

Student's name

ENG 111. FJB06, FJB10, or FGT03

Dr. Lucas

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Finding a Way Forward

Each day as I greet my students from behind my mask, I am reminded of how much my teaching has relied on practices the pandemic prohibits. Dwelling on those losses provides no way forward, so instead I strive to focus on the endeavors I can continue, including modeling the writing process. Although I have composed assignments with my students for years—more than a decade, perhaps—the process remains instructive for me. This semester, writing a literacy narrative and a textual analysis with my students has deepened my understanding of the process and reminded me of the vital role of writing as a mechanism for making sense of the world.

Preparing to write the first essay of the semester with my students meant facing the challenge of finding yet another literacy narrative to tell. I have written so many essays about my learning experiences, I wasn't sure what was left untold. Yet somehow after several pages of scribbles and strike-throughs, an early memory crept into my consciousness. I saw myself as I was nearly fifty years ago, a preschooler lying on the floor "reading" the wordless comic strip *Henry*. That memory from when I was too young to read and too small to hold a newspaper led me to form the thought that would become the essay's opening line: "To a small child, the pages of a newspaper are enormous." The recollection that prompted that sentence also reminded me of a later memory of lying on the floor reading. The former memory not only gave me a starting point for my narrative, it also gave me a transition to a second scene:

Reading the wordless comic strip *Henry* for the first time was the beginning of a years-long habit of stretching out on the floor with newspapers and large books—not thick ones but ones that were tall and wide, among them one of my childhood favorites: *The Golden Book of Fun and Nonsense*.

As I continued to draft, I wondered what had prompted those recollections of my early childhood and realized my unanswered question could serve as the beginning of my conclusion:

Why these particular early memories visit me now, I do not know. Perhaps rereading Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir, *Maus*, with my students has roused the wordless *Henry* and the word-filled *Golden Book of Fun and Nonsense* from the corner of my brain where they've slumbered.

Days later, after I posted the literacy narrative to my blog and shifted my attention to *Maus*, a panel in Chapter 3 presented a concrete answer to my question. There, Art Spiegelman depicts himself lying on the floor of his father's house sketching the war stories of the older Spiegelman. Art's legs extend beyond the panel linking the scene in his father's living room to the adjacent panel depicting Vladek Spiegelman as a young soldier. Studying that image of Spiegelman lying on the floor, I became aware of the subconscious inspiration for my story; Spiegelman's depiction of himself had led me--though I didn't know it at the time--to my own narrative.

The same uncertainty that accompanied my initial work on the literacy narrative resurfaced when I began the analysis of *Maus*. Spiegelman's shifts back and forth from the present to the past were my primary interest, but I could not decide which scene in *Maus* would serve as my focus. While I remained indecisive on that point, I did make one decision early in my planning: Rather than examining a series of panels, I would focus on one to demonstrate to

my students that one panel alone could serve as the subject of a thorough textual analysis. After I resolved to analyze a single panel, I returned to the selection process. I found myself gravitating repeatedly toward the image of the Spiegelmans and the Zylberbergs at their dining room table in Sosnowiec.

Without knowing what drew me to that window into their home, I took the first step; I drafted a description of the panel, lines that would show Spiegelman's images with my words and lead to the thesis and analysis still to come. That process of recreating the panel in the form of a paragraph required the close attention to detail that developed my understanding of Spiegelman's aim. What I had initially perceived as shifts back and forth from the past to the present could be described more accurately as simultaneous depictions of the present and the past. Juxtaposed with the retrospective Vladek, the seemingly ordinary scene of domestic life grows ominous. As I wrote in my analysis, "With Vladek's final words [in the panel], the dark heavy window grilles become the bars of a cage. Readers see the family as the storyteller-survivor does, both as the happy family they were and the prey they would become."

Witnessing the growth of that idea and the others that form the essays I have written this semester has deepened my understanding of the necessity of approaching writing as a process. Had I not stepped into the unknown, I never would have found the words to express what lies within the pages of those essays, nor would I have the opportunity to reflect on them with the words you are reading now. As I prepare to don my mask again for my last face-to-face classes of the semester, I realize that putting pen to paper with my students has not only taught me more about writing but also shown me a way through a semester of uncertainty. Now as COVID-19 cases surge and the President continues to hinder the peaceful transition of power, we move forward into the unknown. Pen in hand, I aim toward hope.

Works Cited

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