

# UC Irvine

## Journal for Learning through the Arts

### Title

Seeing the World Through Words: A Student Writer's Journey toward Developing Her Own Voice

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/20227441>

### Journal

Journal for Learning through the Arts, 13(1)

### Author

Chen, Vicky

### Publication Date

2017

### DOI

10.21977/D913135150

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2017 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Seeing the World Through Words:  
A Student Writer's Journey toward Developing Her Own Voice

Vicky Chen  
University of California, Irvine

Abstract:

*This paper is a self-study that uses the lens of Vygotsky's four phases of sign acquisition to examine one student writer's development of voice through writing produced from 5th grade through her second year of graduate school (17 years). Growing up as a twin—and as a visually impaired individual—the author learned how to use the written word to help her imagine those aspects of the world that she could not physically see. Through excerpts from journal entries, planning documents, short stories, long fiction, poetry, school assignments, and fanfiction she traces her growth as a writer within the shifting context of experiences within and outside of school. Her sensitive exploration of varied sources of motivation and inspiration, along with her own changing attitudes towards and beliefs about writing, provide the reader with fresh insight into all that goes into one's development as a writer.*

“Do you write stories because you want to get away from the world?”

I start at the question, taken aback, but unable to think of an appropriate response. The sounds of the Chinese restaurant around us seem suddenly too loud, yet our space on one side of the round table is too quiet. The words hang in the air between us as our respective parents chatter on over plates of stir-fry and tea. I wonder why her question feels like an accusation.

“No,” I manage at last, flustered, “that’s not why.”

She does not press the issue. I tell her no more about the fantastical world I had created or the characters who inhabited it. To this day, I wonder why that simple question from a friend—who used to tell me stories before she went off to college—knocked me so off balance. Perhaps it was how seriously she asked it, or perhaps it was the confusion of not knowing the answer mixed with the suspicion that I had just been accused of cowardice. Whatever the case, I remember that jarring disruption in a dinner that would otherwise have been like any other dinner with family friends as the first time I ever stepped back to ask myself: “Why do I write? Why am I writing?”

There are many answers to these questions. I find myself returning to them time and time again as a Ph.D. student outlining a class presentation, as a writer composing a work of fiction, and as an English tutor working through an essay prompt with my tutee. As uncomfortable as that moment in the restaurant was, I realize now how important that question was and still is, because it shapes not only our journeys as writers but the voices we develop as we struggle to communicate—not only with others but with ourselves. It is integrally tied to what inspires us to pick up a pen or turn on a word processor in the first place.

I often hear people talk about narrative writing and expository writing as two of many distinct categories of written text, which can be further divided by academic discipline, genre, audience, and an array of other factors that all have their own conventions, expectations, and requirements. However, when I am working with students on an essay for class or thinking about how I might prepare them to tackle assignments in the future, I wonder if perhaps these distinctions obscure the bigger picture. What inspires a person to write at all? In this paper, I explore this question through a study of my own experiences with story starting in my early childhood and my writing from around fifth grade up until now (in my second year of graduate school), taking into consideration the motivations and circumstances that inspired and shaped my work. I will focus primarily on fiction as it plays a major role in my identity as a writer, but I do not consider academic writing and narrative writing to be mutually exclusive. So, I will also touch upon how development of my fiction writing influenced my writing as a student.

### **Personal Context**

To explain the role writing has played in my life and how it has evolved, there are two things that I should clarify. First, I am an identical twin. Not only did my sister and I attend the same schools and take most of the same classes all the way through college, but we share a number of hobbies—including creative writing—and often collaborate on projects. Second, my twin and I are both legally blind. Our vision began to deteriorate at around the same time, shortly before elementary school. For many years, this made it difficult for us to form connections with our peers and encouraged us to stick together. The way we see—or do not see, as the case may be—has had a great impact on how we navigate the world, both literally and metaphorically, for what we cannot see, we imagine. To explain how this experience has fed into our passion for writing, I will use the lens provided by Vygotsky’s theory of sign acquisition.

### **Vygotsky’s Four Phases of Sign Acquisition**

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1986) described signs such as words and visual symbols as the psychological tools that mediate, shape, and transform our thinking. The sign systems that we appropriate and use inform not only how we express our thoughts, but also how we think about and interact with the world. Further, these sign systems, including both oral and written language, are acquired in four general phases—“acquired” here referring to the process by which a person learns and internalizes a particular sign system. Vygotsky uses the example of a child in the process of acquiring speech to explain the four stages of sign acquisition.

In *Phase One* (Primitive Stage), the child emits cries and verbal utterances as expressions of feelings and emotions, while also experimenting with sound production (babbling). However, verbalization remains separate from thought. In *Thinking and Speech* (1987), Vygotsky argues that thought and speech have different developmental roots, in that thought is grounded in basic problem-solving activities while speech is grounded in primitive expressive utterances. These two lines of development begin to merge as caregivers co-create meaning with the infant by ascribing communicative intent to the infant’s natural utterances and behaviors. The baby begins to mimic the words spoken by those around her, without yet understanding their meaning.

In *Phase Two* (Naïve Stage), the infant determines the meaning of words from responses others give to her phrases. She discovers her own abilities in relationship to meaning making. Signs and thoughts come together. The infant relates to her own utterances as meaningful and uses them to communicate. At this stage, learners begin to master the syntax or external structures of the sign system without necessarily understanding their underlying meaning or purpose. Vygotsky (1986) asserted that language learners actually master “the syntax of speech before the syntax of thought” (p. 87), because syntax provides the structure necessary for signs and their operations to exist in memory.

*Phase Three* (External Stage) serves as a mid-point in internalizing a sign system. During this stage the child begins to use signs to solve problems, as when counting on her fingers. She starts to use “egocentric speech,” talking to herself when there is no one else around or during play with others. This audible self-talk serves as a transition from external to internal speech (Vygotsky, 1986). The child’s audible self-talk transforms into the internal voice many of us experience when thinking, reading, dreaming or problem solving. We each come to prefer and rely upon our own unique combination of sign systems for thinking and planning purposes.

Finally, in *Phase Four* (Ingrowth Stage), sign operations grow within the meaning maker. The signs become internalized, and we no longer have to rely on external representations. Inner speech shortens during this stage. For example, thought sentences will lack a subject, since the subject is already known to the child. Instead of counting on her fingers, she will count in her head, utilizing part of her short-term memory. This does not mean that, at this stage, we dispense with external signs entirely. Instead, we develop an easy dialogue between external and internal sign use, so that each flows into and influences the other. This phenomenon has been witnessed by most of us when children and adults talk to themselves during difficult or emotional tasks.

Although these examples focus primarily on the acquisition of oral language, these four phases of development can be applied to the acquisition of other sign systems or psychological tools as well. For example, in an article exploring her own growth as an artist, the painter Cathrene Connery (2010) uses these four phases of sign acquisition as a lens to examine the development of her own visual language, situating her work within the shifting context of her life and illuminating the interplay between external and internal, as well as conscious and unconscious processes. Through an analysis of art created from her childhood into her adult years, Connery is able to retrace her own footsteps as an artist and discover a deeper

understanding and awareness of both her own artistic style and how that style emerged. She notes, for instance, that her earliest paintings as a child with their pools and swatches of color were reminiscent of a baby's initial bumbles, the beginnings of sign use where signs existed separately from her own thoughts. Rather than conveying any particular meaning, the colors of her early work reflected the colors of her environment and the colors that her mother pointed out to her—the clothes her mother dressed her in, for example, and the colors that pervaded the Catholic mass that her family attended. This tendency towards certain types of colors and color combinations, as well as her preference for shapes as opposed to lines, evolve and become more conscious as she moves through the later phases of her artistic development. While reading her account, I was struck by the similarities between the pressure she felt, as an art student, to—as she puts it—come into her own as an artist and create her own unique style and the comments I used to hear from teachers about needing to find my own voice as a writer. Back then, in middle then high school, I would wonder: what exactly does it mean to write “in your own voice”? How would I know if I had achieved it?

Obviously, it wasn't as simple as using your own words instead of copying someone else's, because we already rephrase things ourselves all the time in essays to avoid plagiarism. Even though no one ever provided a satisfactory answer, I have noticed in recent years that, when rereading stories co-written with my twin, I could point to certain sections of the text and say, “Hey, that sounds like me” or “That sounds like something you would write.” With this in mind, I set out to apply these four phases of sign acquisition as a lens to examine the development of my writing, while keeping in mind that Vygotsky's four phases were meant to be fluid and interdependent. My analysis, then, centers on the phases through which I learned to use written language and gradually made this medium my own—or at least enough so to have my own literary voice—starting with the early experiences with story that framed my initial understandings of and interest in fiction.

### **Phase One: Play, Imitation, and the Seeds of Story**

On a mountain far away, there is a tall, tall tree. This tree has a single very, very large leaf, and on this leaf is a tiny little house. This is where Little Pimple lives. One day, while Little Pimple was outside hanging his laundry up to dry, a huge wind came and blew him away...

This was how our Uncle Jay's stories about the pimple on his arm always began. That great and terrible wind would carry the main character to a strange and far away land, and he would spend the story trying to get home, running from witches in houses made of bone or exploring buildings made of ice cream and cake. My twin sister and I loved these stories and would pester him whenever he visited to tell us more. It didn't matter that the stories never ended and he never remembered where he had left off in a previous story so that he was constantly starting over from the beginning. As a child, it wasn't how Little Pimple got home that interested me, but the fantastical places that he visited. I would picture these places in my mind and envision how exciting it would be to go on such adventures myself.

When I think back on the stories that shaped my early perceptions of narrative before I ever began to write anything down, these stories about characters traveling through imaginary worlds, of heroes fighting monsters, and of people with supernatural powers are what I remember. In addition to my uncle's tales, the stories whose footprints I can find in my early writing include the Chinese literary novel *Journey to the West* in the form of a children's audiobook, the *Power Rangers* television show in which a group of high school students assumed secret superhero identities and powers to fight evil, and the *Animorphs* book series in

which the main characters fought against alien invaders using a power that allowed them to transform into any animal that they could touch. While playing, my sister and I would often pretend to have these powers and imitate the karate moves and gymnastics performed by the Rangers on TV, teaching ourselves how to do cartwheels and shriek like birds or growl like wolves. When Pokemon came out in fourth grade, rather than transforming into animals, we decided it would be even cooler if we could transform into Pokemon with their unique abilities and special powers.

This hodgepodge of fantasy, science fiction, adventure, and heroic battles, as well as this idea arising out of playacting, that we could somehow become a part of it all through storytelling, formed the backdrop of much of my writing from fifth through eighth grade. Like the infant in Vygotsky's example, who mimicked the speech of those around her and played around with sound without understanding the conscious choices and meaning behind those sounds, the content of our stories mirrored the adventures and heroic deeds in the stories that we loved. For example, my sister and I planned and started—although we never got very far—a number of stories during elementary school based around a group we simply referred to as the Guardians, whose job it was to deal with problems throughout the many universes that exist within space and time, traveling to other planets and other dimensions when duty called. Fifteen of the group's seventeen members were directly based on real people in our lives, including ourselves and a couple of our elementary school classmates. We divided up different powers and creature transformations, and we had a lot of fun designing alien planets and working out what kinds of problems the Guardians would be called in to address. When we started planning their secret base, we went so far as to try and dig one in a bare corner of our backyard, although that attempt was shortly foiled by the discovery of a layer of concrete under the dirt that proved completely impervious to our shovels.

What inspired me at this time was the strange and extraordinary, as well as the promise of grand journeys through worlds markedly different from our mundane reality. Ordinary artifacts like candy were exaggerated so as to become something other than the commonplace, like the house of sweets from Hansel and Gretel. One of my motivations for writing was to experience these adventures for myself. All of the Guardian stories were written in first person or from an "I" point of view, and in a diary entry dated July 10, 2002, the summer before eighth grade, I wrote, "The life of my most beloved characters is mine as well. I experience their lives, their pain and joys." In retrospect, reading through these entries alongside the story files I started at the time, this singling out of the characters' emotions speaks to me now of a second purpose that motivated me to write and would become increasingly important later in my life. This was to express and work through thoughts and feelings that I did not always feel comfortable expressing aloud. In another entry from earlier that same year, I had written, "It seems that I tend to give my main characters the emotions I often feel," especially negative ones such as, in this case, sadness and a sense of not belonging.

It is probably no coincidence that I began to spend more time writing about adventures and less time acting them out as I moved from fourth to fifth grade, which was when I really began to feel the distance between myself and my peers. My vision had been steadily deteriorating since kindergarten, but it wasn't until elementary school that I truly began to notice that I was different. It became increasingly difficult for me to initiate any social interactions with other students. The harder it became to make friends, the more I withdrew into my writing and the various worlds that my twin and I created. It became easier to write than to speak, especially about things that upset me, so much so that I remember writing a letter to my mother after an

argument to explain why I was sad and angry rather than confronting her verbally. This, perhaps, is why I had such a negative reaction to that question asked me years later, “Do you write stories to get away?” Because in the beginning, while it wasn’t the only reason, it probably played at least some part in my desire to journey to other worlds.

The form my writing took during this period from fourth through eighth grade was almost exclusively long fiction with chapters. Although very few stories ever progressed beyond Chapter One, they generally had chapter labels. It seems likely that I was imitating the format of the books we read as well as the stories we enjoyed, which tended to be long, with series like *Animorphs* having more than forty volumes. The knowledge that written stories could, in fact, have different structures (*Phase Two*), and the awareness of why stories might be broken into chapters at all (*Phase Three*), were completely beyond me. It never occurred to me to question such conventions.

I thought very little, if at all, about the different elements of plot, such as how a story should end, or what might make a story interesting or understandable to someone other than myself. Rather, my language focused on character actions, on what they did and what happened, rather than on their underlying motivations or the greater contexts in which these events occurred. This latter fact seems at odds with the vividly detailed settings that my sister and I constructed during play and indicates to me a lack of understanding of how thought and meaning actually map onto the system of written words and printed stories. I could picture the stories in my head, but was unable to translate them into coherent prose. For example, in one story file, I wrote about a group of characters fighting with magical weapons. From only the words written on the page, it is unclear why they are fighting, who the characters are, or even where the story is taking place. All of these details that help to contextualize the action and assist readers in understanding the story were absent.

Partway through middle school, one of our childhood friends visiting from New York introduced us to the *Forgotten Realms* books, which are just one of several umbrella series that came out of the background of *Dungeons and Dragons*, a popular fantasy role-playing game. It was the many different races, cultures, and characters that we read about in these books that became my inspiration to create my very first cast of characters that did not originate from play. I see this as roughly where phase one of my development began to blend into phase two. Where a child acquiring oral language learns that her own utterances have meaning and begins to master the syntax of speech, I began to understand that stories were about more than transcribing a series of events divided by chapter labels. The structure or syntax of a story included, for instance, a clear plot as well as the setting in which the story took place. This shift in my awareness was driven primarily by my growing desire to become a published author and the beginning of my awareness that writing stories was an art requiring particular skills and techniques. These characters, for whom I began to design my own races and cultures, remain to this day some of the characters closest to my heart. I can trace my development both as a writer and as a human being through the evolution of their stories over the course of almost fifteen years.

### **Phase Two: Hearing Rhythms and Seeing Structures**

To light a candle is to cast a shadow.

~ Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*

I took this quote from Le Guin’s novel, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, to my mother the first time I heard it in elementary school. “Listen to this,” I told her, and recited the sentence before asking, “Isn’t it beautiful?” Although I could not have articulated my exact reasons at the time, there was

something about the simple elegance of this quote that appealed to me, something about the way the author was able to use only a few words and an image to describe how even an action we believe to be good can have negative consequences. Over the next few years, I would borrow the audiobook from which this quote was taken over and over again from the library until I could recite short passages by heart. I even unearthed a literary analysis that I wrote about it in my last year of high school, done in the form of a poem interspersed with quotes I had taken from the text, where I noted that it is both the good and the bad in life that “make us whole.” *A Wizard of Earthsea* tells the story of a boy who sought to become a powerful mage, but, in his arrogance and ambition, released a darkness into the world which, if he could not conquer it, would devour him. Though the plot and the character appealed to me, what made this story truly special was the way in which it was written. As I listened to it time and time again and tried to articulate what made it so memorable, I began to understand that language has a rhythm. Even though it was not poetry, there was something lyrical in Le Guin’s use of words that fascinated me and inspired me to look more closely, not only at what words people used, but also how words and stories are put together.

Connery (2010) describes this second phase of development as a period when she experimented with a variety of both physical and psychological tools as she tried to master the external structure of her own visual language—a key feature of Vygotsky’s second phase of sign acquisition. To do so, she studied the work of other artists and engaged in a wide range of artistic pursuits, including music, poetry, sculpture, and photography. In a similar way, I experimented with a mosaic of written forms ranging from song lyrics that I set to melodies and sang with my sister to comic books and short stories, which in turn fell into a number of different genres such as personal narrative and speculative fiction. Perhaps it is not coincidental that, like Connery, I can narrow down this phase to a period of about seven to eight years from ages 13 to 22, which is also a time in which we often talk of struggling to figure out who we are as people. Vygotsky comments that in this phase, we learn to use signs to communicate with others, which implies that it is when we begin to struggle with what we can and want to say while we learn about the different ways in which we can say it. It also implies awareness of an “other” with which we can communicate, that there is an audience and that the audience matters. This was certainly the case for me as my sister and I explored different kinds of writing and discussed different texts.

By the time my twin and I began high school, reading aloud to one another had become a well-established practice between the two of us. Our eyes tired more quickly, and we read more slowly than other people—something I became painfully aware of when asked to read out loud in class—and the selection of titles available in audio format at the library was limited. Since we could not read especially fast or for very long on our own, we took turns reading books aloud so as to decrease the burden on our eyes, using the high-power magnifier or CCTV, which was our primary tool for accessing printed texts at the time. I would read a few pages, and then when I grew tired, we would switch off so I could rest. In this way, we worked through both novels and school textbooks. As we each began to write our own original stories, we read these aloud to one another as well, giving each other comments as requested and developing a sense for the flow of language, which reading aloud made more obvious. We discovered that some sentences were easier to read or sounded more poetic than others and that the order of words in a sentence could alter the way it felt in our mouths. Later on, as we learned to use screen readers in college, we would use our computers to read texts aloud instead. This habit of listening for rhythm and flow became a crucial part of my writing process regardless of subject, form, or genre.

The way my twin and I bounced ideas off one another and discussed both what we read and what we wrote reminds me of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development where assistance and collaboration among individuals help a person learn and accomplish tasks she may otherwise not be able to accomplish (John-Steiner et al, 2010). Together, we talked about things like what made us like or dislike a particular story, and what did or did not make sense about a character's actions, trying in our own way to break down and understand the elements that make up a good story. We also did a great deal of online research about how to write good stories and how to deal with common problems of the starting fantasy writer, such as the dreaded "info dump," where you end up boring readers by dropping large amounts of information on them all at once. My key takeaway from dealing with info dumps and learning how to avoid them was that a reader is generally not as interested in your creations as you are and does not need to know every detail that you have thought up. This means you need to prioritize and decide what information is necessary and what can be left out; this is an essential skill in essay writing as well, and one that I often find myself dealing with when working with student writers. I learned that there are different ways to summarize information, and that, depending on the argument I am trying to make, different story events or different facts become more important.

Unfortunately, I did not keep a record of the articles that we read, although I do remember one sentence of advice about originality—because we all know there's no such thing as a truly original story—that a person could, for instance, write the story of King Arthur from the point of view of King Arthur's fleas. In other words, originality often comes from a change in perspectives rather than some spectacular plot twist. In addition to these activities, I also acquired a habit of asking people about their favorite characters and stories and why they liked them, whether in books or on television. Near the end of this period, around the time I graduated from college, I recorded a couple of these answers in a file titled "What Makes a Good Book," and it included such interesting answers as those from a friend in Taiwan who told me that she liked stories about clever, coolheaded female characters and goodhearted but slightly silly men.

Over time and after much argument, my twin and I developed a set of loose rules or mutual understandings for giving one another feedback. By the end of high school, for instance, we had banned the word "interesting". Although it was nice to know that the other found one's writing interesting, we decided that it was neither helpful nor informative to say so. If we said something was interesting, we also had to explain specifically why or how. We also decided that we would criticize only if we could also offer solutions. It was okay not to like something, but it was not okay to say only that it was bad. We demanded that the other offer a way to fix whatever she perceived to be a problem. These rules were crucial for allowing us to critique one another's work in a way that helped us think without hurting one another's feelings. I have since learned to be more thick-skinned, but that resilience required time to grow and a certain level of confidence in my own abilities as both a writer and a critic.

It helped us also that, while my twin and I share a passion for fiction, our specific areas of interest differed. We brought different preferences and perspectives to the table. For example, while I enjoyed dealing with imaginary cultures, she wrote more on the politics of the worlds she created. Where I discovered a particular interest in developing character histories and figuring out how to integrate these details into the narrative, she excelled at vivid descriptions of scenery and use of personification. Sometimes these differences have led to heated arguments, but they also let us evaluate stories from different angles and, in co-created work, allowed each of us to write to her strengths.

In this phase, my writing began to move away from myself, or rather, I began to view my characters more as their own people and less as extensions of who I wanted to be. I took an interest in what made them individuals and how their pasts and the worlds they inhabited might shape them. This shift, which demonstrates a growing awareness of the different elements that go into story writing, is reflected in the large number of files I generated during this period for planning and world building purposes, which included informational documents on mythology, religion, games, and holidays. One of my first forays into Microsoft Excel, before I began using it to organize information for class, was to create a timeline for my world, and I used PowerPoint to make one character's family tree. I even drew my own maps of the different continents complete with labels for major settlements and landmarks. I wrote more extensively about character relationships and increased my use of dialogue, and I paid more attention to the "how" and the "why" instead of just the "what".

My characters also became more diverse and began to embody different aspects of my personal beliefs and philosophies, as well as thoughts that I was struggling with about the world, life, and human nature. I gave them each conflicting aspects of my own viewpoints, and they conversed about issues of justice and forgiveness, religious faith, responsibility, and an inability to let go of the past versus the need to live instead of just surviving. Through their conversations, I held conversations with myself. A war that I wrote about in middle school as a straightforward matter of conquest and resistance was revised in late high school and college into a war of ideologies, different conceptions of what society should value or what would make an ideal world, all of which contained underlying beliefs that I found valid—the desire for order versus the desire for freedom, for instance, and fairness versus merit. In many ways, these fictional characters and their narratives provided a safe space in which to be conflicted—about the benefits and drawbacks of religion, for example—so that I did not yet have to commit to only one opinion.

Dealing with loss and death, as well as how to move on from these tragedies, was a recurring theme, influenced in part by the death of my grandmother on my father's side in the middle of my first year in high school. Attending her funeral in January, 2004 was the first time I ever remembered Taiwan being cold. Reminiscing on December 22nd of that year, I wrote:

I recall how my current literature teacher... says her parents never let her go to funerals. I wonder if it's a good idea for children. She believes that children should not have to concern themselves with such grim facts of life, not yet. I can't say whether I agree or not, only that that experience in Taiwan... really changed my life. I began noticing all the darkness all around me and brought into stark relief the fragility of human existence.

This event left a deep impression on me, and I would return to it several times over the next few years, in a personal essay in 2006, a fictional short story in 2013, and another personal essay in 2014.

This use of my own experiences both as material for writing and as a source of inspiration influenced both my actions and my perceptions. I participated in programs like Teen Academy in 12th grade, where I listened to accounts from veteran police officers about their work and visited a shooting range, not because I thought they would advance my career or education, but because I felt the experiences they offered might be usable in my writing. In a way, I was doing something that Vygotsky considered vital to both learning and developing a rich and flexible imagination, purposefully increasing the number and diversity of experiences that formed the foundations for my thinking (Vygotsky, 2004). Some of these were my own experiences, but even more were more reminiscent of what Vygotsky termed "social

experiences,” where I was able to gather information from the stories of others. My twin and I borrowed audiobooks from the library by the dozen, and I read a great many folktales and superstitions, which I found and continue to find fertile ground for new ideas. At the same time, while I did not actively converse much with my peers and preferred still to keep my thoughts to myself and on paper, I paid close attention to other people’s thoughts and conversations. For instance, in a diary entry dated November 10, 2008, I recorded bits of a conversation between a boy and a girl that I overheard on my way home from campus. I mused about how I found it endearing that they were talking earnestly about whether or not they still liked each other in a romantic way, instead of becoming overdramatic, angry, or upset.

One form of writing that I did a great deal of during high school—which I have done less of since due to time constraints—is poetry. I loved the way songs were used to tell stories in books like *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien and the *Redwall* series by Brian Jacques, as well as in many country songs, such as “Riding with Private Malone” by David Ball, “Three Wooden Crosses” by Randy Travis, and “Love Me” by Collin Raye. Inspired by the idea of ballads and bardic tradition, I saw poetry—especially poetry meant to be sung—as a fun and highly lyrical way of telling stories, expressing emotions, and sharing information in only a few short minutes. It was something I did to entertain my sister and myself—to give us something to sing on long car rides—and it remained purely a matter of enjoyment since I never had any professional ambitions about being a poet or a song writer. On the other hand, this lack of ambition was also why I did not spend time analyzing poetry (beyond the limited amount required in English class) in the same way that I later analyzed novels and short stories.

In retrospect, my creative writing outside of school, coupled with the broad range of books I read, was probably responsible for keeping my interest in literature alive, despite the fact that I disliked almost every book I was forced to read in high school—partly, I admit, simply because I was forced to read them and seemed expected to think that they were good. I didn’t want to only discuss what a piece of literature said about humanity or about the time period in which it was written. I was beginning to understand from my own attempts to write fiction that what an author intends and what actually makes it onto the page are not the same thing, and it was the nuances of this that interested me. What I wanted to know was what made one kind of sentence more powerful than another and how to use words to touch a person’s heart or make a reader cry. However, these topics were seldom talked about, because language arts classes when I was in secondary school were about “good” literature and tended to focus on understanding the content rather than the form of the text. Although we did discuss what was expected of an academic essay—i.e. having a thesis, using quotes as evidence, etc—the elements of a strong narrative were never taught in the same way or with the same attention. I saw similarities between the two that kept me interested, such as the need for evidence to support an idea, except that where you choose pieces of evidence from an existing text when you write an essay, you have to create those pieces of evidence when writing a narrative. Yet there were important differences too, such as the fact that no one would ever demand that your analytical essay make a reader cry.

As a consequence, despite my interest in language, my favorite high school subjects were physics and chemistry, because they emphasized problem solving and explained certain mechanics of the natural world. If I hadn’t stumbled across the rhetoric department at Berkeley when I was trying to figure out what to major in, it is likely I would have ended up studying physics or psychology instead. Before college, I had never even heard the word rhetoric before. The first sentence I saw when I clicked on the Berkeley department’s home page explained that

rhetoric was the study of the relationship between author and audience, which was like stumbling across the words for a thought I hadn't known how to articulate. "That's it!" I thought, "That's what makes language interesting to me." My first rhetoric classes did not disappoint. Rather than what the author intended, rhetoric was about what the author actually accomplished and how she accomplished it. It was through these classes that I truly began to understand the structure of language and how these nuances in presentation affect the meaning and effectiveness of a text. This was also when I began to understand what it meant to analyze a piece of writing. When I then became a peer tutor near the end of this second phase of development, I learned to articulate my thinking processes and to model for other students the kinds of questions that I ask of myself and my writing whenever I compose in order for an audience to understand my ideas and interpret them the way I intend.

Two sets of writing stand out from *Phase Two* as major turning points in my development. The first was a collection of short stories written from 2007 to 2010 in which I was teaching myself how to write short stories for the purpose of submitting them to magazines. A staff member my sister and I had spoken to in the disability services office during our senior year of high school had given us some resources for writers, including a website that listed different magazines that would accept unsolicited manuscript submissions. Because of this goal, both the form and content of these first few short stories as I entered college were heavily influenced by fantasy genre conventions and the submission guidelines of different publishers. Unlike the imitation that I engaged in as a child, this imitation was conscious and purposeful, and it resulted in such stories as one where a girl meets the ghost of an old magician at a crossroad and gets enlisted to fight a demon.

More interesting, however, is the scattering of speculative fiction, which, instead of adhering to any particular formulas, reflected my own internal struggles with writing and life in general. Most intriguing, especially in regard to this reexamination of purpose and inspiration, was a short story in 2008 about an author who finds himself unable to write after the death of his wife in a car accident. As he struggles with grief and lack of inspiration, he is visited by the many versions of himself that he unknowingly created each time he used a different pseudonym. He realizes that, over the years, he had begun writing for the sake of being published and earning money rather than for the sake of things he loved and the dreams he had once had. At the time, I, too, was struggling with writing the kinds of stories that I loved as opposed to trying to appeal to publishers. One of the author's other selves encapsulated what I was coming to believe lay at the heart of good writing, reminding him that he had once said he wanted his books "to capture the butterflies without trapping them, to keep them alive with your pages and breathe life into the people who looked at them." This was also a reminder to myself to stop focusing so exclusively on writing like other people and allow myself to be myself. The last story in this set, which was written in 2010, centered on a village where the wishes people made on paper butterflies actually came true. By then I had realized that if I intended to continue with short fiction, I needed to create my own way of writing short stories, because writing stories that did not mean anything to me—and that I did not personally love—would be pointless even if they did get published.

This resolution set the stage for a collection of fanfiction that I began in 2011. Before that, I had dabbled in a small number of fanfics but always made a conscious effort *not* to put too much effort into such work. If I were going to put time and energy into something, I would rather it was original work, since I could not legally "own" the worlds or characters in fanfiction. As an adolescent, I took a great deal of pride in things that I had created for myself; it was important to me that what I produced was, in fact, mine. So what changed? Before I go into my reasons and

motivation at the time, let me explain a little about fanfiction. It is, basically, stories that fans write using the worlds and characters of original authors. For example, if I wrote a story using characters from *Star Trek*, that story would be *Star Trek* fanfiction. Writing what I consider to be good fanfiction is both easier and harder than writing an original story. It is easier because you already have access to a fan base or audience who will be interested in your work as well as interesting settings that you do not have to create for yourself. However, it is harder in terms of keeping characters “in character,” as we say, and writing stories where the characters behave in believable ways based on their personalities and behaviors throughout the original media. Of course, this is only my definition, but this is important to me since I take writing fanfiction very seriously and care deeply about whether characters act like themselves. Keeping the characters “in character” means stepping into the shoes of someone else’s creations and trying to understand not only who they are but who they could have been or might become if placed in different situations. Some creative license is expected, of course, or else there would be no point, but the bottom line is that it has to be believable. Many readers will point out serious discrepancies, just as many readers will applaud a job well done.

What changed for me during the last year of college in regard to fanfiction as a form of writing was: 1) encountering a fandom where I both loved and hated the original story enough to want to write stories about it where things progressed differently; and 2) discovering once I began that I could use fanfiction to relax my own writing style, to try out new storytelling formats I was starting to like on an audience, and to get back in touch with just writing for fun. Of course, I had a habit of stealing particularly well written passages that were transferable from my fanfiction and moving them into my original stories—usually fragments of description or bits of dialogue that expressed my own comments about people and were not tied too closely to the specific setting of the fandom. However, I also realized that since I now had a specific purpose in writing fanfiction, to “correct” things I disliked about the canon and to help popularize characters I felt were underappreciated, it was okay and beneficial to put more effort into it. I also realized that, although I did not own the characters or the original series, other fanfiction writers and readers still regarded my stories as my stories.

What was striking about my fanfiction from this time is how I used it to change my writing style. I adopted a more casual tone in my fanfiction and began to apply it to my original work. I felt that my descriptions needed more life and personality, and I found that by relaxing the way I wrote non-dialogue, I was better able to achieve this—allowing myself to use the word “you” instead of “one,” for instance, and “yourself” instead of “oneself.” Not using words like “you” had been drilled into me by teachers as a characteristic of sound, academic writing, and it took effort to shake the sense that it was also a sign of good writing in general. In a way, I was learning to write in a tone that more resembled speech even while writing in third and not first person, and trying to define the structure of my own written language and discover a style that would best suit me as a writer. Then there was a non-chronological storytelling format that I first practiced in a 2011 fanfic, and then, in 2012, applied to an original short story about a would-be revolutionary. I think of this story as my transition into phase three and one of the first original short stories I’ve written that I actually feel proud of.

### **Phase Three: The Elements of a Personal Style**

Ged had neither lost nor won but, naming the shadow of his death with his own name, had made himself whole: a man: who, knowing his whole true self, cannot be used or possessed by any power other than himself, and whose life therefore is lived for life’s sake and never in the service of ruin, or pain, or hatred, or the dark.

Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*

Like the child in Vygotsky's description of language acquisition who begins to make language her own, Phase Three involved a settling down of preferences in both my writing style and subject matter. Throughout Phase Two, I had experimented with numerous forms of writing and gained experience with writing from the perspectives of a student, a school journalist, an aspiring author, an undergraduate rhetoric major, and a peer writing tutor. I had also read extensively both in and out of school, watched a number of television shows consisting predominantly of cartoons and detective series, and come into contact with a large amount of poetry in the form of songs (with a preference for the everyday stories told by country singers). I now had all these experiences to draw upon as I reevaluated what mattered to me, what truly interested me as a writer, as well as what values I wanted to express in my work.

One major change that emerged from Phase Two and settled in Phase Three was the shift in my focus and interest from worldwide, good-versus-evil type problems to problems that individuals deal with every day—not because the grand battles no longer interested me, but because I realized that even the little things can mean the world to someone. Although the former still sometimes frames my stories, the latter has added new dimensions and depths to the characters I work with. For example, a young woman from that very first cast of characters that I mentioned at the end of Phase One began life in my stories as a famous warrior equipped with your typical sword, bow, and arrows, called in by the Archmage to assist in an upcoming war. These days, in my latest revision of her story, she is still a formidable warrior, but she is also an avid reader of romance novels searching for a stable relationship and the assistant at a bakery, working part time to support herself between adventures. Then there is the mischievous and carefree son of a lord who recently received a scene where he is contemplating what it is he should do with his life and the careers that his friends have chosen for themselves. In this way, I am bringing together the fantasy genre that I love with the issues that matter to me.

A second important theme that came together for me in this phase was that of balance, which has come to mean many things. There is the balance within worlds and characters that Le Guin wrote of in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the struggle between light and darkness within ourselves, and the balance in our lives that is shaped by the choices we make. To do one thing, we often have to sacrifice the chance to do another, and even when we think what we have done is good, it may have negative repercussions of which we are unaware. This struggle for balance frames both the internal conflicts of many of my characters and the philosophies that underlie the systems of magic I use in my fiction. Not only is balance important within my stories, it is important to the external structure of my writing as well. For instance, in an e-mail I sent to a friend in April of 2014, I wrote:

I definitely think writing about a character's feelings is good practice. I used to do a lot less of it because of the whole "show, don't tell" philosophy, but after writing for so long, I've learned that it's not a great philosophy. You really need a balance of both. "Showing" is a useful technique in writing, but "telling" has its place as well—and a well-written story needs both. Humor and seriousness, eloquence and conciseness, dialogue and description, rhythm and clarity, action but also time to breathe—for me, these are the elements that form the basis of my writing style and that I feel I am still working to integrate.

**Phase Four: Or Not**

My writing has become more fluid and flexible, and I am comfortable altering the style and structure of my language to suit different audiences and purposes. However, I feel that I have not yet reached this last phase of development in my writing, but hover somewhere on the border

between Phases Three and Four. Writing remains for me an intensely conscious and reflective process, which leads me to wonder how much I have internalized. Although, like Connery, I have had moments where I feel I have not truly understood something until I have written about it—a phenomenon she associates with having internalized one's own chosen sign systems—I hesitate to claim actual mastery, especially in the area of fiction. I believe I still need more time and practice in order to craft and master a kind of writing that will be uniquely mine.

### **Conclusion: The Implications of Purpose, Inspiration, and Experience**

For me, writing was and is something deeply personal. Whether it was to journey to other worlds, to earn recognition as an author, or to deal with difficult emotions and problems in my life, the motivations that drove me to hone my skills and keep improving were always tied in some way to things that mattered to me. I understood that I was writing for a greater goal. I understood, also, that every piece of writing I did would help me move forward because I saw all kinds of writing as related in fundamental ways. I leave out unimportant facts in an essay for the same—or at least similar—reason that I leave out details in a story. I know, for instance, that if I want to show that a boy loves his grandmother, whether I am writing a literary analysis or a work of fiction, I should refrain from describing his fight with his sister last Wednesday no matter how interesting it was—unless it had something to do with his grandmother. I prioritize clarity over complexity, because writing is meant to be read and I want to leave an impression on my readers. This cannot happen if they do not understand what I am trying to say. In many ways, all writing can be seen as an exercise in persuasion where I put together words for a purpose in an attempt to produce a certain effect. Sometimes, that effect is simply to show my teacher that I understood the book and thus deserve a good grade.

Looking back, it is interesting to note how much of Phase Two—the phase in which we begin to associate signs and meanings and use signs to communicate—overlapped with my time in school. Vygotsky described this phase as a time in which we discover our own abilities in relation to meaning making, and for me, an important part of this discovery process was experimentation. Unfortunately, only a fraction of this experimentation was supported by my classroom experiences, but those assignments that did so led to some of my clearest memories of schoolwork. Although I did not dislike writing essays, viewing them as a challenge to my abilities as a writer, I was most enthusiastic on those rare occasions when teachers gave us the option to present assignments in whatever format we thought best. The most notable of these was a tenth grade project on life during the French Revolution. My sister and I wrote a series of letters from the point of view of two people living through those events in history. When we were done, we put all the letters in envelopes and melted a red birthday candle to seal them with little puddles of wax.

When we allow students to explore and compare the strengths and weaknesses of different forms of writing and encourage them to reflect upon this process—something I did not have the formal opportunity to do until an undergraduate rhetoric class where we compared arguments made in essay as opposed to narrative forms—we are helping them develop a framework for understanding writing on a deeper level, which may allow them to discover something personally meaningful in the work. Given all the different forms of writing out there (and the many reasons that individuals may write), I strongly believe that everyone can, with help, discover a purpose that will motivate them enough to learn.

Whereas purpose was what drove me to continue writing and to finish a particular project, it seems to me now that the place of inspiration is often as a starting point. While inspiration has come from such things as quirky facts, folklore, and superstitions, a greater

proportion of my inspiration has arisen from paying closer attention to the world, to watching and listening and pondering the things that I see, hear, and feel. So, even though I recognize the outlines of Vygotsky's four phases of sign acquisition in my journey as a writer, I also find myself drawn to John Dewey's notion of transformative experience where learning comes from such things as attention and intense reflection (Jackson, 2000). The ability to take an interest in something, if only for a moment, the curiosity to look up and read about Himalayan cats just because you overheard someone mention them, the ability to listen to other people and the patience to think about these things, to imagine, and to make connections—all of these play a part in sparking inspiration.

So why do I write? I write as a means of understanding the world and exploring my own thinking. I write to take myself to other places and walk in someone else's shoes. I write so that I have something to read when I cannot find existing stories that appeal to me. I write to tell stories about life and about living, stories that I hope will affect the people who read them—make them laugh and think or give them a respite from their sometimes relentless reality. I write, also, simply because I love it. There is something inherently satisfying about capturing the ephemeral beauty of a butterfly upon a page and knowing that it will still be there later if I want to come back to it, waiting to take wing again as the words are reread—a little different, as is the nature of reading, but also the same. Writing is a tool for making life more colorful, and all you need is a pen, paper, and your own imagination.

#### References

- Connery, C. M. (2010). The social construction of a visual language: On becoming a painter. *Vygotsky and Creativity: A cultural historical approach to play, meaning making, and the arts*, 83-106.
- Jackson, P. W. (2000). *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- John-Steiner, V., Connery, M. C., & Marjanovic-Shane, A. (2010). Dancing with the muses: A cultural-historical approach to play, meaning making and creativity. *Vygotsky and creativity: A cultural-historical approach to play, meaning making, and the arts*, 3-15.
- Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (2004). Imagination and creativity in childhood. *Journal of Russian & East European Psychology*, 42(1), 7-97.
- Vygotsky, L. S. 1987. Thinking and Speech (N. Minick, Trans.). (Orig. 1934) In R. W. Rieber & A. S. Carton (Eds.), *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky. Volume 1: Problems of General Psychology* (pp. 37-285). New York: Plenum Press.