are my most flexible classday. We'll have the most time to talk then. Yeah, I'm a little nervous. Just because I've never come out to a whole class before." She told stories about coming out to individual students as a M.A. teaching assistant. "These guys I have now are cool, too. They're part of a new generation. They don't have the hang-ups the older generation does."

They already knew a lot about her—from where she had done her master's and some of her own adventures as an undergraduate, to some family stories and her views about current campus issues. This was just one more piece of the picture they would have of her.

"You know, I admire you. I'm practically jealous."

"Why's that?"

"Because. You're so laid back. You're a little nervous about coming out to your students, but not much. Not like I would be if I was going to be coming out."

"You've probably had something bad happen to you. A lot of people I've talked to have."

Had I had something bad happen to me? Carrie kept talking.
"I've been really fortunate. That's why I'm so positive: nothing really bad has ever happened to me. It's been pretty easy."

"Really?" I asked, both amazed and disbelieving.

"Really. I told my brother first. He was cool. My folks are pretty hip. Most of my friends were pretty cool, too. Turns out one of my friends' brother had come out to her like a week before." She smiled.

I shook my head. I decided that Carrie walked her talk much better than I did. I also felt encouraged. Talking with her, coming out seemed natural and easy. Nothing to it. I felt shamefaced and pleased—I had my first interview.

"Thanks for being my first interview. I only need four more. Know anybody?"

"I don't know how they feel about coming out in the department, let alone to students, but I know some people. I've only met them once, at a mixer." She rattled off three names and explained that they were three friends—a gay man, a bisexual woman and a lesbian. "They knew each other in high school, went to different undergraduate and masters schools or something, and then all met up with each other here."

"Wow!"

I consulted the departmental directory and scouted out their offices. Through the open doorway of the corner office
I could see two women chatting together. Hopefully one was a lesbian and the other a bisexual woman. If I was wrong, that would be embarrassing, at the least.

I strolled up to talking distance, but found it difficult to start the conversation. I didn’t want to simply blurt out that I knew that one was a lesbian and the other a bisexual and I wanted to interview them for a research project. But I didn’t know if I should use Carrie for my introduction either, because she’d only met them once.

So I hemmed and hawed for a while, before one of them finally said, “Whatever it is, get it out, girl!”

I revealed that I was a teaching assistant and a lesbian and that I had heard from Carrie, that they might be interested in a project I was doing this semester.

They knew of me, they said.

When I described the project and asked if I could interview them, they looked at each other and one gave me a breezy, “Oh, sure.” The other nodded her head. They acted like it was no big deal.

“I’m the lesbian,” the more talkative woman added.

The quiet woman asked, “We have a friend who’s gay. Do you want to interview him, too?”

“Absolutely!”
"Even if he's a pretty boy--and swishy?" the lesbian joked.

"Especially the swishy ones," I said, playing along. "We need all the swishy queers we can get!"

The other woman said, "I'd like to read your paper when you're done, if that's okay. See what you find out."

"Sure," I sighed my relief--the project was going to be easy. I already had my interview with Jodi, and now I had three more interviews lined up. One more interview and I could tell Joe everything was 'go'.

I wondered if the relationship between the trio was just friendship or if there was something more. As we continued to talk, I discovered that they were just friends. I gathered the impression that the bisexual woman was a Master's student, but I was unsure because the lesbian often spoke for both of them. I wondered if the dynamic was the same when the gay man was around.

The lesbian questioned me closely about my credentials. When had I first come out? What did I think of the community here? Was I part of any organizations? I decided that she was checking to see if I was going to "out" her.

I tried to reassure both of them that I wasn't interested in outing anyone, I simply wanted to know how they thought about the issue of coming out to their students. The
lesbian reassured me that they'd love to talk about coming out issues, and then the conversation--the interview--came to an end as she announced that they had to go.

Leaving the corner office, I shook my head. Not knowing them at all, I had no idea whether they were genuinely willing to be interviewed or whether they were telling me what I wanted to hear to get rid of me. They probably wondered the same about me. I wondered if they would try to check me out in the department. Who would they ask about me? AnneMarie? My straight friends? What would they say?

I tried to catch AnneMarie at her office, but she wasn't in. I felt the clock ticking, so I wracked my brain. AnneMarie had told me about a couple of new M. A. students who were lesbians, but I couldn't remember anything except that one of them reminded AnneMarie of Kathy Bates.

It turned out that I ran into the two lesbian M. A. students in the mailroom. AnneMarie was right, one of them looked a lot like Kathy Bates. Instantly I decided to seize the moment. I introduced myself, led them into the tiny lounge next door, and came out immediately. A few minutes later they came out to me as well. As we talked, I told them about my project.

"Sounds fabulous!"
They were less enthusiastic when I suggested that I interview them.

"We aren't out to our students. I haven't even thought seriously about it. I know you're a big activist and all, but we're not like that."

"A big activist? Me? I don't think so."

"Yes. All the graduate students know you're a lesbian and half the professors. And you volunteer for that phone thing. Come on."

I couldn't believe it. "Look, it's not like I expect you'd be out your first semester of teaching! You don't have to be out to your students to be interviewed. I want to talk to you about the issue—the pros and the cons—what makes you feel the way you feel."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Come on. Do it." I could see them mentally weighing the idea.

"Well... okay. Probably."

"Great! I gotta catch a class right now, but I'll get a hold of you later and we'll set up a time, okay?" They nodded and I rushed off to English 1.

Later I wrote a quick note to Joe letting him know I had six interviewees and could probably get two more. I didn't name who they were, but figured Joe could probably guess they
were AnneMarie and Tamara. I wasn't surprised that Tamara was hard to track down: since she was a double major in Women's Studies, she spent most of her time in that office, not in the English department. AnneMarie was just as difficult to find in her office. But I needed to find them and get going on my project.
Having asked six people, I decided it was time to get started on the paper. I wrote clearly and easily about what I wanted to find out: I wanted to find out how other non-tenured, lesbian, gay, and bisexual college teachers using the new pedagogy weighed the pros and cons of coming out to their students. I also wanted to find out how they dealt with students who came out in their classes; maybe get some advice about what came after coming out to students.

After I had laid out my thesis, I knew I needed to set out the relevance of the project. I wanted to incorporate my own experiences into this section of the paper, but I had a terrible time.

Partly I was caught between the old and the new. I still partially believed, despite the new pedagogy, that teachers were there only to transmit information—to be objective, not subjective, not personal. Nothing I said to explain the value of subjectivity in the classroom felt convincing to me.

I was also afraid. Afraid to delve into my teaching experiences. What if all I accomplished was to prove that I was a poor teacher? Hadn't Royce nearly died, when I might have prevented that? Could have at least tried? And what was that embarrassing shuffle I had done with Deborah?
I was also afraid to delve back into Mark at all. It was because of Mark most of all that I wanted to do the project, but I still felt too guilty to deal with last semester.

One guilt led to another I wanted to talk to others like me because I wanted to find out how I could do a better job, be a better teacher for all my students. I wanted to understand my responsibility—and the limits of my responsibility. Then I would have something to help me break free of guilt and a direction to take to become that better teacher.

Asking my students to use writing to explore themselves and their world meant not only encountering things that make one happy, proud, and popular, but also encountering things that are scary, embarrassing, and risky.

If modeling is a legitimate teaching method, then I had to model that I had the strength and the willingness to take risks through my own writing. Else what was I accomplishing—what could I accomplish—as a teacher?

At the time I just wanted to find the right place to begin. If I could find the right beginning, everything else would come. The right beginning hid from me. I looked for it everywhere. I tried beginning with my coming out story, but this quickly became my autobiography. I tried beginning with
Royce and how I might have made a difference to him. This lead into an exploration of the new pedagogy, which became global, instead of more particular.

I tried again from yet another perspective, only to end with even more wasted paper and a prescient inner voice whispering that this project might be far tougher than I had thought. I ignored the voice and wrote another draft, which only fed my frustration as it turned liquid and slipped from my grasp.

I wrote and rejected more than seventy-five pages. I felt desperate. My desperation increased when I looked back at the first section and even the question itself—what it was I wanted to find out—now looked spongy and rotten. Instead of crying, I walked to my office, and buried myself in reading the composition papers and story drafts piled on my desk.

Although several creative writing students had claimed to be genre writers, only two students in the whole class had actually written a story of any kind before. One of these, the fantasy writer, Val, stood apart from the other students. He was currently writing his second and third novels, he said. He hoped to bring in the first two chapters from the third novel, which he was just beginning, to workshop with the class.
The class felt awed by his accomplishments. So strong was this respect that although they formed friendships and alliances with each other, no one ever approached Val on that level. On his side, Val seemed content to remain apart. He acted friendly to all, but the class knew he lived and breathed air very different from theirs. All of this was subtle, never spoken, but enacted.

His accomplishments weren't the only things that set Val apart from the rest of the class: his looks arrested. He had silky red hair that fell from a central part down to the small of his back. Although his features were a bit on the rugged side, something about his countenance struck me as quite refined. He was only of average height, but I always felt he was somehow taller than average.

Though he wore jeans and sneakers to class at the beginning of the semester, as the weather turned colder, he began wearing a long cloak and moccasin boots that ended in fringed tops just below his knees. Someone else would have been laughed at for such a romantic get-up. The first day Val came in cloaked and booted, I saw smiles and suppressed laughter around the circle. I felt the urge to laugh, too. Only awe kept the class from mocking him outright. Val also seemed aware of the reaction, and held himself a little more aloof than usual.
After the class became accustomed to Val's dress, a new expression appeared on people's faces. At first, I couldn't imagine what this new expression meant; then I realized that students were weighing whether a costume might boost their accomplishments, their talent, maybe give them some of Val's confident purposefulness.

I wasn't immune from Val's charms. But I also knew that I would be the most help if I treated him without either mockery or awe. Focus on the writing, his contributions to the class, and ignore all else. Nonetheless, Val impressed me, and I felt as I had with Mark, comforted by his presence in the classroom. Only with Val, it was his presence as a committed, producing writer that consoled.

Val's presence contrasted with the rest of my students in both classes. While they were individuals I was getting to know, they were also typical. The composition students were producing the now-familiar car crashes, graduation stories, and travelogues; most of the creative writers were struggling to create conflicts and then resolve them. They were feeling for the first time the huge gap between their aspirations and the stories they wrote. Most of them would be deterred by this gap from becoming writers. Val had faced the chasm and remained a writer. This, I found an immense source of companionship. Commitment and other qualities of writers--of
being successful in any field of endeavor--became an on-going discussion in the creative writing class.

It had even spilled over into the composition class. But here, the discussion remained abstract: Val was not there to embody it, and I, as a teacher, was exempt from consideration; they expected me to be committed, clear, and so forth. They, on the other hand, were confused and lost in the maelstrom of adjustment. They hoped, blindly, that interest and commitment would appear over the next four years.

At the end of class one day, Val handed me a two or three pages stapled together and asked me to read it. I said and I would and wondered what was up. This was far too short to be a chapter from Val. His first chapter had run about fifteen pages. He was current with all his reports, so what was this?

I didn't sit down to read it until late that evening. It was a request for permission to bring in the first chapter of his novel to the workshop. The reason for the request was that two of the main characters of the novel were lesbian. Val carefully outlined three strong arguments for having lesbians as main characters in his book, then outlined his arguments for being allowed to bring the chapter to the workshop.
The arguments assumed that I might have some resistance to the issue of homosexuality on principle, and that I might object to the chapter for possible disruption it might cause amongst the class. Val did a pretty good job of countering both objections, declared his willingness to take whatever lumps might come his way. He concluded by outlining the benefits that might be gained from allowing the class to read and respond to the chapter.

I was impressed by the cogent arguments and by the forethought. It was also apparent that exactly how to word the request had been a bit tricky. He didn't assume that I would be entirely closed, but he didn't assume that I would be easily convinced either.

I was mortified by the request. Somehow I had given Val—an astute person—the impression that I might object to a story with lesbian characters. He felt he needed to clear it with me first. I hadn't simply failed to come out, I had even failed to give the impression that I was open-minded.

I had knocked on AnneMarie's office door so many times without an answer that I was thrown off when she opened her office door to me.

"Hi. Come in."

I stumbled into her office, trying to compose myself for this unexpected opportunity. "Hello! I didn't expect to find
you in. You aren't here very often are you?” I looked around and renewed my memory of her office. Poster portraits of Trollope, Dickens, and Eliot hung on the wall behind her desk. A seashell held down a stack of papers on one corner of the desk. A carpet in rich reds and royal blues separated the student chair from her desk. I leaned against the wall.

“I'm taking my exams in December, so I spend as much time as I can at the library.”

We talked about exams for a bit.

“Are you here about an interview?” she asked.

“Yes. I guess you’ve heard about my project. She nodded her head. “I know you’re awfully busy, but an interview would only take an hour.”

“I don’t know.”

“We could do it over lunch or dinner. You’ve got to eat sometime.” I smiled, but AnneMarie didn’t smile back.

“It’s not just the time, although I really don’t have the time either.”

“Well, what is it, then?”

“You and I think so differently about things. I figure we’ll just get mad at each other.”

“Like what?” She didn’t say anything. “If you’re thinking about turning me down, could you at least tell me why?”

"For one thing, coming out has no place in school. I know it's the in thing to do right now. But it's a big mistake. There's going to be a big backlash, and then all those people who stuck their necks out are going to find themselves without jobs. Like the gays in the military thing. It's stirring up a lot of controversy. I think we would just be better off working quietly, instead of making headlines all the time."

"I haven't made any headlines."

"A teacher's personal life doesn't belong in the classroom either. The students are here to learn English. The classroom isn't a psychiatrist's office, and it's not the place for social change. Activism belongs in the community, not at school."

Part of her argument was familiar--these were the same objections of half the teaching assistants who had been in the teacher training class last year. I felt tempted to counter AnneMarie with the same arguments as the co-coordinators had given the skeptical T. A.s: the new pedagogy doesn't ask you to be a psychiatrist or anything else, except a writer and a teacher of writing. If students choose to write about difficulties in their lives--as many did--then, the teacher helped them to write more effectively about the difficulties.
But I had seen the coordinators' arguments fail with the doubting T. A.s, so I saved my breath.

I took up the other argument instead.

"How can you say that social change doesn't belong in the classroom. What about the sixties? What do you do when a student comes out in class?"

"I've never had a student come out in class, fortunately. If I did, I would treat them like I do everybody else."

"What do you mean by fortunately?" I could feel my anger and frustration growing. I felt tempted to make a sarcastic remark, but held it back.

"You're an activist. You want to make an issue out of your sexual identity with everybody. I don't happen to think it's anybody's business but my own. I don't want to be out to my students or anybody at school. I want to be recognized as a scholar--an Eliot scholar. I'm out off campus. But social life and political life don't belong at school.

If my students found out I was a lesbian, my professors would find out, too. That could jeopardize my career and everything I have been working for these last four years. By keeping my personal life out of the classroom, I don't go around passing as straight or anything; it just doesn't apply. We're here to learn English, and that's I do--teach English.
If a student came out, I wouldn’t be mad or anything, but I would grade that paper just like any other. I don’t owe any favoritism to anybody.”

“Why is it favoritism if you have a little compassion for students who went through what we went through at their age?” I didn’t know AnneMarie’s coming out story, I just assumed she had been as isolated and alone as I had.

“I might talk to them after class and tell them it was brave to come out, but I would also tell them they shouldn’t expect an “A” because they came out.”

“I don’t think I pass out grades like candy.” Then again, maybe I did.

“This is why I didn’t want to do the interview.”

“All right. I’m sorry I got worked up. I just think that we’re not as far apart as you think. I can’t explain it right now. I’ve got to think about it some more, but I do think that your idea of who I am and who I am aren’t the same.”

“I’m sorry I got worked up, too.”

We ended better than I thought we might when we were arguing. I was glad we ended peacefully--but I worried that AnneMarie would turn me down if I tried to schedule an interview with her.
I walked back upstairs to my office and sat in the easy chair and stared out the window as the sun sank quickly behind the Union and the campus drained of color. Wind blew against the window glass and the sound of leaves scratching across the sidewalks reached my ears even three floors up.

I remembered Shakes Reinbotham telling me about Potter's class. I had wanted to be part of that class—as student and teacher. The new pedagogy had given me Potter's class. I thought I had embraced the pedagogy, both for myself and in my teaching. Wasn't that where my writing breakthrough had come from last fall? Wasn't that why I wanted to do this project? Not just to find answers to my questions, but to follow up on that breakthrough?

But somehow everything was coming unraveled. I'd lost the thread of the pedagogy. Look at Carrie. Her students knew her as a person. It was obvious that she had the kind of relationship with them that I'd had with my students first semester—and maybe a little bit second semester. But something had changed and this semester was more like ... stepping back into the old pedagogy.

That's why my writing share had been lifeless. I wasn't showing myself to my students anymore. I had retreated. Had I turned into AnneMarie? I hadn't in the sense that I still believed in the goals of the pedagogy, but I was just like
AnneMarie in fearing coming out. Fear undermined the pedagogy and I could see that I was going backward—toward the closet—even though I kept talking like I was going to come out.

A knock on my door brought me back to the present. I called a come in and a student opened the door and poked his head through. It was Ryan G., one of three Ryans in my comp class.

Snuggled into an overstuffed chair, piles of papers fanned around me, I pointed to the chair next to me. Ryan seemed reluctant to come that far into the office. Maybe he didn’t want to step across the ring of papers. I pointed out my desk chair and Ryan sat down on its edge, looking anxious. He mumbled an excuse for showing up at my office outside my office hours.

I told him no problem, and let him settle himself. This was the first time that Ryan had come to my office other than for the mandatory one-on-one conference. I was surprised to see him, and openly watched him while he took in the office as if he hadn’t seen it last week. Ryan was a pretty good kid. An average kid. Good looking, middle rank, typical interests of an eighteen year old middle-American male.

“Uh.” He concentrated on the dusty area rug. “Um.” He fell silent. I was just about to encourage him to speak when finally Ryan plunged in: “I just wanted you to know, uh, some
of the people in class have been saying . . . disgusting things about you. But I defended you. I said 'No way.' I told them to shut up." He had started talking without looking at me, but by the time he got to the end of his statement, he was looking me squarely in the eyes.

I was startled, to say the least. I had had no idea that there were things being said behind my back. Of course I knew that students talked about whether or not they liked the class, how it was going, and so forth, but I certainly didn't expect them to be saying anything that could be described as 'disgusting.' My heart sank. For a second or two I wondered what the whispers could be about. In the next moment I knew, blushing, what the "disgusting things" were about: my sexual identity.

I became acutely aware of my immediate surroundings: the ancient, dusty easy chairs grouped together at one end of the office, a tiny and seedy living room humanizing an otherwise institutional space of gray steel desks, colorless tile floor, and fluorescent lights. Two big windows throwing late afternoon sun into the corner of the room; a shadow seeping across the pale walls onto a bookshelf lined with fat anthologies, and a clay pot dangling a stringy vine from the third shelf. I even notice the dust motes tumbling slowly through the air to settle on the piles of papers.
Most of all, I am acutely aware of Ryan G’s physical presence, of how far apart we are sitting from each other, yet he feels so close to me, and the way that he is steadily looking me in the eye. Can he see the blush that has bloomed on my face, can he feel the heat radiating from my body? Another part of me fights back: Why should I be embarrassed? I am not ashamed of who I am—am I? No, I’m not. Nonetheless, I feel embarrassed and exposed.

Perhaps I’ve been naive to think a classroom of late adolescents would not be curious about their teacher’s sexual identity. Maybe I have lesbian written all over me. Have I been a fool to think I could just omit such fundamental information about myself? Where does privacy end and secrecy begin? Right then, I feel that a secret I have been keeping has been exposed to the world. When did my sexual identity become a secret? Maybe I don’t have lesbian written all over me.

What am I going to say to Ryan G? I know I won’t ask him what the disgusting things are. If I am lucky he will think that I am above this kind of behavior, that I don’t want to hear the details of something this far beneath me. Clearly Ryan is reluctant to be specific and I decide to use this reluctance to cover the fact that I have surmised what the accusations are—and that I don’t want to hear them. It
doesn't matter though, that I won't ask: my mind has filled in the blank. I can hear the words, feel the acrimony that grows as the comments reinforce each other.

My silence, which I hope feigns indifference, is a flimsy facade, but I don't care, because I have been looking at Ryan G's face and what he wants from me is reassurance, validation. He must want it bad—bad enough to come looking for me outside my office hours.

I wonder briefly whether the "disgusting things" refers to: the language the students were using, or to the assertion that I am a lesbian. I wonder how many people and which ones were "some of the people." Then I realize I am splitting hairs, distracting myself from Ryan G.

Even though he wants it bad, I don't have to reassure him that the disgusting things being said about me aren't true. I don't have to validate him. I didn't ask him to be my defender, to take a stand for me. I can say, "Thank you for standing up to these people for me Ryan G, but what they are saying is true: I am a lesbian." Even in the moment I can see that this will be a huge betrayal.

Reassurance that I am not a lesbian, regardless of the truth, is what Ryan G has sought me out for. Especially since he has doubts. I would bet serious money that he is really worried. If Ryan were okay with me being a lesbian, his
description of how he defended me would be different. He might have reported saying, "Who cares if she is a lesbian. Big deal." Or he might have asked me directly if I was queer or gay or whatever language he felt most comfortable with—or the least uncomfortable. But Ryan G has defended me against an accusation because he isn't ready to entertain it. He wants to feel that I am okay and that he is, that his shining armor defense is called for because I am indeed a princess.

"First of all, thank you for defending me. You didn't have to do it, and I appreciate it." He nods his head. He is glad for the thanks, but he also still waiting for the reassurance.

"It seems to me that this wasn't a fun or easy situation for you. He nods. "How are the comments upsetting?"

"Their content," Ryan said, "and because of lack of respect for the teacher."

"You are off the hook," I announce. "You don't need to defend me anymore. You don't need to take on the students who are disrespectful, okay? Let me worry about that. I'll take care of any disrespectful students." He nods again, while I wonder how or if I will do this.

Ryan is still looking at me expectantly.

"Sooner or later," I say, "these people will get tired of the game they are playing; just ignore them." I remember
being in elementary school when my mother first gave me this advice. I had been complaining: "Danny O'Gara called me Bozo the Clown." Her prediction had been wrong. The teasing and name-calling continued all year long. I never did find an effective way to deal with his remarks. Even when I called him names back, they didn't seem to hurt him nearly as much as his name-calling hurt me. Now I was foisting this same bull onto Ryan. I thought of another cliché and threw it out: "In the mean time, you don't need to sink to their level."

He nodded his head, then sat in silence for a while. This is it, I thought. This is where he asks straight out. Will I do it? Will I come out?

"Do you . . ." he trails off. I let the silence lengthen. After two or three minutes, he stands and sidles toward the door, reciting the homework assignment for the next class to make sure he has it right. I am relieved . . . and disappointed. Now that I am sure he won't ask, I ask him if there is anything else he wants to talk about.

He shakes his head no. "Thanks for taking the time to talk to me."

"That's what I'm here for, Ryan." I lie so smoothly I can hardly believe how two-faced I am. He disappears around the corner and I wonder again how many students are calling me names and which ones. I can't keep my mind from speculating.
I suspect the more withdrawn students first, and the sophisticated.

A while later I realize that it's foolish to try and figure out who they are because I have been completely deceived: I have never suspected a thing; they have put up a good enough front that I would have been fooled forever. I feel a fresh flush of embarrassment. I think of the encouragement and support, the goodwill I have given to them, and how they have returned it with deception and meanness. I am angry at them, but feel ashamed to be angry when I know that I am somehow failing them. If I weren't failing them, then I wouldn't be feeling this embarrassment, this exposure.

How will I face this class tomorrow?

If I end up coming out, Ryan G will know I have lied to him, he would feel as foolish for defending me, as I felt now for being fooled. If I say nothing, I will have to pretend all semester that I am not hurt, that I have not lost my self-respect. I am not sure I can do it.

I remember how Devon's remarks and the rest of the class' silence wore Mark down. I remember Mark's smashed windshield, the death threats. Will things escalate now, I wonder. Will talking behind my back not be enough? Will these people, whoever they are, feel like they want more? What
I riffle through the stack of papers until I come to the paper of the most withdrawn student in my class. He routinely arrives at the last moment before class starts, sits back in his chair, his legs stretched out in front of him, getting as close to lying down as he can. He never speaks in class unless I call on him, and then I can barely hear his mumbled reply.

I scan the paper with dread. Has he written a paper with a sly (or not so sly) double meaning? I can't tell. I read the first paragraph—which took up most of the page, then two more paragraphs. When I have read them, they don't make any sense. I read again, this time reading the whole piece. It makes no more sense afterward than it had when I started.

I decide that if this paper contains an attempt at a secret joke, it is failed one. It fails so miserably that I decide that my most sullen student is just that: sullen—and a poor writer.

I am getting weird, I realize, and I pack up the papers.

The next day when I am again reading and responding to papers, I can't keep myself from reading with an eye to secret meanings. I see nothing, but this doesn't change anything. I take my shame and embarrassment and suspicion into class.

I am surprised at how difficult it is for me look at my students; I stare at the floor tiles instead. I begin
sentences but forget what I intended to say. I wonder where to put my hands. This is silly, I tell myself. Teach the class.

When I finally looked up, looked from face to face, I wondered which students had been making the "disgusting" comments. I longed to talk openly and directly, but I feared it as well. What if someone accused me of being a lesbian? How would I handle indirect accusations? Was my credibility as a teacher gone—along with my status as a human being? What had I done—or failed to do—so that my sexual identity had become something that I could be accused of?

I realize how flimsy is my power as a teacher: it can’t protect me from name-calling, or get my students to focus on learning rather than on thrusting me into a role that reduces or removes my humanity. I have authority to the extent that my students grant it. Without their consent, I can teach them nothing. Someplace inside me is a six-year old: since they have embarrassed me, exposed me, I feel like saying that I didn’t want to teach them anyway.

I slogged through the class, commanding myself not to think about anything except the current task, and what I had to do next, and next, praying that my distracted state and my fidgeting wouldn’t provoke questions or comments.
The single fifty minute class seemed to last hours, but eventually ended. I slogged through creative writing class as well. Afterward I taped a note on my door canceling office hours and rode the bus home, done for the day. Should I have come out to Ryan G? To the class? Were these teachable moments that I have passed up? Or would I have gone down in flames? The next day while journaling, I realized I had canceled my office hours because I was afraid Ryan might be there and I couldn't face him. Not then. Maybe I never could.

By Monday I had cobbled together a fragile new confidence that allowed me to face the class and to keep my office hours. I had minimized enough to feel mostly comfortable in the classroom again.
A week later, I had ducked into the mailroom to check my mail when I saw one of the lesbian M. A. students.

"Hi," I said, and walked over to her. "Hey let's get together and do the interview."

"Umm... I don't think we can do it," she said.

"What? Why not?"

"Because."

"Because why?" I pressed.

"Well," she shrugged her shoulders and moved farther away from the stream of traffic going in and out of the mailroom. "Because we're just working on our M. As. We're not Ph.D. students like you. We only teach one section. We barely know anything about teaching. This is our first time teaching. I don't even think about coming out. I just want to survive."

"That's okay. We can talk about that."

"No," she said. "We want to apply for the Ph.D. program here."

"Okay," I said in a what's your point tone of voice. "An interview with me isn't going to affect getting into the Ph.D. program."

"It will. We don't know who might find out the stuff that'll be in there."
I could feel my heart pounding. "It's not like I'm going to publish it!" I said.

"Oh God," she said, "I hadn't even thought about that!"

"Oh come on," I said. "Please? If you quit, I might not have enough interviews for my paper. Come on--help me out."

"I'd really like to." I could see she felt guilty. "I feel like such a wimp. But I'm just really worried that we won't get into the program already. And if someone from the selection committee sees it..." she rolled her eyes.

We talked longer. I trotted out all sorts of arguments and assurances--everything I could think of, but I couldn't keep everything from unraveling. In the course of our talk, she mentioned that she had talked to the trio and she didn't think they were going to be interviewed either. They were the ones who had gotten her thinking about the possible negative consequences in the first place.

I couldn't believe it. I refused to believe it. I wound up the conversation in a hurry and practically ran up to the office of the lesbian of the trio. They were there--just leaving--and confirmed my worst fears.

There really wasn't a conversation, mostly because they just kept walking while I tried to talk to them. The lesbian was the spokesperson again, and her turn-down was as breezy as
her acceptance had been. It wouldn't have mattered if she had followed the niceties and stood still and talked to me—she said all the same things that the lesbian M. A. had said. I had exhausted my arguments on the M. A. and didn't have gumption left to argue anymore.

I wandered around campus for a while replaying the conversations and wondering what I was going to do. It was too late in the semester to switch horses and do the back-up proposal, even if I could work up any interest in it—which I couldn't. There weren't more than five weeks left in the semester. I couldn't go to Joe. He was certain to tell me, I told you so, and demand that I switch tracks, even though he knew I would have no hope of writing a good paper. I decided to stick with my project. I had an interview with Carrie and, I realized now, pretty much an interview with AnneMarie.

I needed to talk AnneMarie into letting me use last week's conversation as the interview. Then, in place of the interviews, I would talk about the turn-downs. I could easily meet the page requirements for the paper with all that had happened with the project.

I had a hard time convincing AnneMarie to use our talk. She must have talked with the trio, because she was also worried about my publishing the paper. I finally got her to allow me to use it by promising to let her read the paper.
before I handed it in. "You can change anything you don’t like."

I called Tamara’s office repeatedly, hoping to catch her. I left voice mail messages and dropped by her office whenever I had time to dash across campus. But I never did catch up with Tamara. It wasn’t until spring semester that I heard she had burst her appendix and missed the last five weeks of the semester.

This paper was the most difficult I ever wrote. I still didn’t know what to write about the relevance of the project. In the end, I took refuge behind a patchwork quilt of quotes. I discussed Jodi and AnneMarie’s interviews and made a stab at coming to some conclusions. Mostly I felt too overwhelmed to be able to process what had happened. I did what I could.

I took the paper by AnneMarie’s office, pulled it out of the envelope and offered it to her.

"Here it is, as promised. I’ll change whatever you want."

She looked at the envelope for a minute, reached out to take it and then withdrew her hand.

"Never mind,” she said. “I don’t want to read it."

"What? Really?"

"Forget it. Hand it in."

I left before she could change her mind.
I didn't expect to pass—there were too many reasons for failing. I hadn't met the requirements of my own proposal; I had written a lousy paper, and I had pissed off my professor. Any one of these alone could sink me.

About a week after the semester was over, I found a manila envelope in my departmental mailbox: my returned paper. I left the envelope on my desk, unopened, for a couple of days. I finally opened it because my friends asked how I did for the semester.

Everything I expected pretty much came true. Joe said I told you so and was mad that I had kept going with the project instead of switching to my back-up proposal. As to the paper itself, the first part relied too much on quotes. The conclusions were general when they could have been more specific. Other times they were specific, but missed the generalization that could be made. I had drawn conclusions where I would have been better off postulating questions for future study.

Joe ended the letter with a knife twist: "I wish you had come to me. I would have been upset, but I also would have helped you assess the material you had and helped you shape up your conclusions." He gave me a B-, the lowest possible passing grade. I knew Joe had been generous.
I also heard for the first time, and as if from a long way off, the calling of an insight. I didn't know what it was, but it niggled at me. I suspected it might not be anything good.

Over the course of the semester, I had gradually become the Assistant Director of the Support Phone. That included answering requests for pamphlets from people who had called the Support Phone. Going through the list of requests one weekend evening, I came across a name that felt familiar to me: Tiffany Sullivan. It took me a minute to place the name: she had been one of my composition students this past semester!

When I thought about Tiffany, I was shocked by how little I remembered about her. She had been one of only forty-three students I'd had that semester; she had turned in her final paper only two weeks ago. Yet most of my memories of Tiffany were terribly vague. I think some of my lack of memory has to do with the fact that Tiffany was a young woman and not a young man. One of the effects of being raised in a culture where gender makes a huge difference is that both men and women notice women less, pay less attention. And this—despite the fact that I am a woman myself, that I am a feminist and actively work to pay more attention to women—seems still to be true.
This gender socialization cuts in another direction as well: women do less that would draw attention to themselves. There are women for whom this isn’t true, but generally, in my experience this holds. I remember so little about Tiffany because she was female, yet I remember her at all because she did inadvertently draw attention to herself.

She had even features, including dazzling blue eyes framed by long, arching blonde eyebrows, and long curly blonde hair—a bold, completely natural blonde the color of strong summer sunlight. It cascaded over her shoulders and down to the small of her back. I was a little envious of her looks. I also remember she had slender hands.

Despite the fact that Tiffany was quite attractive, she was nervous. She bit her fingernails and sometimes chewed her lip. She spoke so hesitantly she almost stuttered. I remember how surprised I was that a young woman with Tiffany’s looks didn’t have more self-confidence, and even plenty of popularity. Perhaps, I speculated, she had seen through the shallowness of popularity based on looks, and sought something deeper. I think I remember being disappointed that her papers didn’t give me any insight into her feelings about looks or about what made her nervous.

I have had a few students who were quite nervous, but Tiffany remains in my memory at all because her nervousness
was different somehow—a bit more noticeable, maybe. Or perhaps she remains in my memory because she seemed to get more nervous rather than less as the semester played itself out.

She hated to be called on or have any attention at all paid to her, at least in class. She did show up at my office once or twice. I wish I could remember the circumstances of her visits, or what happened between us. Unfortunately, I just don’t remember. Her papers were also unremarkable and I have no clue what she wrote about nor any idea of her personal writing style.

I think I remember noticing her reticence and chalking it up to the lack of self-esteem that women often feel—that I felt for a long time (and still sometimes feel). It was the shaking that finally caught my attention one day. Tiffany’s whole frame trembled with nervous tension. The shakes were visible to me from a distance. It was as if she had come through some traumatic experience—a fire, an earthquake, some near-death experience.

I stopped and looked at Tiffany as if I had never seen her before. I looked too long, because other heads began to turn in Tiffany’s direction; this ended my staring and took me back to the business of the moment. But while the class continued, my mind was spun with the experience of seeing
Tiffany as if for the first time, and with questions that came from that seeing. Tiffany had already been a reminder to me that looks don’t guarantee anything—not popularity, not even self-confidence. Now I had an actual mystery before me: what could be happening to this young woman that would make her whole frame shake?

I think I remember asking her about it. It must have been after class, but if this isn’t just wishing, why can’t I remember what either of us said? I think it’s more likely that I thought about asking her, but held off. She was already skittish, I probably reasoned, and putting her on the spot would just make her feel worse. I must have let it pass.

This is it, all I remember about Tiffany with any conviction at all. The rest is just wishing—that I had paid more attention, asked more questions, remembered more about her, been less reticent.

I wondered when Tiffany had called and who had answered her call. I searched through the Support Phone records and found she had called twice during the semester. I thought about the fact that I could easily have been the volunteer who answered her call and I wondered how I would have handled it.

Mostly the calls are easy—people call looking for social activities. Occasionally we get a call from a straight person seeking to help a family member or friend. Other
times, the calls are hard: about once every six months we have a call from someone who has been kicked out of the house. Or we get a call from someone living under incredible tension: pressured at home, harassed or beat up at school, sent into counseling by a parent or parents who can't accept what their child could not avoid admitting.

We get calls from people engaged in private battles: Is the "lifestyle" immoral? Does being gay mean dying young? Are they doomed to live stunted, loveless lives? Are they going to hell?

There is no way to explain my complicated feelings about recognizing Tiffany's name. Like most of the volunteers on the Support Phone, I had joined because I wanted to help others who had questions about sexual identity. Help their questioning be a little less painful than my own had been.

Tiffany had been my student for sixteen weeks and she and I had never talked about our sexual identities. I had never known, or even wondered. Why not? Had I really had no clue that she had any questions about her sexual orientation? All that shaking and near-stuttering, what was that? The bitten fingernails, the chewed lip, the lack of self-confidence? The trembling?

And what of all the students who also have questions about their sexual identity—or the sexual identity of someone
close to them, but who never give any outward signs? What did Tiffany know about me? Did she know I was a lesbian? She could have suspected I was a lesbian, but how useful would suspicions be to her? The distant, niggling voice of insight felt much closer to me, but I still couldn’t make out what it was saying.

I don’t have a strong chronological memory; nor a good sense of dates, whether days of the week, months or years. Instead, my memory holds onto events, and how one event is linked to another. Because Tiffany was largely unremarkable to me, and because when she did crop up again in my life it was apart from school, it took me a while to make the connection. Tiffany and Ryan G. were classmates. Tiffany must have heard what he had heard—both the “disgusting things” and Ryan’s upset denials of them. Did any of this have any connection to the trembling, the near stuttering?

I cannot help but recognize myself in Tiffany; I, too, had sat in numerous English classrooms, wondering just how people would respond to me if they only knew what I suspected about me. I am still wondering how people will react to me.

It’s possible that what made Tiffany shake, what made her almost stutter when she talked, what drained her self-confidence was entirely unrelated to what was going on underneath the surface of my class. It could even be that all
these things had nothing to do with issues of her sexual identity; perhaps any number of possibilities; I don’t know. But it seems to me like a distinct possibility that these nervous reactions were about her sexual identity.

And they definitely had something to do with writing and teaching. All my talk about freewriting, about discovery and insight. What was that? The community of truth? About taking risks? What had I told Terrell—that others think things are only half as risky as we think they are? When I think about teaching and the value of it, I tell myself that I help people discover writing as a means of exploring their inner worlds—the shape of that inner world, and how the inner world shapes what we perceive as the world outside us.

Tiffany showed me that this notion was a fantasy, perhaps a distant aspiration, but no more than that. There was—and is—some fundamental rift that should not exist between who I am and what I am about. The power of words—my words, Tiffany’s words, Ryan G’s words, the underground words of gossip—these were what the class needed to be about in some important way. If we write to explore and express, then our secrets, our silences defeated us. My silence defeated us, defeated me.

The niggling voice finally spoke clearly. I couldn’t keep kidding myself that I could stay in the closet and teach
my students any of what I most wanted them to learn about writing, about life. Unless I could find an answer to my insoluble dilemma I would have to leave. Leave teaching. Leave English. The thought frightened me. It depressed me. But the insight remained. Come out; find a way to make that work or get out.

I didn't want to listen to this voice and I didn't. I taught several more years, twisting and turning, seeking a way out of my dilemma. I found no solution and I left teaching after 11 years in the classroom.
Since then I have been thinking—and writing—about teaching and disclosure and writing. About what happened; trying to sort it out. Learn from it. Make the stories of these experiences part of the stories of these words. I have learned. The learning has helped to feel less alone.

About a year after the class I took from Joe, I read Annette Friskopp and Sharon Silverstein’s *Straight Jobs, Gay Lives*. Their book shed some significant light on my own efforts to contextualize myself among other lesbians and gay professionals, if not among other lesbian and gay educators. *Straight Jobs, Gay Lives* reminded me that ‘coming out’ is a broad term with multiple meanings. For instance, it may refer to anything from:

- a person’s first glimmering of understanding that he or she is different—or the first time a person accepts his or her homosexuality. Alternatively, it may refer to the first time a person seeks the company of other gay people or habitually seeks out such company. [C]oming out [also] refers to a range of behaviors that let heterosexuals know one is gay. (155)

Even when it’s limited to letting heterosexuals know one is gay, ‘coming out’ still encompasses “a range of behaviors . . .
from pointed hints that are mutually acknowledged to direct statements about being gay or in a gay relationship" (155).

Friskopp and Silverstein also found a great deal of confusion around coming out. When they questioned closely, they discovered that some people who asserted they had come out through hints were indeed out; others admitted "they are not really out" (155, emphasis inherent). The confusion, they concluded, stemmed from language: "each gay person has his or her own individual definition, often intuitive and largely unconscious, of what being in the closet and coming out mean in a particular context" (155).

The telling question was often, "How do you know [the person you came out to] understood what you were telling them?" (210). Responses such as "'Oh, because she asked me how long my partner and I had been together' or, 'He asked me if I had come out to anyone else at work'" confirmed that a person really was out and demonstrated the importance of response to one's hints (210). Those without a confirming response would "give hazy descriptions. They'd fall back on feelings, or refer to remarks that could be interpreted very differently" (155, 210).

Griffin noticed a similar pattern of hinting and suggestive behaviors among the 13 lesbian and gay educators in her participatory research project, and named this 'inferred
disclosure' (179). Griffin found that the educators chose to infer disclosure as a conscious strategy: "By taking certain actions in school, participants believed that speculation about their sexual orientation among colleagues, students, or parents would increase" (179, 180, emphasis added). At the same time they could "maintain some degree of safety because their identities had not been directly disclosed" (Griffin, 178).

Are Friskopp and Silverstein right? Is the confusion around coming out due to individual definitions which were largely intuitive and unconscious? Or are lesbians and gays, bisexuals and transgendered people, as Griffin suggests, aware and carefully managing their identities? Maybe some of each.

An insight came out of reading *Straight Jobs, Gay Lives*. I recognized myself as one of the wishful thinkers--those who are not *really* out. This isn't entirely true: I had come out directly and clearly to my peers and to several professors. The wishful thinking came in when I entered the classroom and became the teacher.

In my first semester, I hinted around and dropped clues. I took stands that I expected would increase speculation about my sexual identity. I came as close as I ever have to coming out to my students. But neither Deborah nor Royce's behavior indicates that I succeeded in 'inferring disclosure'.
When Deborah asked me if I was married, I could have come out explicitly; instead I backed off, hiding behind the myth of "neutrality". As I began my next semester, I intended to come out, but I lost my resolve as I went through the semester with Mark. Sometime in that semester, my momentum must have shifted. Unconsciously, sometime during this semester, I began moving backward, into the closet.

By my third semester, the fall of my second year, I no longer believed that being closeted could keep me safe. Yet I no longer dared even to infer disclosure either. Val's petition and Ryan G's office visit confirm this. Bleich suggests that a pedagogy of disclosure can handle disclosures that seem to endanger learning; that it can handle antagonism, prejudice, and "differences within a presumed cultural homogeneity" (49). But can it handle them all at once? How long can it go on? Sixteen weeks? Could I sustain it semester after semester?

Clearly, Carrie and AnneMarie and I all felt differently about coming out in the classroom. What was at the root of the differences? Friskopp and Silverstein suggest a fundamental difference between Carrie and I. My aspiration to come out was more like the "gay professionals who came out selectively," who reported "testing the waters on their own via clues and hints to try to assess the implications of
coming out" (215). These people were often highly influenced by the tone set by management.

In contrast, I think Carrie acted and believed more like the group who were "out most broadly"—those who intended to come out "irrespective of the obstacles they found (215). "While they might have modified their strategy to take circumstances into account", this group "always intended to come out no matter what" (215). These people "were able to implement their [coming out] plan, whether or not it faced roadblocks, because they had confidence in their long-term vision" (215). Confidence in a long-term vision is exactly what I lacked.

On the other hand, AnneMarie seems like the "nine of the thirteen [educator] participants" in the Griffin participatory research project who claimed that being gay or lesbian "had nothing to do with their abilities as an educator" (181). Griffin found, despite their claims, that their stories "revealed ways in which being gay or lesbian did make a difference" (181). Unfortunately, I was too busy disagreeing with AnneMarie to think of asking her for any teaching stories. (181). At the conclusion of the study, the participants themselves realized they had seen their sexual identity as a "professional liability" and they now felt this was less true. (192).
These same nine participants' lives' were "compartmentalized into a private life among a circle of trusted friends and a professional life of carefully managed relationships in an overwhelmingly heterosexual environment" (182). While I didn't live as compartmentalized a life, I did still split off the classroom and make it an orphan from the rest of my life.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered teachers know a lot about disclosing—the complex effects it can have—both good and bad. They also know a lot about not disclosing; it's ostensible benefits and the complex toll it often takes on professional and personal life. This means that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered teachers and pedagogical theorists are in a unique position to offer the profession insight into the complexities of disclosure and risk negotiation in the classroom.

Swartzlander, Pace and Stamler worry that students feel pressured or even required to write dramatic and too-personal narratives. I strongly agree that students should not be pressed. But freedom to choose one's own subjects is not being pressured or required. I believe this strongly. Yet people choose to disclose, through their writing or through talk—things that they suspect or know for certain will be difficult for themselves or for the Other. Just as my actual
thoughts and feelings leaked through my 'should be' journaling.

We choose to disclose, even though we can’t predict the effects of our disclosure, or even when we suspect it will be difficult, because we want the benefits that that writing and disclosure bring. When we write, we can discover what we think and feel, we can see our thoughts and feelings externalized. We have the chance to expand on our thoughts and feeling— to explore them more deeply, more broadly. We can reflect on what we think and feel, gaining perspective on it.

When we disclose to the Other, we take the opportunity, in Bleich’s words, “to reveal the true terms of [our] membership” (47). We reach for the chance to be known—by ourselves and by others. The most risky audience maybe the imagined audience, the audience of internalized voices. Fears associated with the internal voices may preclude sharing with a real audience or severely limit the sharing we do with real audiences. However, we can’t escape either the internalized audience or the risk that these voices may represent. While homophobia is all too real, it’s also true, as Mary Elliott says, that we are “hyperaware” and that we “berate ourselves”

Miller gives the example of a teacher, Lankford, who received a violent and homophobic paper. The teacher
eventually took the paper to a composition conference and sought others’ opinions. Miller reports the “most popular” suggestions were for the student to be removed from the classroom and turned over either to the police or a counselor. Partly from training and partly from the student’s context, Lankford chose to respond to the essay as a work of fiction—commenting on word choice, organization, the student’s imagined audience and so forth.

While Miller would have preferred that the paper be “moved out of the private corridor running between the student writer and the teacher and move it into the public arena,” yet he praises Lankford because he “achieved the kind of partial, imperfect negotiated, microvictory available to those who work in the contact zone when he found a way to respond to his student’s essay that kept the student in the course” (Miller 407).

Lankford agrees that his response was a “qualified success”—the student even signed up for a second course with him. The student also “learned to cope with an openly gay instructor with some measure of civility” (393). But Miller also reports: “Lankford’s own assessment of his approach” was that he had been “spineless” (393). Is the partial, imperfect, negotiated, microvictory enough if it leaves us
feeling spineless? How does one sustain one's ability to teach or learn?

Mary Elliott suggests that we can stop feeling spineless, but to do it, we must first stop running away from the terror of the moment of disclosure into the 'safety' of theories about disclosure. As teachers of writing, we can help our students by acknowledging both the risks and the benefits inherent to writing, inherent to disclosure of any kind. As practitioners of student-centered, process-oriented pedagogy, we most effectively teach by showing ourselves taking risks in our writing, and by sharing our process of risk-benefit negotiation.

If we ignore risk, it won't simply go away. When I invited my students to "freewrite," they immediately wanted to know how freely they could write. Jana modeled risk-taking for my class and thereby opened up the class to the whole issue. Terrell sought my help to negotiate his risks, but in the end, I don't think I was much help to him. I didn't know enough then to be able to help him.

Royce negotiated his numerous risks—both in life and in writing—in an appalling isolation. Appalling that he was rejected by family and friends, appalling that I, who knew what he was going through and could have helped, didn't come out to him.
My silent second class spent a good portion of the semester keeping risk at arms' length. How might that class have been different for everyone concerned if I had had a long-term 'vision'; if I had come out? If I had shared with my students my own risk-negotiation process?

When Lankford came out to his students, did he sign up to make himself the text for the course? What happens to the teacher who makes visible his or her racial/class/cultural/religious/language/sexual identities? Ruth Spack suggests that some teachers have no choice: their appearance discloses them—although not necessarily accurately (10).

In illustration, Spack offers the experience of Lavina Shankar, whose students see her as one of the "the colored, the foreigners, the immigrants, the Easterners . . . the Third World citizens" (15). Shankar's students "assume she chooses to teach texts by writers of color because of who she is (visibly)"—"and where she was raised (India)" (15). But Shankar was "trained in British schools on a diet of canonical literature written by European males identified as white"; her text choices are "based on her exposure to these texts only as a graduate student in the United States" (15).

Like Shankar, I wondered what my students saw. At times, I hoped appearance would do my coming-out for me. But
Shankar and Spack are right: the language of the body is not at accurate speaker of identity.

Learning is subjective as Polanyi says, and passion is central to it. Perhaps Miller is right and the partial, the imperfect is all that teachers can achieve. Yet this is in some ways a disempowering view of teaching. I am drawn ultimately back to Palmer’s realization. Each time I walk into the classroom I “can choose the place within myself from which my teaching will come, just as I can choose the place within my students toward which my teaching will be aimed” (Palmer, Courage, 57). Where Palmer says we “can” choose, I believe we must.
Works Cited


Griffin, Pat. "From Hiding Out to Coming Out: Empowering Lesbian and Gay Educators." Coming Out of the Classroom


