There’s not much about academic life that’s personal. At least, no professional academic is supposed to take any of the activities that make up an academic life personally. The trajectories of our careers—getting hired, published, tenured, promoted, reviewed—are documented in terms of qualifications, criteria, standards. These words feel scientific; they carry with them the respectable aura of observation and impartiality, and academics are encouraged to take comfort in the procedures that determine how—and whether—they will live their professional lives.

Yet of course all academics know how personal a professional life in a university is. What could be more personal than your job interview, sitting on a bed in a small room in the Washington Hilton explaining what you have to offer while They—the nodding Search Committee—declare what they want? How does a writer not take personally a letter rejecting a deeply thought-out essay that begins, “Must we have these ‘a funny thing happened to me on the way to the cocktail party’ openings?” (First line of first rejection letter of first article sent out by HCR to College English.) Or the rejection of a manuscript from a group of Anonymous Reviewers, one of whom begins his/her response with a pitying “I always admired Ronald and Roskelly’s work before. . . .” (Comment from reviewer of book manuscript by HCR and KJR, later published.) How is a tenure-track professor supposed to use this anonymous evaluation of her published work: “I find this popular, chatty, and obvious.” (Written comments from KJR’s fourth-year tenure review.) How does a member of a departmental community fail to feel personally hurt by a tenure vote that will cause him to leave that community, lose his job, his house, his students? (Both of us have lost good colleagues and friends to such tenure votes.)

The academic life is a personal life. Professional activities and decisions are also deeply personal ones in great measure because writing and teaching are activities of the spirit and imagination. Evaluations, recommendations, reviews and other instruments that document performance comment on those spiritual, imaginative enterprises. Why can’t we get real about just how personal our professional lives are and stop pretending that what goes on in a classroom, a department and in our profession is “just business?”
And yet the pressure to reject the personal is strong. The bias in a profession still trying to believe its own press remains with the objectifiable and standardizable. (As the comment from the CE reviewer above suggests: it denigrates personal narrative as a “proper” form for an article as much as it criticizes the essay itself. And, as the comment from Kate’s colleague’s shows: it rejects personal narrative and objects to her personalized relationship with her audience. As you can see, neither one of us has ever forgotten these comments.) In the face of that pressure, and an odd, though real need to feel protected from the personal, academics have a hard time asserting it in their writing, teaching, and—maybe most damaging—in the decisions they make with and about one another in tenure votes, curricular decisions, and promotion and merit evaluations.

Maybe this desire for escape from the personal is especially strong in English departments, where writing forms the essence of both subject and method. The inherently and inescapably messy, idiosyncratic, and defiantly subjective nature of writing and reading is a burden to teachers trying to work within a system that forces quantification, data, results, and hierarchy. So teachers assign grades to stories written by eighteen-year olds about parents dying; they evaluate language clearly shaped by poor schooling; they try to justify—in some terms they can live with—a grade for the performance of self that writing is and must be.

Yet, we recognized the depth of the conflict between personal and professional in teaching and in the whole academic life only dimly at first. As graduate students who had returned to school “late”—Hepsie was a public school teacher; Kate a secretary—we knew our decision, and thus our work, was personal, requiring the sacrifice of security, family time, and money. And as beginning professors who rode the first wave of rhetoric and composition (Kate graduating in 1984, Hepsie in 1985), we understood less of the “professional” side of the conflict than the ever-larger groups who followed us. No one talked seriously to us in graduate school about publication. There was scarcely a conversation about the job search and MLA interviews. It took us a while—and we realize that this admission makes us sound foolishly naive—to understand that being academics—going pro—would mean that we’d leave our home and one another.

This essay is a personal history of two academics’ struggle to stay together in a deeply competitive environment, to find, keep, and use the personal within their professional lives. It’s certainly not a how-to guide for constructing a life in academe. We have no real model to offer, no reasoned position to defend. But we stumbled upon and then deliberately followed a path around the serious, professional/personal dilemma in our field by using our friendship—and our professional collaboration as writers—as a solace and a guide. Our friendship has, with no exaggeration, allowed us to stay in the profession. So if we
don’t lay out a plan to follow, or announce a universal truth, we do here what good teachers always do: we tell a story that may suggest something useful to a reader about how to rethink an old problem, or how to offer resistance rather than accommodation to a system intent on ignoring, reducing and constraining the personal dimensions of our professional lives.

**INTIMATE MOTIVES**

Collaboration, especially group work and peer revision, has become a commonplace in many composition classrooms as teachers have realized the benefits of active talk and listening among students: livelier discussions, deeper investment in writing, awareness of alternative ideas. The pedagogical strategy of creating small groups who talk and write together comes as well from a clearer understanding of theories of learning that suggest people learn more effectively when they articulate, respond to and challenge ideas in social and connected ways. Academic writers in the humanities, especially in composition and rhetoric, have begun to realize some of the same benefits in their own collaborative efforts.

We have been collaborators now for twenty years, writing and speaking together in many classrooms and professional venues. We have team-taught classes, administered programs as a team, presented conference talks, papers and workshops together, co-authored articles, co-edited one collection, and most recently written together a book. But our collaboration did not stem from our sense of applying theory to the test of practice in the classroom or in our own writing. Although we have discovered professional rewards for our work together, that’s not the reason we write together either. While our collaboration has developed simultaneously along with the field’s embrace of social constructionist theory and practice, working together, for us, has always been more personal than professional.

As graduate students at the University of Louisville in the early 1980s, we were assigned the responsibility of helping direct the composition program. But we soon discovered that more than the contingency of our jobs as co-assistants drew us together. We had both grown up in Louisville, although in different parts of the city. Our educations had been different, too—Hepsie a graduate of public schools and a public university; Kate a product of a Catholic girls’ high school and a private Catholic university—but our ideas about learning were much the same. We found similarities in our pasts as well: we both had strong fathers with a clear sense of duty and ethics, supportive mothers who believed in our abilities, complicated webs of family expectations and interactions. And, as we shared family stories, we realized we had been brought up with almost identical aphorisms to guide our behavior and our choices, aphorisms that
seemed to be (or at least were put to us as) Southern in sensibility: “Be polite,” especially to strangers and guests; “Don’t toot your own horn”; “Pretty is as Pretty Does”; and “Act like a Lady, no matter what you are.”

We found that we were alike in lots of ways. We both used humor to deflect our own fear and others’ potential criticism, and we laughed a lot. We were energetic and optimistic. Maybe most important, we shared a beginning understanding of our calling to teach, and a dawning, shaky awareness of the personal changes that calling might require us to make. All these characteristics made us feel like a team even before we made our first presentation together, at an orientation session for teaching assistants and part-timers at the beginning of the fall semester of 1980. We might have begun that first session by dividing up the responsibility for the presentation; that would have been the way we had been trained to think of collaboration. Kate probably wrote out an outline and presented a prepared bit on the role of the Writing Center, Hepsie no doubt winged it as she described the construction of a syllabus. But near the end of our first session as Assistant Directors of Composition, somebody asked a question about drop/add or their schedules or something. We were standing together on the stage and without hesitating we responded in unison: “In the office.” We looked at each other apologetically, and then turned back to the group. “Check next week” we said again. Together. The crowd of slightly bored old hands and more than slightly fearful new instructors laughed. That workshop, and the ones that followed it, began to teach us that together we had a more powerful voice than each of us could muster individually. We had been given the position from which to speak, but neither of us yet had the authority that comes with a terminal degree, publication, tenure, or years in service. Our two voices together, though, somehow could speak to audiences that might not have listened to either of us alone. As time passed, people around us started to run our names together, speaking of us almost always as a unit, and we began to talk consciously about ourselves as a team and cultivate our doubled presence. With this story, we write this reflection down publicly for the first time.

When we spoke together, in meetings and presentations and workshops, we delivered ourselves together, making ourselves open and accountable not only to our audiences but also to one another—honoring and using our individual styles, pace, and predilections. As speakers together, at once performer and audience, we learned how to improvise and use nuance. We became more than usually attuned to each other’s words, and more that usually open to modifying our own. The oral beginning of our co-authorship is important to this story because, for us, collaboration remains primarily a matter of talk. The two books we’ve worked on together both began in offhand conversation about our lives and
interests. The preface to each one acknowledges the role of our talk in cultivating our ideas and sustaining them through writing and more talk; the first describing a conversation in the car on a backroad in southern Indiana about why we felt pulled in such opposite directions—in Massachusetts and Nebraska, we were being forced to choose between teaching and research, expressivist and social theories of learning, just to name two of the most pervasive dichotomies that still define the academic life—and the second in the attic at Emerson’s Old Manse, where we excitedly talked with one another and the guide who had taken us through the house about Emerson’s graffiti and the impact of the personal within the historical. But the important point here is that we were traveling together to be together; the ideas, the writing, grew from that impulse.

Our writing together has always in large measure been a way to keep our talk, our friendship going. From the beginning, we made choices that perhaps seemed less than professional but which turned out to be the most professionally astute moves we could have made. After our stint as Assistant Directors was over, Kate was appointed Director of the University Writing Center, a move which would take her to a new office. Kate had started out in the Writing Center as a tutor when she quit her secretary’s job and tentatively entered graduate school. Hepsie had never taught in the Writing Center. Yet, faced with separation, we decided that Hepsie would just move into the Director’s office with Kate. Thus, we continued our administrative collaboration whether the university made it official or not. We team-taught English 098, the most basic basic writing course, the back door to the University, and there we learned even more about how to move, talk, and think together with students. The Writing Center staff came to view us as co-directors, and when Kate left to take her first job at Nebraska, Hepsie moved officially into the Director’s position.

In the fifteen years we’ve been separated by several states and even the Mississippi River, having an excuse to talk has been central because our collaboration was born mainly from separation, bound up with our memories of the presence we had enjoyed in graduate school versus our present reality working alone. We made all the right professional decisions, accepting the best tenure track jobs we were offered, and those decisions made it seem important at first to carry on the kind of talk that had allowed us to make those professional moves in the first place. One of our most powerful memories is a moment outside the Writing Center, after comps, when we were hit (again, naively) with the realization that all this good work meant that we would have to leave. We burst into tears, held onto each other, and laughed while we cried over how much we would have to give up in order to reap our professional rewards.

We no longer shared work in one place, and we missed it. So we decided to write and present research together at the CCCC meeting in 1984, our first
professional meeting as professors. We proposed the paper together, drawing on our team teaching in U of L’s Writing Center. We were cautioned by convention organizers that, together, we only had twenty minutes. At the session, it was clear that we were expected to deliver separate performances, and there was some confusion about how to introduce two people with only one paper title. The physical space at the podium was too tight to allow us to stand together. It was awkward: while one spoke, the other had to stand a step behind, making our usual delivery—where we watch one another, interrupt, make fun, refer back—difficult to pull off. But we managed it. Many people came up afterwards, not to comment on the substance of our “paper,” but on the fact that we delivered it together. The audience seemed surprised, sort of delighted, as though our talk let them become part of the interaction. People wanted to talk to us not professionally, but personally, about how natural, easy, and intimate our performance had seemed. That presentation became our first co-authored article, and working long-distance to prepare it for publication, talking about working on it, we realized we had a scheme for protecting the personal in our new and separate professional lives.

In the fifteen years since then, we’ve taken on more and more professional responsibilities—chairing composition programs, directing graduate studies, directing dissertations, leading teacher education and writing across the curriculum programs—and we’ve sacrificed more and more of our personal lives to those responsibilities. But we’ve perhaps lost less of those personal lives than many academics because our talk always blurs the line between friendship and work. We’re now always writing together, or planning to write together, or talking about writing together. We never compartmentalize, even in stolen weekend sessions supposedly devoted to writing a chapter. In the middle of a discussion of Peirce’s pragmatic maxim, we’re likely to go off on a fantasy about where and how we’ll retire together. Instead of chastising ourselves for inefficiency, we have learned to value the way our talk slips between personal and professional. It’s no accident that our latest work together has explored the uses of romantic rhetoric and pragmatic philosophy for the teaching of writing; our collaborative lives have been sustained by a spirit of hope and belief, but at the same time carefully managed by practical moves and decisions that keep us talking and writing together.

Academics will tell you that they write for many reasons; because they have an idea they think is important, because they have to publish to get ahead, because they want to teach others. All writers will tell you that they write to connect; we simply add one more, very important connection to that process: the connection with each other. But there are lots of other advantages of collaboration too. Looking back at the beginnings of our work together, it’s easy
enough to see us as two women in search of a voice within an academic world where we were not at all sure we belonged. We remain in this world largely because that voice has been created in our collaboration. We were able to find an “other,” a responding voice, that was not alien. And we discovered another big advantage as we practiced this way of writing together: collaborating in our talky way allows—even insists on—a speech-like quality in the discourse that gets inside even our most academic prose. And we like that. Our talk easily turns into writing, and our writing becomes a way to image our talk. We see ourselves speaking together as we write and rewrite, rather than reading alone. As we write, we imagine not reading the text, but speaking it together. And because we now theorize this double-voiced relationship consciously, we now recognize the process and the style that has come out of it as one strategy of resistance to the formal, impersonal, discourse and modes of the academy.

As the opening to this essay shows, not every audience approves of this oral style or for that matter understands this kind of collaborative relationship. We have had to counter and respond to criticism about the collaborative path we’ve followed in our professional lives. For, despite new attention and theoretical support for social theories of learning and discourse, myths about collaboration remain: that there’s always a first author and a second; that one member of the team is the creative spark, the other the plodding worker. Perhaps this picture of collaboration comes from science, where research teams have a definite “team leader” with the vision and a bunch of other scientists who work the lab experiments and get to put their names on the finished papers. Or maybe it comes from traditional graduate student/professor collaborations, where the student who dug through the library is allowed to “co-author” with the professor who had the brilliant idea. Whatever its source in academia, there’s a pervasive sense that in any team effort, there’s no real team. Underneath all the myths about co-authorship is the belief that two people can never have (or be credited with) the same idea.

In our experience, sometimes Kate has the idea; sometimes Hepsie, but the idea very quickly becomes “ours” because it moves between us so fast. When we were in graduate school, we used to joke about having it—the creativity, the power, the authority a struggling graduate student needed to teach engaging yet rigorous classes, write stunning major papers, read The Wings of the Dove and The Rhetoric of Motives in one week, comment with wit and eloquence in seminars, go to the grocery, pick up the kids, and visit aging parents. We’d ask each other, “Do you really need it today, or do you think I could have it?” We worked the same metaphor in the process of getting tenure and promotion. It seems to be something we share, lend out, trade off, just as we wear the same size in shoes and the same prescription in glasses. Now that this particular essay is completed,
for example, just like every other piece we’ve written together, we can’t tell who had the idea that generated its final shape. Our knowledge is joined, shared, and communal—in inception, conception, and delivery.

So we have given up the notion that anybody’s idea is hers alone, although, as we’ve discovered, much of the academy proceeds that way. We have talked to other collaborators who admit “holding the best ideas back” for their individual, future projects. We’ve heard professors say that they don’t want to give their graduate students “too many of their ideas” or they’d have nothing left to write themselves. “What section were you responsible for?” a colleague might ask. In fact has asked. Repeatedly. Of both of us. We always reply “All of it. Both of us.” We simply don’t buy that belief in ideas or language as individual property. Hepsie wouldn’t have re-thought Plato without Kate; Kate wouldn’t understand Emerson without Hepsie. We resist the academy’s standard of the truly “original” idea, for our collaboration has shown us that all good ideas are remade in the words and minds of others. In our work, there is no clear division of inspiration or labor.

PERSONAL METHOD

Another myth about collaboration is that it divides up work and makes it easier. Sometimes we think that the humanities—which often seems to take perverse pleasure in the difficult—is wary of collaborating writers because there’s a suspicion that writing together is somehow easier than writing alone; that somehow the writers escape work by halving their work load. In drafting our projects together, we’ve found that the writing load doesn’t split in half; it doubles. We do not, for example, write separate chapters and then submit them to the other for comment and revision; we don’t assign separate tasks or sections although we do play to the strengths we discovered in each other (Kate will do bibliographies and manage the computer disks; Hepsie will write inspiring endings; Kate will write the funny line; Hepsie will find the perfect quote). Our way of writing together has become so integrated that even these examples, however, sound false to us as we write them.

Our organic process of writing together, obviously, is always pretty messy. When we get an idea—from what we’ve been reading (and we often read very different things), teaching, observing around us—and we decide that we’ll pursue it together, we start talking: “Let’s take your freshmen and my business writing students as an example.” “So what’s going on with Rorty?” “How about using that Anna Quindlen book as the lead-in?” “OK, but let’s not forget to bring the Octavio Paz quote back in some way.” “I was out working in the roses this morning when our title came to me.” As with all the stages in our collaborative composing process, our jumbly drafting or invention is grounded in this
kind of exploratory conversation. The talk quickly becomes a stimulant for as well as a record of our thinking. We not only begin to plan and draft the essay in our talk about it; we begin to shape how we’ll talk about it.

If we’re in the same location, we usually do this talk at the computer, making notes or outlines, then moving to the machine, taking turns at the keyboard. One talks, one writes, and both revise talk and writing as we proceed. The pace is halting, sometimes the fingers of the one on the computer can’t move fast enough on the keys; sometimes there are long pauses while we think. “Why is this so hard?” one will complain. We digress and ramble; one walks to the bookshelf, the other says “I’ve got it,” and starts a new paragraph. Sometimes the ideas and revisions come too fast: we’ve often rebuked ourselves for not using a tape recorder. (Once or twice we’ve managed it, and it does help, but it also somehow interferes, makes our talk seem too professionalized, too deliberate.) When we’re exhausted or our other lives intrude, we print out, read, then make more notes for ourselves for our next session. We proceed this way for as long as we are together or until we have a complete draft. When we are writing together long distance—a much more common occurrence—we talk, write, email, fax, read over the phone, revise separately, revise together. We’ve never before consciously described this procedure; it hardly seems like one. And yet, we do follow a consistent if meandering path, always listening, responding, backtracking, building, changing.

We usually have a rough sketch very quickly, and then we read separately, talk about what we’ve read and talk through the whole piece together. Because we are used to working this way, and because we trust the other’s words, something interesting happens in this process. Although it’s arduous, taking much longer to get from start to finish than a piece either of us might write individually, we find ourselves anticipating the other. One of us might be writing a paragraph and stop to imagine the voice that responds to the thought. Or to imagine not just the other’s reaction but the other’s production. “Kate will think that’s an awkward pile of words”; “Hepsie will find another metaphor that’s more eloquent.”

We have found, in our disorganized, inefficient method of drafting and revising, the same rejoinders and responses all writers listen for in their audiences. Here, in the process of getting the ideas on the screen, on paper, in the mail, our reasons for writing together in the first place also come into play. Not only will we tell each other, often through silences, that our ideas are simply boring, no good—we also “rejoin” with the kind of support and encouragement that every writer needs. Hepsie writes in a letter to Kate, with the latest version of an introduction “This is a great story to begin with.” Kate faxes revisions to Hepsie and says that her explanation of Peirce’s triadicity make sense,
which is no small feat. At the lonely moments in front of the computer, it’s easy for a “single author” to abandon an idea; solitary writers have to conjure up the belief themselves. Acting simultaneously as writer and audience, we work out belief together; in other words, we give it back and forth to each other.

It’s a theoretical commonplace now that the solitary writer’s voice doesn’t really exist, that all language is constructed in communal contexts. And yet, in academic contexts, the continuing belief in the original and separate voice leads to the false assumption that collaboration causes an individual writer’s voice to get lost, that writing produced in tandem becomes devoid of personality, responsibility, and creativity. Our process of writing together does indeed change and challenge the writer’s unique voice, but in creative, rather than deadly, or deadening, ways.

It is true that the voice all writers struggle to find and maintain gets altered by working with another writer, by listening and responding to another voice. The first time the other voice says “Do you really need to use the word organic” or “I’d like to begin the paragraph with the story of the train instead,” the writer’s ego bristles a little. When those sorts of comments continue on both sides, writers can only defend “their” choices, “their” voices, rather than listen for a new one, and that’s why, we suspect, so many first time collaborators never become second time practitioners. What we’ve discovered about voice is that successful collaborative tone doesn’t emerge as a duet, or a round, one writer’s voice followed by another in uneasy compromise or certainly not from a shouting contest where one voice claims victory over another. The tone in a good collaboration comes from a new third voice that emerges in the process.

The great advantage of knowing each other well before we began to write together may have helped us to avoid ego-bruising debates about additions and changes to a growing text. But our earliest attempts were sometimes marked by hesitation as we painstakingly listened for that third voice to assert itself. “Why don’t we put Eudora Welty here?” one of us would say. “Then we can talk about reader-voice in the students’ writing later.” The shift to “we need to” from “I think you need to” led us to take responsibility for all the sentences that we were producing. Using that “we” soon became a method for establishing our third, collaborative voice, to hear it and nurture it along. This small stylistic matter clearly illustrates our collaborative voice: we quickly realized that, to avoid confusion, the only “we” that could ever appear in our work together had to refer only to us—Hepsie and Kate—not to teachers in general, the profession, or humanity. Forced, then, to eliminate the royal “we” from all our prose in favor of the particular, intimate “we” of our partnership, we write perhaps more humbly and with more immediacy and accountability than we might have otherwise.
You don't lose your individual voice by writing together. If anything, we've discovered, you find it more easily, hear it more directly as a result of writing as a team. We are as single writers more conscious of style and of effects on an audience now. Here, in single-authored words, so rare for us, are some of the lessons we've learned about our own writing from one another:

Hepsie: From Kate, I’ve learned the value of attention. I’m a writer who generalizes, who makes sweeping—often sermony—statements. I’m a writer who’ll sacrifice too much to a metaphor or to a clever turn of phrase. Kate keeps me honest. I wouldn’t have known these things about my writing had it not been for Kate’s example of careful reasoning, thoughtful presentation, meticulous stylistic decisions. I’ve learned to move down in my writing as well as out, and I’ve learned just how important the merger of support and generalization are. Plus, Kate’s funny on paper and in person and her clear sense of humor permeates my own thinking now.

Kate: From Hepsie I’ve learned to let go and to believe. I’m a writer who hesitates, who edits too quickly, who writes in fits and starts. From her I’ve learned to follow and trust a metaphor, to mine it and not be afraid to stretch. (From her I’ve learned to start sentences with “from her”; she claims she’s not a stylist, but her parallel constructions give her writing an oral style that is terribly effective.) More than anything, she’s taught me that the process itself is what matters. Hepsie resists closure; for her, it’s the exploration of the idea that’s important. Where I tend not to look down the sideroads, not stop at historical markers along the way, because I want to get there and be finished, Hepsie’s continually looking around, wondering about connections, taking the scenic route. And she’s also a very funny traveling companion.

As you can see, our approaches to writing alone have been strengthened by hearing the unexpressed query or affirmation of our partner’s response. In other words, the “rejoinder” has become an overt part of our individual writing. We automatically hear the other’s voice. And now, since we write together so often, looking for that voice leads us to the point at which we no longer remember which one of us wrote which sentence. More importantly, it reminds us to remain tentative in the face of an evolving draft, to remember that the “we” being created is more important than the “I” that we’re letting go. Bakhtin talks about how every word is in reality “half mine/half someone else’s.” Our composing together extends this definition of meaning to something more like “all mine and all hers.” And, this realization of community, of communion, is the reason, years ago, we entered academia in the first place.

THE PERSONAL IN THE PROFESSIONAL

The ideology of individualism, firmly in place in American culture, especially in school and most especially in the humanities, often prevents collaboration or makes it less powerful and successful than it might be. The icons of
American literature, at least up until the last part of the twentieth century, have depicted the individual, heroic and embattled, against a group or a society that limited and tried to defeat individual choice or belief. Hester Prynne, Nick Adams, Jay Gatsby, Edna Pontelier, Bigger Thomas, and dozens of others that come to mind, all faced unfeeling or repressive groups that prevented them from becoming or enacting themselves. As well, some of our most cherished cultural ideals in this country—the cowboy, the entrepreneur, the poor boy who becomes president—celebrate individual striving and accomplishment in stories and songs, in movies and comics, and in history books. (It’s unsurprising, although worth noting, that these heroic individual models have, for the most part, been decidedly male). No wonder then that school replicates and reinforces the cultural prescription. Achievement in school, in sports or academics, is by and large all about competition, what an individual (or group acting as an individual) can do, above and against group norms or predictions. We love the Cinderella story in life and in basketball.

Because English studies is at heart about the production and reception of writing, premised on cultural and literary models that glorify the individual creator, teachers carry the myth of the individual firmly into classrooms as we teach and into our offices as we write. Despite all the theory of how writing actually happens, how creativity is sparked—socially, communally—and despite acknowledgments pages at the beginning of books and dissertations, the academic model of success too often fails to make theory practicable in writers’ own working lives. The recent film Shakespeare in Love shows young Will Shakespeare practicing writing his name rather than penning Romeo and Juliet until he talks to his friends in a bar. He uses the words, the ideas, and the experiences of everybody around him to find and illuminate his own creative energy. All writers know from their own experiences as writers that ideas are engendered and transformed in conversation, in collaboration, with those around us, with books we read, with stories we hear. But academics ignore that truth too often.

It may be because academics are so driven to assess achievement that we continue to promote and perpetuate the individual at the expense of the communal. It seems hard to reward two rather than one. The system drives us to ask: Who did what? Who had the idea first? Which part is yours? We want to make sure that the individual gets credit. Our students feel this conflict too when they work together. Most teachers and students have had unhappy experiences with “group presentations” where “one person did all the work” but all the others get similarly rewarded for the final product. When teachers do assign team writing, it’s often in the name of efficiency rather than a nod to the social nature of language, a practical attempt to cut down the workload of evaluating individual writers. And
one of the mainstays of collaborative writing assignments is the individual’s statement of contribution to the project, or the team’s assessment of each individual’s work. Despite what the academy is learning about team writing in professional and business contexts, collaboration remains suspect.

In spite of the humanities’ problems with collaboration, there are some well known and successful practitioners of dual authorship and dual presentation style. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have written together for years, and from their initial study *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1984) to the *Norton Anthology of Women’s Literature* (1999), the profession has tended to think of them as always together, always as Gilbert and Gubar. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford form another writing team that has merged into one unit—almost; moreover, their co-authored articles and their study of collaboration (*Singular Texts/Plural Authors*) have helped the profession take collaborative writing seriously as a practice and as an area of research. In fact, at a Coalition of Women Scholars meeting during the College Composition and Communication meeting in the Spring of 2000, Lunsford argued that the “structures of the academy get in our way” and must be changed to allow and reward collaborative writing, particularly collaborative dissertations.

We think that change would require a real shift in the academy’s conception of effort, achievement, and reward. The individual still holds center stage, often even within collaborations themselves. We’ve noticed that many collaborative pairs of writers steadfastly retain the markers of individual effort, perhaps because collaborators feel the pressure of the individualist model so strongly. For example, in their latest collaboration, *John Dewey and the Challenge of Classroom Practice* (1998), Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy sign individual chapters with individual names, even marking each one’s contribution in co-authored chapters with “first” and “second” authorship. This convention is an acknowledgment of a method of collaboration that doesn’t risk a loss of individual autonomy or threaten academic, literary, and cultural models of individual achievement and accountability. The work is divided rather than combined. The two writers are in dialogue with one another and with their subject, but they retain their own selves as they write. As we’ve shown, our writing together doesn’t work that way. We’re interested in what happens when we create a new voice and blend facets of an idea; we use our talk as a method of creating that third voice or idea, rather than as conversation between our separate selves.

We’re not saying that this process is easy, nor are we necessarily recommending our method, or any method, of collaborative writing to any of our readers. We still exist in a profession dominated by an individualistic, competitive model, and, as writers, we had to understand, early, that the academic life we entered expected and tried to require us to be in competition with one
another. That model is the source of questions like “What percentage of this article did you write?” Or “Why is she listed as first author?” We have to resist that model, not only to write together, but also to be friends, which has always been the basis of our writing together at all. The process we’ve described is our way, not necessarily the way, to resist such a model.

But because of our friendship and the values and insights we’ve gained through writing together, we have continually (and successfully) fought against the destructive effects of professional competition. Just as we were taught at home, we are still polite; we still believe that pretty (or scholarly or teacherly) is as pretty (or scholarly or teacherly) does, as we serve as supporters but also critics and watchdogs for each other’s temptations toward professionalized stances and language; we still try not to toot our own horns too much (although we toot the other’s, a much more “ladylike” and happy stance). And we have retained, thank god, the silliness of those first years as co-administrators and team teachers, our ability to see the hilarity of so much of the academic life, as well as its high seriousness—the lives at stake, including our own—in our teaching.

Our writing together has remained one way, and a significant one, that we’ve been able to stay in a profession that routinely suspects its members and to confront the over-specialization in our field, the esoteric, dry voices that too often dominate oral and written performance, the destructive over-competitiveness that stymies real growth and learning and risk-taking. Our writing as a pair has become a way to keep believing in the personal worth of what we’re doing, to remember that the professional is always personal. For us, the personal collaborative relationship that we’ve nurtured in writing and in talk—both privately and publicly and in real attempts to blur that line—remains the ground of all our work and its method.

We’re better writers and thinkers, storytellers and teachers in part because we both remember and use each other’s memories (sometimes we remember them better than our own.) We count on one another’s words to help us teach, and we use our friendship to mentor younger members of our profession as we assert, implicitly and explicitly, its importance in our academic lives. And in our administrative, departmental work, in the painful decision making processes that all academic units engage in, we are braver colleagues than we would be without the example and sympathy of the other. Whether it’s a policy matter or a tenure decision, we’re less willing to accept objectivity as a defense, secret ballot as a refuge, tradition as law. Simply put, our collaboration has taught us that the personal is never merely that; “taking it personally” is not a condition to be overcome but a platform from which to act.