Staying Alive

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As a newly single mother of a grade schooler and an even newer holder of a Ph.D., I began my career in composition with, perhaps, more than the usual apprehensions. Before beginning my doctoral program, I'd worked for five years as an adjunct teacher of writing and enjoyed it. So when I'd started graduate school, I'd just assumed I'd teach, either at a two year or a small four year school. But when I got my degree, composition jobs were plentiful, more so than now. I'd loved living in Chicago ten years earlier and my oldest sister still lived in a western suburb there, so when a chance to teach at a Chicago area university came about, I took it, not heeding or even listening to the misgivings I had about whether this job with its emphasis on research, would be the right choice for me, the direction I'd planned to take.

Pretty quickly I realized that the job and I weren't a good fit. Away from the support system of graduate colleagues and old friends, I felt overwhelmed by the job's publishing demands, even though I enjoyed the teaching–both undergraduate and graduate. I saw with increasing clarity that if I were to be successful in this job, I wouldn't have much time to have a life, to be an available parent. Finally I asked myself the fundamental question, the one I'd glossed over earlier: "What do **you** really want?" I tell you all this, not so much to share my own history, as to say I think the most fundamental way of staying alive in any job is, first, to **listen to ourselves, to what we want and need** so that we find a reasonably comfortable match between the job's "duties and expectations" and our own abilities, desires, and life circumstances. .

Because **I** wanted to have as many options and as much control as possible–in other words, I didn't want to start looking for a job because I hadn't gotten tenure–I began testing

other waters And I tried listening to what I needed, what gave me pleasure, what fit my responsibilities. I found such listening difficult. I'd worked hard during graduate school and had wanted to do this job just right, wanted it to be the right fit. I felt responsible to those who'd helped me during graduate school, and, like most of us, I'd never NOT been successful in school. Similar pressures exist for anyone thinking about changing jobs. Still, I probably wasn't just changing jobs but directions in my career. I didn't want to lose status, but I was increasingly aware that researching and publishing weren't the activities that nourished me. Teaching was. I realized I was, in Stephen North's terms, a practitioner. This struggle to define myself deepened and extended my earlier insight about listening. To stay alive in a field, we **must listen to ourselves, even if it means making a change that's downwardly mobile, sideways, or "just not rational"**. We have to be willing to think out of whatever box we've created--or embraced--for ourselves,. It's difficult, first even to **see** the box, let alone decide to dismantle it in our own heads or leave it, but sometimes listening to ourselves and what we need demands just that.

For me, seeing and getting out of my box meant testing the job waters further. It took another two years: I looked at several four-year schools with fewer publishing pressures, at urban community colleges in various locales, and, finally, at a rural community college in Oregon. I tried to be aware during and after each interview of how the job and I might match. I learned a lot in the process. I was a better listener this time, and, to be honest, I also was lucky. The Oregon job and I have proved a good fit. But I didn't **know** then that this fit would be so good, though I thought so, felt so. I did **know** then that I'd placed myself in the "trenches" of composition–all teaching and heavy loads. And I knew I now had to learn how to stay alive there, to thrive.

The first few months on the new job, I realized, yet again, how really smart Aristotle was–**knowing our audience is essential.** I had to get to know my new audience, my students–and they were different from most students I'd taught. My students weren't the 18-22 year olds, often middle class, that I'd had before. They were 18 to 50 year olds who had both more suspicions about education and more life experience than I had. And they **weren't** less able, just less familiar with academic approaches and language. Their often skeptical perspective and maturity startled, then delighted me. They almost insisted that we work together: that I ask them what they knew and didn't know, what had worked and what hadn't, what was too big a jump and what was obvious. For my part, I insisted that they work, that they trust me that what they were learning was important in and of itself and for their futures. Those students helped me learn that their practicing of skills needed to be the focus of the classes. I had to listen to their successes and failures–to **their** efforts–in order to teach well. And we all had to loosen up and laugh in the classroom. I still remember when I asked a first-term writing class what they thought might help them identify that nebulous concept we'd been working with, THE THESIS. One young woman sighed, then said ruefully, "Maybe a neon sign flashing THESIS HERE!" The laughter gave us a way out of the frustration to begin anew.

I also had to get to know my other new audience, my new colleagues. They, too, broke the stereotypes I'd had. About half had Ph.D's. Committed to teaching well, they had diverse interests and backgrounds. Best yet, some colleagues were willing to be mentors, to talk teaching, writing theory, students. And talk we did. We tried out assignments on each other; devised new approaches to teaching everything from symbol to comma splice, argued about what caused students to actually think Norma Jean JUMPS at the end of Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh". Those first years both groups refined Aristotle's analysis of audience into my third

tenet for staying alive in a job: **we have to listen to our audience; get to know and respect them and what they have to offer us as well as what we have to offer them.** Such mutual respect is at the heart of collaboration, at any level. In teaching, such collaboration –with students and colleagues--lightens the load and opens up learning, gives way to genuine laughter and sharing. For four years, learning to listen to these two new audiences as guides to teaching was enough, in and of itself, to stay alive in the job.

Teaching loads at community colleges are, however, heavy, and the classes taught stay much the same. Design and chance intersected in several ways over the next five years to help me stay alive. First, two pieces of background information: during those Chicago era testing-the-waters job interviews, Dr. Rinda West, at Oakton Community College, had shared how many English teachers in her department stayed alive: They'd found tasks that necessitated release time. Also, while I was teaching in Chicago, I'd done research that led me to interview Muriel Harris, founder of Purdue's Writing Lab. That visit had shown me how powerful a writing center could be in helping students learn to write; it was a new way of teaching. Thus, seven years later, when the founder and director of our Writing Center retired, I asked to take on her duties–and her release time. In learning how to direct the Writing Center, I found variety in my job as well as research that I could keep up with and that helped me solve the problems directly before me. Of course, I found new ways of thinking about the work of a Writing Center–both from the research and from my colleagues.

Our Writing Center has evolved so that it is now staffed primarily with practicing writers who hold bachelors' degrees and who work part or half time. Their expertise and perspective have made directing the Writing Center a collaborative affair. They help define its role and its character, making it a place where students make the coffee and stop by to say how they did on a

paper; where local writers come to read their newly published works; where community members who need to work on a writing project can find help, where colleagues sometimes stop just to share in the laughter. These staff members question their own tutoring strategies, making working in the trenches a shared effort and joy. **So a fourth way to stay alive is to find or create a job that allows us release time from teaching, an opportunity to practice other skills, and a smaller body of research to read.**

The retirement of another colleague (could a tenet of staying alive be joining a department with some members who'll retire in the next five or six years?) gave me the opportunity to teach an autobiography writing class that attracted people from the community as well as some full time students at the college. With its significant number of retired professionals, the class is a combination seminar and serious writing group whose members write, to be honest, at a level well above that of most community college students. Because the writing matters to them, these writers write often, respond critically to each other's work, and sustain each other (and me) when the writing is painful or life events are difficult. We've held public readings, worked with freshman writers to help them find that elusive thesis, and published several chapbooks as well as full length books. Despite their accomplishments, however, the hallmarks of the class are laughter and playfulness, making it a joy to teach.

In another illustration that clouds may have silver linings, the budgetary cutbacks of the late 90's in Oregon, ironically, resulted in a new program, a culinary arts institute that had writing as part of its curriculum. Long a devotee of *Gourmet* and a fan of good food–good eater will be inscribed on my tombstone-- I signed up to take a class in writing about food at Linfield University, a private school with excellent writing courses. The class itself proved to be superb–another story–and it gave me enough background to tackle teaching the required course for the

culinary institute. The students were yet another audience–often writing phobic yet artists in another domain. We've negotiated our differences, so the resulting course meets their professional concerns as it broadens their knowledge of the kinds of writing being done in their field. It's meant, too, pleasurable research for me, as I pore over cooking magazines and cookbook reviews–this is work? These two examples illustrate that **yet another way we can stay alive is by taking on or developing new teaching assignments**

These new assignments led to my taking classes in order to do my job well. I went to the University of Oregon (in Eugene, Oregon) and to Portland State University during summer sessions. For me that meant a change of locale, good in and of itself. For any of us, it means being a student once again. And that student perspective, as well as the information I gained, renewed my enthusiasm for my work. I felt the nervousness my students feel when I had to read an autobiographical essay aloud. I experienced not only that anxiety but the benefit of the peer review, for I felt the ah-ha of knowing how to change something in my writing to make it work. I thus could articulate, firsthand, for my own students the value of peer review. In short, going back to school gave me the perspective of a student, allowed me to explore new areas, and strengthened my belief in the efficacy of specific teaching strategies while it gave me new techniques and new information. So **another tenet for staying alive is finding opportunities to study new subjects, to be lifelong learners and to gain a student perspective whenever we can.**

Lest I sound too idealistic and Polyanna-ish, going back to school also helped raise my salary by participating in a program common at community colleges–a system of increment credits that can be accumulated and result in a step increase or raise. Indeed, a favorite colleague dubbed these courses "greater greed" classes. I needn't say anything, I'm sure, about the

benefits of a larger salary to "staying alive" and being happier in your job. But I can say quite a lot about **taking advantage of opportunities to increase your salary when they're available**. The "greater greed" classes didn't survive the current reduced budgets for community colleges. My salary increases did, and so did the mental stimulation they provided–both essential in staying alive.

To backtrack a bit, for me, especially during my first four years in Oregon, the contact at 4 C's with far-flung colleagues and new approaches to teaching energized me. About then my focus shifted, because, by chance–**another** colleague's retirement-- I became the department's representative to OWEAC, the statewide Oregon Writing and English Advisory Committee, charged with communication and advisory articulation among the state's community colleges and universities. That group met once each quarter at a member's campus, so through it I got to know my colleagues, their colleges, and my adopted state. We also wrote guidelines for proposed changes in the articulation between high schools, community colleges, and universities. And we talked, of course, about new developments in composition and at our schools. That group helped me gain a larger sense of my "local" professional community and understand the various and common ways we struggled to maintain our teaching and our sanity in times of reduced budgets.

Thus, not surprisingly, **another way we stay alive is by our participation in state, regional, and national committees and conferences**–as this conference indicates! .

The OWEAC group also helped me realize that many educational problems at public educational institutions stemmed from political and economic ones, ones voters didn't want to address. We live in period of decreased respect for education and educators. We find the reality of that lack of respect in hate radio, in editorials of newspapers and magazines, in students'

attitudes in the classroom, in our salaries and workloads, and, sadly, in the legislative bodies of many of our states and in the voters' voices at the polls. For those of us in public education, the latter are serious matters indeed. It's tough not to feel devalued, not to burn out, when our legislators repeatedly compromise funding for education and erode our pension and health benefits, when the voters in our communities turn down ballot initiatives to provide basic educational services. Thus, axiomatic as it is, I feel compelled to say it, a tenet of staying alive is refusing to **link our sense of professional worth with others', especially voters', approval.**

When the reality of reduced funds and cut programs was impossible to ignore, I realized I needed something to balance the increasing stress of larger classes and reduced morale. I opted to take advantage of the "free" courses at my community college, and they've helped to counterbalance the negative. I've had the fun of learning to sing Italian arias and Billie Holiday tunes; the challenge of performing Benjamin Britten's "A Ceremony of Carols"; the messy pleasure of throwing pots in ceramics; the soothing balance of practicing Tai Chi. Because our campus is small, I often meet my own students as a fellow student in these classes, and that alters our relationship a bit. But to be honest, that isn't my motivation. These classes are just plain fun and help me deal with the inevitable stress of any job. **Whether or not the classes are free, learning new skills or developing new interests is essential in our staying alive.**

So where does all this lead? I'm still learning to listen to myself, my students, my colleagues and still trying to think outside my boxes; still developing new facets of the Writing Center, the autobiography and food writing classes, still expanding my sense of my educational community; still taking fun classes. All these represent my efforts. What I've also learned in reflecting on my experience is this: We need to trust the process of our developing interests, their synchronicity with opportunities, to guide us in staying alive**.** If we are honest, when most of us

look back at our lives, we see not only our design, but also the role that chance has played in our fortunes and the ways that a path we didn’t choose and didn’t want to take ended up taking us the way we needed to go. And we need–certainly I do–to take myself–my job and my life–a little less seriously, to lighten up and laugh.

All this brings me, finally, then, back to my title. When I first heard the conference title's opposing poles --dinosaur versus burnout-- their hyperbole made me smile and play with several titles as I thought about my place in that spectrum. Finally, I remembered both a scene and a song from the 1978 Goldie Hawn-Chevy Chase-Dudley Moore movie " Foul Play". In it, Goldie, intent on survival despite being pursued by hit men, ducks by chance into Dudley Moore's apartment for refuge, only to find it equipped with every "cliche" of the 70's bachelor pad. As a bed, complete with flashing lights, lowers from the ceiling, Hawn and the viewers are treated to Moore's hilarious strip-tease dance to the BeeGee's "Staying Alive". And, ironically, that's just what this interlude has done for Goldie: helped her stay alive--by design and chance--and with lots of laughter. Design, chance, and laughter–these three have characterized my efforts to stay alive in the profession. Regardless of the specific tenets you may develop, these three will help you stay the course. So, with a nod to the improbable wisdom found in Hawn and Moore's encounter--here's to our "Staying Alive."