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Finding the "Lovely Lower Purposes" of Writing

Paul Walker

The first time I heard the word *bouldering* I was teaching at a university in Flagstaff, Arizona, a town that attracted many outdoor enthusiasts, especially rock climbers and river runners. One of my students had chosen the activity of bouldering for her open-topic short presentation, and unlike other presentations, her description created a lexical dilemma in my head. Bouldering, which she explained as the scaling of small rock faces without the assistance of ropes and other climbing equipment, is a decades-old term, a category of industrial recreation, a part of the adventurer's lexicon. But to me it was new, and for some reason it seemed wrong.

Readers of William Safire's *New York Times Magazine* column, "On Language," know that all words are new to each of us once, whether they were coined last week or last century. Many of us revel in Safire's explanations of the origin and meaning of idioms and neologisms because "new" words are thrilling, especially when they are pointedly accurate. We celebrate the coinage of new terms and phrases that clarify change in linguistic cultures and adaptations to changing technologies and circumstances. Because of my attachment to both words and scrambling up and around rocks, I felt an immediate aversion to *bouldering* when the student mentioned it as her primary hobby. On the surface, *bouldering* seems blundering and unimaginative, and I questioned and even resented its existence as representative of a broad range of activity. Admittedly, I have neither the power nor the desire to exert my taste for words to the rest of the English-speaking world; I don't claim to overrule the British mountaineers who coined the term nor the practitioners of what it has become now. Nevertheless, my initial and continued aversion to *bouldering* has led me to look more closely at the labels we use to make meaning in our modern lives—especially how those labels envelop more focused, deliberate purposes.

"I Hate Writing"

One of those areas of cultural capital is writing—the basic communicative effectiveness that is valuable in our information-rich society. Yet there is strong aversion to the act of writing among large portions

of our population. I know I am not the only writing instructor who encounters incoming first-year college students' "I hate writing" attitude. It is, I'm sure, disconcerting to each of us when students volunteer such a position during introductions on the first day of class or in an after-class conversation. Although there are multiple reasons for their (often proudly) dismissive attitude towards writing, one reason may be that students have limited ideas of what writing actually means, which stems from, in part, their growing up during a time when the definition of writing has been theoretically divided and subdivided and categorized and recategorized so frequently that even we as writing teachers are unsure how to adequately define it.

Nevertheless, our uncertainty of writing's scope and particulars may be a positive thing in terms of disciplinary progress. Frank McCourt once gave a Depression-influenced critique of instant gratification, and I think it applies to writing scholars and writers in interesting ways. Writers and writing teachers individually strive to firmly define writing to achieve some kind of gratification in doing so, driven by a cultural and possibly biological taxonomic desire. But we might all be better served by a delayed fulfillment of this dream. McCourt believed contemporary children are cheated out of the *longing* for something unfulfilled: "The dream is something that's possible of being fulfilled. I think this is what the children nowadays have been denied—the dream." He meant that dreams, rather than gratification, are more likely to produce positive qualities in children, such as patience and persistence. Likewise, as long as a *dream* of understanding writing remains a possibility, it is pursued vigorously, and innovation in its philosophy and pedagogy occurs accordingly.

Of note, however, is McCourt's comparison of what happens to someone who receives nothing as opposed to someone who receives immediate gratification. McCourt and his family, having nothing, told stories. His high school students told stories also, but they were rehashed stories—"what they watched last night, or what they listened to last night." In contrast, McCourt and his family "talked about what we *did*." In this example, the act of storytelling remains constant, but the subject changes as new generations discover what society embraces as useful cultural capital. Today, media entertainment and students' strong social ties outside their family are cultural bonds that replace the novelty of one's *own* experience with the commonality of *others'* experience. One could argue that as students move through the grades of our educational system, they progressively do less writing about themselves and more writing about other people's stories. We recognize the value of analytical, critical, and argumentative writing as part of the development of the same in our thinking, but it is possible that as

the subject of writing shifts from the personal to the general in early stages of secondary schooling, the interest in writing itself changes as well. Writing objectively can become drudgery because it is contained within a culture and assessment system students are inclined to resist. As we emphasize the beneficial functions of writing that have been researched and theorized by vigorous scholarly efforts, student gratification from writing other people's stories may dissolve even as its disciplinary value expands.

Mark Twain understood that knowing a thing too much detracts from its holistic appeal, and that with the acquisition of esoteric knowledge one loses not so much the exoteric, but the novel experience attained with one's own senses alone. Writing of his training as a river steamboat pilot, he describes the first sunset on the river as beautiful for its colors and interaction with the river's surface and foliage. But once he learned to "read" the river, each of those beautiful elements changed into something of imminent concern or indicative of what was occurring below the surface that could affect the steamer:

> Now when I had mastered the language of this water and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the majestic river! . . . All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat. (78-80)

Twain is not advocating a constant innocence or unlearned state in order to provide continuous moments of unprecedented romance or beauty in the landscape. He simply recognizes that our quest for usefulness displaces the pure emotion of first-time encounters with the world. The utility of existence, subsistence, and abundance can overshadow what was once so aesthetically appealing. Walker Percy would even deem impossible Twain's description of a vivid experience on the river involving the beautiful sunset that caused Twain's reflection. According to Percy, with word-of-mouth and the pervasive media imagery surrounding us, everything we see is instantly compared to our expectations for that thing, and that authentic experience is no longer sought within a lived experience itself, but by the authority of an expert's validation. Writing for pleasure and learning through writing's pleasurable satisfaction are sidestepped for the sake of procurement. The objective complexities of academic writing, including constant validation or invalidation by teachers, may keep too many students away from the antidote that professional writers hold: control of the subject and its inherent motivational power.

The scientist Carol Yoon observed, "To order and name life is to have a sense of the world around, and, as a result, what one's place is in it" ("Reviving"). Taxonomy is one method of understanding the objects of our experience because it makes clear our subjective stance, for *to name* is *to control*. Acknowledging the historical and political implications of naming and controlling, a taxonomy of writing has produced numerous careers that are distinguished and controlled by genre, medium, occupation, or graduate program. We are placed or we place ourselves in a category and subsequently limit each other narrowly. Those limits have a societal and economic purpose, but increased categorization may also limit our students in unacknowledged ways. By breaking down writing into parts and processes and genres and specialties, we may be producing writing-haters with the same unwitting conviction of climbers who saw bouldering as great for beginners. Harold Raeburn claimed that "on a single fifteen-foot boulder one may find a series of climbs containing all the characteristic difficulties one will encounter in a whole day's climb on a great rock-peak" (126). But G.W. Young, another British mountaineer and the credited coiner of the term, disagreed because bouldering, with its emphasis on skills, provides the beginner no feel for the "rhythm and balance" (153) of the craft—something much more holistic than taxonomic detail.

At Our "Leisure"

Aldo Leopold noted in 1949 the scientific epigram that *ontogeny repeats phylogeny*, meaning "that the development of each individual repeats the evolutionary history of the race" (176). The industrial revolution quickly increased the pace of urbanization, and the crowded cities led to a surge of purposeful naturalist adventuring epitomized by Theodore Roosevelt at the turn of the twentieth century. This adventuring was aptly termed re-creation. Whereas just one or two generations previously the surrounding landscape was something to grapple with for survival, now the re-creating of the "primeval" conditions provided a restorative escape from the industrial pains of urban life. While the trope of escape from teeming city life remains, people from both urban and rural areas increasingly view recreation as leisure challenges—problems to be solved without the risk of life attached. But even Leopold underestimated the impact of technological change and mechanization on sportsmanship. The gadgetry of recreation, according to Leopold, "has draped the American outdoorsman with an infinity of contraptions, all offered as aids to self-reliance, hardihood, marksmanship, but too often functioning as substitutes for them" (180). In the six decades since Leopold's reflection, those outdoor virtues have been turned into abstractions for the busy person hankering somehow to connect with

nature. Not only have our gadgets grown exponentially, but we have made gadgets of ourselves.

The nature of nature activities in the last few decades has altered how we approach leisure. Leisure in its early use represented opportunities during time not spent laboring for sustenance, limiting it nearly exclusively to the wealthy. But *leisure* increasingly connotes easy, relaxed, or less challenging effort, which, when applied to recreational activities, means that advancing technology makes finding fish and sighting deer less time-consuming, and climbing mountains less strenuous and less risky to one's life. The irony of this, then, is that a job, or labor, is required to sustain the expense of engaging in these leisure activities—rather than laboring to live, we are working to make recreation *easier* by purchasing speedy bass boats, GPS devices, subzero down parkas, rock climbing shoes, and rifle scopes. In fact, Adam Gopnik's "Devil's Theory of Innovation" suggests the more frivolous and easy our daily challenges, the more innovative our gadgetry (52).

Leopold, along with Wallace Stegner, Edward Abbey, and Wendell Berry, question industrial recreation because participants are driven by technology. Essentially, the issue revolves around the definition of success: obtaining food for survival means one more day or week or year of living, while obtaining food for fun, or engaging leisurely in activity that was historically engaged in obtaining food for survival brings, say, personal satisfaction and occasionally money and fame. For the historical hunter / gatherer, the trek up the mountain, the canoe trip down the river, or the carving of a fishing pole were essential to ultimate success—these tasks were necessary to hunt for food, and if food was obtained, life continued. For the modern outdoors person, the success is still in the completion of the task, but the methods for completing tasks have been subdivided so far that one has to distinguish, both to oneself and to others, that one is a climber, hunter, fisher, river runner, biker, hiker, or camper. Each of these activities, at one time collectively necessary for food-finding, is now a purpose in itself.

The intentionality of these activities reminds me of what Ian Frazier describes as "lovely sort of lower purposes." Reminiscing on his childhood "doings" in the woods near his home, Frazier remembers distinctly the day he and his buddies asked themselves, "What *are* we doing?" effectively ending the carefree days of simply going to the woods after school or on a Saturday. Around the age of twelve, telling his mother that he was going to the woods seemed inadequate because he was unable to explain the purpose of being there. In other words, the lower purpose, or no purpose, ended with adolescence. Frazier uses his example to wonder about all of the higher purposes that we ascribe to grown-up activities and tasks, asking if a lack of purpose is

even possible once one becomes culturally aware that one must indeed have an explanation for the question, "What *are* you doing?"

Bouldering, to me, is an adult justification for something that as children would be scrambling up small cliffs or layers of slickrock for the intrinsic, in-the-moment idea that it seems like something fun or interesting to do—to "use up energy" as my 5-year-old daughter puts it. I grew up in southeast Utah amid an abundance of sandstone bluffs, knobs, natural arches, Anasazi ruins, and wind- and water-eroded pits and formations in the rocks. If I encountered slickrock formation, I looked for a way to scramble up, around, or through. Like Mt. Everest's appeal to Sir Edmund Hillary, the challenge of this scrambling was the mere existence of the rock, for unlike the ancient puebloans, I did not require the protection of these cliffs from enemies or the elements in order to sustain life. And yet, I was not risking my own life or a sherpa's life in expending this energy, and as Frazier discussed, I never felt the urge to label what I was doing, or give it a purpose beyond doing something fun. Furthermore, my simple tennis shoes were adequate to the task, and if I was unable to scramble up at one point, I tried another until I found a way or decided to try something else. Generally, my purpose was simply to keep going until I was called back by a parent, and only if an adult mentioned "the view" would I care about it. I implicitly recognized that the fun was had on the way to those heights, for I often wasn't able to find a way to the top. Thus, this activity never had a higher purpose—I never thought to measurably increase my skill in scrambling on these rocks, nor did I rate the areas I climbed according to their difficulty. Climbing that sandstone was simply what we did.

Upon hearing the first and subsequent use of *bouldering* by my students, I realized that not only did my "lower purpose" activity have a name, but there was also specific equipment and ratings and even people who could be called boulderers. One student said it was the only type of climbing she did—a rock climber who preferred bouldering. Is that like a writer who prefers diagramming sentences? The elevation of an activity into a sport reduces the cultural value of any of its intrinsic aspects. I picture kids herding sheep in the Alps scrambling up rockfalls while the herd grazed, puzzled at the focused seriousness of the first mountain climbers who pass by on their way to climb the craggy peaks above. Did the mountain climbers disdain the youngsters' casualness for rock? I recall the surreality of reading travel articles by people claiming to "discover" the sandstone formations of southern Utah, and the influx of jeepers and mountain bikers into the area once it became "known." We already knew it, for the isolated red desert landscape was my childhood "woods." In the high-desert Colorado Plateau, we didn't have patches of forests, we didn't have creeks, and

we didn't have treehouses. While other kids, like Frazier, were doing nothing in the woods or in the creeks, we did nothing on hobgoblin rocks. The equivalents of *bouldering* for kids who grew up in more lush environments would be going *woodsing* or *creeking*. Unlike those unused terms, *bouldering* has been defined as both "practice" and a "sport in its own right" ("Bouldering"). A sport implies purpose, and I resist such a definition in the same way I believe we should resist singularity of purpose in categories of writing (academic, professional, creative, etc.). Categorization has its place and purpose, but purpose need not always be in place.

From Practice to Sport

Rather than *bouldering* being a sport in itself, I view it as an unnecessary subcategorization of a larger activity. Mountaineering in its essence presents a legitimate challenge to its enthusiasts, enough to warrant significant training and resources to participate. Rock climbing requires more precise skills than climbing high mountains, because the focus is on scaling rock faces that would be impossible to scale in freezing weather with parkas and gloves. Both, however, require practice, either in acclimation to the altitude or in strengthening the muscles and feel for clinging to rock walls. My concern with *bouldering* is that it is a practice activity morphed into a sport—a specialty that, for some, achieves equal status with its parent. Like a golfer skilled in long driving whose entrance into long-drive contests alters his training and practice to the point of abandoning the full game of golf, those who latch onto bouldering reduce their participation in the more complete rock-climbing experience.

Specialization, that bane and boon to academia, likewise increases in a sport as the level of pay or "play" increases. In truth, any professional or Olympic athlete is far above the physical and talent levels of even the best recreational athletes, and the degree of ability between a professional's "specialty" and the specialties of his or her teammates or opponents is likely very small, but significant enough at that level to make a difference. In the same way that disciplinary minutia can confuse, fluster, or inspire the non-specialist, the sheer variety of sport and leisure activities influence young amateurs. We have unwittingly split our entertainment and recreation (and scholarship) into a million pieces, so a million people are known for one thing. Ricky Henderson is known for stealing the most bases in baseball history, but it was his talent at getting on base via hits or walks that put him in position to steal those bases and get into the Hall of Fame. What we are known for rarely encompasses our entire skillset or persona, whether we are a sports star, actor, or professor. Our preference for tightly defined titles

reflects a seeming cultural resistance to broad and inclusive categories when exclusive taxonomy is available.

The recreational or leisure specialties that have emerged from historical necessity for daily sustenance now add to the purposeful sorting of our society. For our generation, the satisfaction in hunting, fishing, camping, and other activities rests in the honing of skills, re-enacting rather than applying those skills to the now unnecessary purpose of survival. Since the larger focus is gone, purposes are invented or developed, leading to competitions, difficulty ratings, and personal bests that provide the continued justification for leisure recreation. While I am not opposed to personal improvement and skill contests, it is the increasingly narrow classifications within a sport that minimizes the combination of several skills and actions required for participation. When those skills and actions are removed from the whole, the depth and richness of both the mother sport and the spinoff arguably decrease. Consider G.W. Young's assessment of bouldering:

> The introduction to climbing customarily inflicted upon novices is practice upon single rocks, low cliffs, quarries and erratic boulders, with or without the aid of a rope held from above. The 'bouldering,' or problem climbing, may serve to discover a talent or encourage an inclination, but it is of little use as commencing practice. The scrambles are short. They give no opportunity for a groundwork in rhythm or for balance in motion. (152-153)

He recommends bouldering only for experts because boulders don't provide the right amount of risk to body that builds courage and respect for the rock, and its potential easiness may lead the beginner to a false sense of accomplishment. Young feels that the best start for beginners is to climb higher faces with an expert who can provide enough rope for safety but not so much for the beginner to rely on it for traction. Imitation and prolonged movement, Young states, will "infect him with the beginnings of rhythm." Rhythm and balance are the constants for the expert climber—the various problems that arise during a climb are secondary to the trained muscles that are stretched and tested in difficult conditions.

Likewise, effective writing requires rhythm and balance, and the teaching of writing must challenge the student safely while avoiding undeserved praise. As a university writing professor, I am expected to teach students how to think and write in an academic setting and beyond. The scope and challenge of this task grows in enormity each time I encounter another theory or a student who defies what all other theories have addressed. Numerous approaches to teaching writing exist, and certain methods, assignments, and activities seem to be proven effective for nearly all writing programs. But program direc-

tors and instructors must still manage the expectations of students, faculty, parents, the administration, and potential employers of students. Not to oversimplify, but the process of climbing 8,000+ meter peaks is analogous to the completion of a first-year writing course or sequence because a semester or year is made up of smaller efforts that collude into a whole. Mountaineers must first establish a base camp to acclimate to the altitude; then they must sortie supplies to one or two upper camps. Lastly, they must make the climb to the top, with the final triumph lasting only a minute before elements force them to return to less threatening conditions.

A writing course requires establishing a base camp where one can become acclimated to the environment. Students must be made aware of the rigorous expectations for their writing after high school, and must take the time to adjust to the new altitude. Shorter assignments, focused on certain skills like analysis or synthesis, are like the sorties that climbers take up the peak to drop off supplies and continue to get used to the thin air. Bouldering, according to Young, would be like these short assignments to help climbers practice anticipated issues in a larger climb. These shorter writings should help a student accomplish the larger task of a well-supported, persuasive paper for which the reward will be, like higher or more technical climbs, more challenging assignments in other classes.

From Sport to Practice

The concept of *bouldering* as a sport on its own brings to mind the idea of an entire semester or sequence spent on one writing type. For example, instead of helping students to find a rhythm and balance to the craft of writing an academic paper, the course might only teach students to analyze texts. This would no doubt benefit the students; they would gain a keen understanding of rhetoric, close reading, and the ways authors appeal to audience or use words, as well as learn to identify contextual indices of intent, motivation, and personalities of several authors. And it could be argued that in analyzing texts, one is writing an argument, just as people who spend most of their leisure time bouldering would call themselves climbers. But as Young said, the "scrambles would be too short" and the students would not have as much opportunity for risk by which their ethical and lexical courage might grow through imitation and prolonged movement within the difficult task of writing their own persuasive pieces.

However, analogies such as this are prone to produce orthodoxy in curricula. Writing itself has been broken down into so many categories that several careers, including mine, are dependent on one aspect of it and therefore invested in continuing its existence. The typical first-

year writing course or sequence requires students to write some sort of analysis paper, a synthesis paper, maybe a narrative paper, all followed by short and long argument papers with integrated research. I'm supposed to be an expert in these skills, although I can't remember when I last wrote an as-directed, three-page analysis paper. As someone who is still honing writing skills within whatever feel for language I have gained, I consistently question whether these "bouldering" writing activities actually help my students effectively find the rhythm and balance of the whole of writing.

We writing teachers precipitously defend our curricula while frequently decrying the quality of writing of our students. The adoption of rhetoric as the primary content for first-year composition courses encouraged the piece-by-piece analysis of how writing occurs and performs, until there arose still-brewing resistance to standardization of the writing process and the components of *academic writing*. The nature of composition—by definition putting things together to form a whole—is overrun by efforts to make writing more functionally specific in early grades. The "fun" and subjective aspects of writing, if grasped at all, are suppressed when "transactive" writing is emphasized and assessed. By the time students reach their first-year writing class, should we be surprised that we have to explain to them how to freewrite? In fact, freewriting resembles bouldering in the sense put forward here because it is a systemization of something that doesn't need a name; by labeling it so, freewriting becomes un-free. A name allows it to be assigned, theorized, and morphed into something within the terms of its "owners." Much like how *parkour* and *freerunning* make intangible free movement into a tangible and marketable activity, freewriting, now useful, becomes an *assignment*.

Amateur poetry, humorous stories, diaries, blogs, Facebook, and self-motivated narratives are some of the "lovely lower purposes" of the act of putting pencil to paper. We write without thinking that we are "writing" a functional document. I climbed many sandstone boulders and buttes without knowing that I was bouldering, and by doing the unnamed, I was freed from the pressure of the purposes that names bring. I can still climb those places as if my muscles and brain never forgot how to do it. I know that rubber tennis shoe soles stick wonderfully to slickrock sandstone, and I can walk up or down inclines that make my wife, who did not "boulder" when she was younger, extremely nervous. Yet even I have to shake off that adult feeling—*what are you doing?*—that comes so quickly each time I revisit those childhood rocks. The top, often unreachable, is more of a goal now than I remember. The view from the top, when reached, is now what we talk about when we get there and when we return.

So what am I advocating? Frank McCourt's solution to the disciplinary problems of children was to "give them nothing, and to hand it out in front of the courthouse steps." In that sense, I am offering nothing: no new term, no new theory, no new way of understanding the world or of teaching writing. I suggest only that we recall the enjoyment of the craft of writing: the satisfaction in the nuance of words, the triumph in searching for and maybe finding the perfect way of expressing thought, and the small surprises that attract us to composing words and sentences and paragraphs in various ways on a page. These are the "high places" of writing that resist labels and overtheorizing but still attract our rapt attention:

> There are high places
> that don't invite us,
> sharp shapes, glacier-
> scraped faces, whole
> ranges whose given names
> slip off. Any such relation
> as we try to make
> refuses to take. Some
> high lakes are not for us,
> some slick escarpments.
> I'm giddy with thinking
> where thinking can't stick.
>
> —*"No Names," by Kay Ryan*

Life has varying phases and degrees of significance, and throughout we hope to learn propriety for the situations we encounter or seek out while retaining that higher ground of personal identity and expression. Whether in writing or life, there is value in resisting purposeful adulthood's inevitability by permitting its purposes and categories to "slip off" once in a while. Only then can we see the full imposition of our nomenclature.

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