

Navigating Trey: A Teacher's Voyage

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I seize the chair as if it is the helm and I am about to sail into the depths of his 14-year-old soul. "What's going on?" I inquire, peering into his deep sea eyes.

"I don't know. I've been getting into trouble in all of my classes." He glances down at his hands which he clasps and lays in the blue jeans fold of his lap. The short midnight hair on the crown of his head blends in with his dark Metallica T-shirt. I foresee our conversation devouring more and more of the 30 minutes allotted for lunch.

Silence surrounds us—a stark contrast from the sounds of students that filled the room during fourth hour. Now, as his classmates clamor into the cafeteria, I sit with Trey in silence. I never knew he could be this quiet. He crashes wave after wave of sarcasm against the shore, drenching others with the sting of cold salt water, mocking them with the wind. Thirty minutes ago, he sent Shelby to the counselor's office in tears.

"You don't know when to stop, Trey. You are so bright and so funny, but there is a fine line between wit and sarcasm, and when you aren't careful, you cross that line. You crossed it today."

"Shelby is too emotional," he counters.

"Shelby is very emotional. Many girls your age are. Some of us are much better at controlling our emotions than others," I reply. "But what you said was uncalled for. I understand you were trying to be funny, but you took it too far."

"She's weak. I hate people like that."

"Trey," I say softly, waiting for his eyes to meet mine, "I am one of those people." His eyes search mine, then focus on the fluorescent lights marching across the ceiling. Tears spray his cheeks as he speaks of living in his brother's shadow, of never measuring up, and of fear. This boy before me feels nothing he does is good enough. This boy before me—a black belt—fears he will go to jail for a fight even though he refused to fight back. If the punk who jumped him gets off, Trey reasons, the judge will assume his accusations are lies and lock him away for perjury. This boy before me thinks he has become the very thing he despises—weak and emotional—because he is unraveling before my eyes. Unraveling like a rope bleached by the sun, weathered by the sea.

"Trey, you are not weak," I reassure him. "You are human. We all need someone to talk to, someone who will listen without judgment, sometime."

"I guess you're that 'someone,'" he mumbles, his dimples emerging as he dries the tail-end of his tears. "Thank you," he whispers. The bell rings.

For 30 minutes I have been lost with this boy at sea, helping him navigate his way toward land. Thirty exhausting minutes. Thirty minutes I would not trade for anything. Thirty minutes to remind me why I am here. Why I chose to be here. Why there is no place I would rather be.

Reflections

on writing "Navigating Trey: A Teacher's Voyage"

I began this piece at an OWP writing marathon in March 2008. A sculpture at the Oklahoma Art Museum titled "Man With Child" reminded me of a story I'd been meaning to get down on paper but had not yet found the time to do so. I scribbled it in my journal and tucked it away until the summer institute rolled around. Hoping to use this piece as a vignette in my thesis, I typed it and posted it on the E-Anthology.

After revising based on suggestions from people scattered across the continent, I learned of N. Scott Momaday's three-voice narrative poems during Freeda Richardson's presentation, "What Unites Us: The Power of Story in Native American and World Poetry." I decided to turn this vignette into the story or first voice of a three-voice narrative illustrating the impact of teachers listening to their students. I added a second voice reflecting personally on the story and a third voice reporting my findings.

I also entered "Navigating Trey" in the OWP writing contest in January 2009, and it won the teacher prose competition. It is published in *Literary Leaves*, the 2009 Writing Conference Anthology, and in my thesis, which I defended May 2009.