On Frogs, Poems, and Teaching at a Rural Community College

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My father grew up on a dairy farm along the Flint River in Michigan’s Lapeer County. His father raised and milked cattle, and his mother taught Longfellow and arithmetic in a succession of local schoolhouses. Those two rhythms—the particular, deliberate rhythm of country life and the equally organic cadence of community learning—form a strong, double-thudding heartbeat at the core of everything I do. Thinking of the Flint River now, I see the sugar shack my uncle built along its banks to house his evaporating pans for boiling off maple syrup and his huge cider press for the pressing of cider in the fall. The “shack” is actually several large rooms encased in wood from barns that are no longer barns, though we all know their stories. There, every fall and every spring, my family gathers to extract the sweetness from the woods and orchards around us. And there, every gathering features both the lively music of our Irish American heritage and deeply wrought teaching stories. Of my dad’s siblings and their spouses, six are or have been teachers in Michigan’s public schools. In that sugar shack, over the twenty years it has been sending clouds of steam rising over the river flats, knots of teachers have stood alternately raising their voices in song, taking a turn pouring off the rich liquids we distilled, or unraveling for each other the integral intersections of their lives with the lives of literally thousands of students from schools across the state. Students sing and play and work there, too. My uncle’s four children all encountered his high school
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English courses, and many, many other current and former students of his and my aunt’s show up at the shack to bring a load of apples or firewood, to collect sap, to stand in the sweet steam listening to Uncle Paul discourse on sugaring in as lively a voice as ever he used to help them into Beowulf. This student-teacher pattern is repeated throughout the shack: my own mother taught me and my two brothers high school English as well, and I am only one of several of my cousins who has chosen the profession that we saw enacted, in classrooms and kitchens and on the banks of the Flint River, throughout our childhoods.

My parents left the farmland of southeast Michigan for the north a year or so before I was born. They now live on a farm of their own on the north shore of Lake Charlevoix, that slender finger pointing two of northern Michigan’s rivers the way into the greater lake that so strongly patterns life on the west side of the state. Although I spent much of my early years on the ancestral farm in Lapeer County, I actually grew up and came to understand my own identity in the north woods, among the beech and maple of my folks’ forty acres. Seasonal change is dramatic across Michigan, but in the north it is endowed with special significance, and along Lake Michigan the drama of the seasons is fierce, relentless, and terribly beautiful. I learned to mark the changes with the movement of geese, with a bushel of seed potatoes, with the angry snarl of chainsaws in the fall and the special pleasure of dressing by a woodstove on frosty mornings. I’ve seen waterspouts dance across the big lake in a summer storm and followed the twisted architecture of ice along the dunes in the winter, and these regional realities have led me to yearn, always, for the part of the state where I experienced the challenging beauty of such things. It is not surprising, then, that I now develop my own teaching stories at West Shore Community College, on a campus where out my window I can just see a portion of the Lincoln River nodding to me as it runs the last ten-mile stretch to Lake Michigan. I have tried living elsewhere—in a central Wisconsin mill town, in Boston, in Ann Arbor. But the rhythms of these places couldn’t satisfy the hunger I have to know what the big lake looks like on a blustery fall day or to walk into a local grocery store or gas station and know that some of my students will likely be working in the building.

Choosing to work at a rural community college isn’t all about environment, of course. I teach five courses a semester during the regular school year, meaning I work with between 100 and
130 students each semester, a load very similar to that faced by high school teachers like my mother and uncle. The small community aspects of my job are countered somewhat by this load: intimacy and familiarity are encouraged by the close environment but simultaneously challenged by the large number and endless variety of students with whom I spend my time. My course load also makes it more difficult for me to do this, to share my ideas and reflections with an intellectual community through writing. When I am immersed in the current of a semester, however, I like to think that I am living as deeply as one can the life of this region. Because I have so many students and because they come from all over the district and from so many backgrounds and have experienced such a range of what west Michigan has to offer, I truly feel more aware of where I am. To a large extent, this is because I rely pedagogically on reflective writing in all my classes. I ask my students each semester to live writing lives, and one of the consequences of this is that I am made more strongly aware of how their various experiences shape their understanding of the courses we run together and how these courses might, in turn, be affecting their experiences of the landscape and community we inhabit. Working at a community college, then, deliberately puts me at the heart of the community, or at least in a place where the multiple currents of being human hereabouts dramatically intersect.

I drive to work seven miles down dirt roads through cornfields and stands of alfalfa for dairy cows. The residences I pass are misshapen old farmhouses, trailer homes, newer homes from the 1990s whose suburban look feels a bit alien, isolated as they are among the oaks and maples of the Manistee National Forest. This is a world that I’ve celebrated ever since the first time I drove a spile into a maple tree, ever since the moment of joy I had when as a third grader I read to my class a personal experience essay about cutting Christmas trees. For me, it is relatively easy to relax into joy about where I live. I have a good job and even some time to spend freely in a canoe or with my dog in the dunes. My students, though, have a more complex relationship with this landscape. The district served by the college has one of the highest unemployment rates in Michigan, and a sense of isolation, of being cut off from the dream of a good job and a real future, runs its riptide through our campus. The landscape here can seem a wasteland where the rusted-out Chevy and the rotted woodpile stand in sullen recognition of cold winters and cold prospects. But my students, like
me, also are aware of the uncanny brilliance of a sunset over the lake, of the sudden rushing white when trilliums fill our springtime woods, of the quiet cold of October mornings when an arrow connects hunter and deer in an ancient ritual. The landscape here is not, or not merely, romantic idyll, because it creates livelihoods for many who are able to stay, but it often offers a very difficult hope, the succulence of a morel mushroom it took agonizing hours to find. Some teaching stories ache with helplessness or throb with violence. Even here, in a world I’ve always known to be beautiful, or maybe especially here, the frustrations of poverty and parochialism can be suffocating, and the college writhes with such tensions as often as it lights with creativity and hope.

Place, a physical place, shapes us and inscribes our writing. It inspires us or saddens us or angers us, and it draws the story out.

Lorraine Anderson

Lorraine Anderson is an editor at the Traverse City Record Eagle, a fine northwest Michigan institution. I like this quotation of hers because it emphasizes the very active role of place in the writing process. For Anderson, as for me, our region is not merely a place we write about but rather is a landscape that draws forth our words. Up here the geography requires, even demands, response. Wildly Socratic, it continues to ask challenging questions of its denizens, and we decline to answer at our peril. I came to work at West Shore in part because there are certain questions that are asked here in patterns delightfully familiar to me, about when to plant tomatoes, about where to move several feet of snow, about knocking back aspens to let wild apple trees catch the sun. But there are other questions asked by this landscape that I’m just beginning to frame answers to, and I know I have a long way to go. The main town in Mason County, the county that holds both West Shore Community College and my forty acres, is Ludington. Ludington is most noted for its presence on the lake and the car ferry that takes passengers to Wisconsin. It has some of the most magnificent beaches in the country because of the undulating dunes that luxuriate unimpeded north of here through a popular state park and a wilderness area. Accordingly, Ludington pushes tourism and has been making a concerted effort to develop its considerable lakefront with parks and luxury condominiums. Across the street from the crown jewel of such development, however, sits an abandoned factory and
warehouse complex. When I ask my composition students to write descriptive profiles of place, this old factory proves to be a magnet; I’ve taught eleven sections of composition since I’ve come to West Shore, and in six of those classes, a student has decided to tackle the complex as a subject. The rusted hulk casts a deep shadow over the harbor and on the consciousness of my students. In revision, I try to get them to imagine the possibilities—what could happen to that space, how might the factory be rehabilitated. But they are reluctant to travel far down this road. For them, the question raised by this misshapen oddity of the harbor front isn’t so much what do we do next with it, but how do we get out from under its shadow. Borrowing from Lorraine Anderson again, such acquiescence to the terrible inertia of symbols like the factory complex is what “saddens” me about the physical place I inhabit. My students accept a great many things about themselves and their places, and their resignation is a frequent answer to the hard-edged dramas of our shared environment.

Last spring a newly married and very young couple took one of my writing courses. Both of them were very bright and engaging and wrote exceptionally well; they also stood out from the other students in part because of their relationship but also because the bulk of the rest of the class consisted of dual-enrolled high school students even younger than the newly married couple. Observing them in compassionate and earnest engagement with their younger classmates, I became convinced that they could very successfully develop their talents in the teacher-training program. When I suggested that they consider taking a few education courses, though, I met with considerable resistance. I suppose that I have worked in teacher education long enough and have felt the need for good teachers keenly enough that I am sometimes more evangelical in such circumstances than I should be: there is considerable presumption involved in anyone, no matter how experienced or careful and well meaning, interfering with vocational decisions. But when I read the young woman’s fine and thoughtful research paper on attention deficit disorder and the young man’s equally insightful comparison-contrast essay on teaching styles, I redoubled my efforts. Of course, I’m discovering an awkward prejudice here as this paragraph lurches towards a lament about some students’ “acceptance” of an associate’s degree as terminal. Telling this story now allows me to worry back to how well I listened to the stories they brought to me, whether I quieted the roar of my enthusiasm
enough to let their needs and interests surface. I do expect this young couple will live profoundly involved and fulfilling lives in any careers they choose. But the reason that their story comes to my mind now is that neither of these promising young folks believed, at the time of my earnest promptings, that they could become good teachers. Something analogous to Ludington’s old hulk of a factory had cast its shadow over their understanding of their abilities and talents.

At a community college, as with any small institution, employees wear many hats. Although the bulk of my teaching load consists of composition and literature courses, I was actually hired to develop the education program, because a great many of West Shore’s students transfer into schools of education in Michigan’s universities. This means that some of my courses are introductory-level education courses where students explore whether and how teaching might be a vocation for them. About half of my education students are traditional eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds not quite sure yet of their road. The other half tend to be women aged twenty-five to thirty-five, most of them with families, many of them single. They already know a good deal about children and about the realities of the region, and they bring strong, direct, purposeful questions into my classroom. The concerns of these mothers, working students all, are sincere articulations of what this region asks of its inhabitants. My students know about child support, child abuse, alcoholism, welfare, and children having children. They have firsthand knowledge of the legal system, of racial and sexual discrimination, of the alienation from school that comes from poor self-esteem and a culture of resignation. I have students who want teaching to be not just about answering their own considerable needs and interests but also about addressing important local and social concerns. My curriculum, then, is partly directed by such concerns and issues, which are not particular to our part of Michigan, of course, but are definitely exacerbated by the relative isolation, and the relative poverty, of a largely rural district where winter bites hard and employment can be desperately seasonal.

Trying to frame my own answers to the tough questions, I seek solace in the pieces of landscape that remain familiar to me. I am sitting right now in my library at home. Behind me are two of my favorite artifacts, one of them a huge oak bookshelf from the high school library where my mother brought hundreds of students, including my brothers and me, to research term papers long ago.
She is now the librarian in a new building, but she made sure I received this old bookshelf, which still proudly bears the word FICTION, during the move. Next to this shelf is my great-grandfather’s teaching chair. He, like his daughter (my father’s mother), taught in a community school not far from the Flint River. A picture of him standing with his class in 1902 sits on a library shelf next to several books of poems by Robert Frost, a favorite poet of all the language teachers of my family. This room has a huge bay window, looking west, lakeward. Right now the sky is gray and heavy, but warm; the last of our snow washed out in the rain last night and with the pond free of ice, frogs of all kinds are not waiting for evening but are filling the afternoon with jubilation, just as I imagine they are on my father’s farm where he pauses to listen beside his black iron cauldron of boiling sap. The frogs rejoice in “these flowery waters and these watery flowers / from snow that melted only yesterday,” as Frost wrote in one of the few poems crafted during his Michigan sojourn (lines 11–12). Out of such things—the shelves of poems that connect me to my mother and to learning to love words, the chair in which my great-grandfather sat reading student themes, and the long, gray warmth of sky drawing forth excited frog songs—out of such things I find words and images to use in building a reply to the harder demands of my physical place.

This essay can’t be about solving the problems of poverty in rural places like the district served by West Shore Community College. I can’t use frogs and Frost poems to stem the tide of violence against women and children or correct inequities in education and opportunity across my region. But this essay can be about valuing place and allowing the richness of a community to invigorate not just my writing, but also my curricula. The point of the frogs in this essay is that I can hear them, right now. They are a part of my conscious mind as I type, and they are performing, at this moment, rituals that are important to me beyond their considerable inspirational value to my psyche. Amphibians are indicator species: they are more susceptible to pollutants and dramatic changes in environment than other species are. Hearing them in such abundance is, in part, a signal that the natural world I inhabit is functioning richly and powerfully, that the play of life is working as it should be. The frogs and the maple trees and my students and I are denizens of a community in which we all depend in some measure on each other. This ecological reality is a good
way to frame a curriculum; my students, all of them, bring into my courses webs of connection to each other and to environmental realities both inspiring and challenging. In my place I can’t afford not to hear the frogs singing or the songs and laughter, anger and tears in the questions of my students. I need to let the realities of my place have a role in my classroom. Most of my education students will become teachers. Many of them will be teachers, if not in Mason County, at least in places very like it, and one of the many, many things I will ask of them is that, as teachers, they learn to listen to the realities of their places, to let the curriculum be about what their students are about. I can’t use frogs to fight inequity, but I can learn to listen to students in the way I’ve learned to identify a cricket frog’s chatter and know what it means to me in physical and spiritual ways. Hearing frogs, right now, reminds me that my curricula need to be aware of the realities brought into my room by the other inhabitants that share my space; their needs are in so many ways my own. I know this as surely as I recognize now that when my teaching relatives brought teaching stories into their kitchens and into the sugar shack, they were working. Telling stories about teaching, especially the difficult stories, is a way of working out the problems, embodying them in a place where they can be carefully handled.

This summer I will teach a course in Michigan writing to interested undergraduates. A great many and a great variety of artists have wrestled with the environmental realities of Michigan, and my own students and I, of course, will be Michigan writers, too, our words reflecting on our place and on others who have similarly reflected. I will use Native American stories, the words of French missionaries who canoed our coastline, and a wry, exploratory novel of Michigan’s frontier by Caroline Kirkland to set a foundation. From there we will wander into the recent century and an explosion of words, some of them grim and some of them celebratory, all of them attempting to reply to the exciting, challenging peninsulas that draw their stories out. I suspect I will sneak some Robert Frost into this course, at least “Spring Pools,” the poem I excerpted above. I’ll do this because this exploration of Michigan writing is, for me, an organic development of what my family has delighted in doing for generations, sharing words in a community of learners. My mother, my uncle, my grandmother, my great-grandfather, I myself, and so many others connected to us by blood, by love, by the realities of a classroom’s walls, have carefully chosen words
that reverberate, froglike, in the places in which they are shared. Saying poems is a way to share the joy I feel in where I live, a place I’ve been learning how to inhabit well all of my life. The curriculum I will teach this summer is important to me, in part, because it courses like maple sap with a powerful love of language that I have felt since my mother first read to me, since I first heard Uncle Paul recite a Frost poem or describe his sugaring process, since my father first gave me the specific names of the trees in his woods and the frogs in his own wetland. This course will be important also because it will allow my students and me to learn from the variety of ways Michigan’s writers have responded to where they are. We will read bruised, brokenhearted words and bold, exuberant prose. We will face hard questions and hear delighted songs, and we will have, before us, a challenge to raise our own voices in chorus. Reading and writing poems communally can allow us to discover, together, language for the personal and communal responses to the geography insistently tugging our stories toward the surface.

Bibliography
