

ON CAMPUS

The Soul-Crushing Student Essay

By Scott Korb

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Last August, as college started up again, I hadn't quite finished my beach read, William Finnegan's "Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life," so I brought it to my freshman writing class. I tried reading a few passages aloud to break the ice. I thought my students might relate to one in which the writer first wonders about turning his surfing experiences into something worth reading:

"Our queer devotions, frustrations, little triumphs, and large peculiarities, plus a few waterfront characters, plus photos, could probably keep a blog burbling along."

"What do you make of that?" I asked. "Large peculiarities — what do you suppose he means?"

Crickets.

Sand I'd smuggled back from California slid from between the pages to my desk.

Maybe they were wondering what a blog was.

We expect college freshmen to feel at least as comfortable with self-expression as the burbling bloggers and writers of yesteryear. Something beyond stylized selfies must populate their social media streams, after all.

But every year I find that getting them to admit to feeling devoted or frustrated, to being peculiar in any way (much less in a large way), verges on impossible. And as someone who has read thousands of student essays over the past 10 years, few things are more dispiriting — and as the pages mount, soul-crushing — than those written by 18-year-olds who can't see themselves as peculiar.

But why can't they?

One reason reveals itself when someone finally asks the clarifying question: "Do you mean we can write with the word 'I'?"

The class looks up in wonder. This happens every semester.

Somewhere along the way, these young people were told by teachers that who they are in their writing ought to be divorced from who they are on their phones, or as the writer Grace Paley may have said, with their families and on their streets. They know a private "I" who experiences devotion and frustration. I see them text in class and talk and laugh and sometimes cry in the halls. They wear band T-shirts, often from my era, so I assume they have taste. I watch them read.

But no matter who they are in private, when I first encounter their writing, they use only the public passive voice: The text was read. The test was taken.

It's never: I read the text. I took the test. And it is never ever: I loved the text with queer devotion!

It's true that a student's writing style isn't everything and that much of what we call good writing cannot be taught. (Bad writing apparently has been.) One can be devoted to something — a band from the '90s, surfing, YHWH — without being able to put that devotion into words.

But my experience with students has me worried that years of "texts being read" and "tests being taken" have created the sense in them that whatever they're devoted to doesn't matter much to the rest of us — so long as they know the answers to our questions, so long as they pass the test. Writing so passively and with what they've been taught is appropriate and "objective" distance from topics they often seem disinterested in, these young people signal to me that they're still waiting for something important or real to happen to them.

Perhaps they feel that only someone who has lived through something momentous — like the teenagers who survived the Parkland, Fla., shooting — has earned the right to be heard. It's hard to imagine any of those young activists writing, "The rally was held because Congress was lobbied and guns were purchased."

But what about those queer devotions and frustrations, experiences and ideas that have stirred an individual heart into peculiarity?

A decade teaching young writers has taught me a great deal. First, we need to value more the complete and complex lives of young people: where they come from, how they express themselves. They have already lived lives worthy of our attention and appreciation.

Second, we need to encourage young people to take seriously those lives they've lived, even as they come to understand — often through schooling and just as often not — that there's a whole lot more we'll expect of them. Through this, we can help them learn to expect more of themselves, too.

Some lines from the great writer John McPhee have helped me consolidate these lessons over the years. Reflecting in *The New Yorker* in 2011, he wrote: "I once made a list of all the pieces I had written in maybe 20 or 30 years, and then put a check mark beside each one whose subject related to things I had been interested in before I went to college. I checked off more than 90 percent."

I always tell my students that I find these lines heartening. As a writer, I've spent more than 20 years reckoning with the joys and tragedies, the shame and grief, commitments to sports and study, of my own pre-college years. A good deal of my writing continues to take me to northern Florida where, when I was young, my father was killed by a drunken driver; the stories I continue to uncover there — about justice and race and addiction — begin with me at 5 and continue through my adolescence into this adult life.

Mr. McPhee, and Mr. Finnegan, too — who at 13, he writes, found in the oblitative sea that "the frontiers of the thinkable were quietly, fitfully edging back" — tell me that there's no good reason for me ever to stop going to Florida and attending to what happened there.

At the start of this semester, I read some passages from Barry Lopez's wintry classic "Arctic Dreams." The descriptions are incomparable, even as the setting itself remains ineffable: "The physical landscape is baffling in its ability to transcend whatever we would make of it. It is as subtle in its expression as turns of the mind, and larger than our grasp; and yet it is still knowable."

This has been the lesson for my students this term. Look around at what baffles you; look in at your peculiar self and how your own frontiers continue to edge back. Don't worry, you'll never fully grasp how the world transcends you and your ability to describe it. I surely don't, and I'm 41! But don't forget: You've been trying to understand and triumph in the world for as long as you can remember, even as a kid. Now go and write.

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