
Controlling the “Others”

STEVEN HELLER

Produced in Catherine Schutz's Fall 2013 ENC 1101

The following story is told from the point of view of a fictional college advising psychologist who has a visit from a student with problems unlike any he has ever seen before. The student and his troubles are based on struggles that the author faced when entering college. This story attempts to present solutions for overcoming these struggles that have been developed in response to advice from other writers as well as firsthand experience.

Are we all not an amalgam of those with whom we have studied in the past? Our teachers, our siblings, our parents, and our religious leaders all push their ideas, writing styles, and habits on us assuming that we will accept what they say and apply it to our choices and actions in the future. As children, we are malleable clay pieces that have not yet met the fiery kiln that will decide who and what we will become as writers in the future. Incoming college students have been molded by previous encounters into grotesque clay figurines that writing professors strive to change. However, in some cases, it may be too late. Some students see the academic world through a sort of tunnel vision that makes them feel like their writing must be boring, dull, or pointless. They find it difficult to write because those in the past who have influenced them have taught them in a certain way and they now do not know any other way to write. The old saying, “You can't teach an old dog new tricks,” applies wonderfully here. When writing in college, there are so many new paths to follow, so many new mountains to climb, so much paper to traverse, and most students have not the faintest clue where to start.

As a college advising psychologist, many students have entered my office as a last resort. They think, “Well, I have done all that I can to improve myself so there must be something wrong in my head.” There are some students who have writer's block, and just need the small push that it takes to get their ideas flowing. Usually, having them sit down in a quiet environment where they can tell me everything that they think when planning to write helps tremendously. However, I had one college student come in to my room whose hopes of success were gone.

In my most challenging case so far, I had a student make multiple visits so that we could discover the root cause of his struggles with writing. Barry Windon¹, a first-year student at the University of Central Florida, came into my office claiming to be having great difficulty when he writes. He said that he could not concentrate and had writer's block from the very start of his papers. Writers should be able to think clearly, and Barry felt this was not possible for him. His only hope was to push through and struggle to see over the infinitely expanding brick wall which was impeding him from writing successful college papers. His writing was so forced that the result was nonsensical papers that had no consistency or meaning.

In Barry's first consultation, I had him write for thirty minutes about his difficulties as a writer. He was whispering to himself, which was not very peculiar to me because for some people it helps them to hear what they are writing. He wrote a few paragraphs and then looked up at me red in the face and tore the paper to bits in frustration. I was indignant that he would waste my time in

¹To protect the confidentiality of the student, a pseudonym is used throughout.

such a manner and asked him why he acted this way. He responded by saying, "I have such great ideas and I want to write them, but then I think they will disagree. Should I listen to myself or the others? I do not think they will much like what I have to say." I do not know if it was the bizarre statement that perturbed me or the strange angle that his head was tilted in. Maybe it was a little of both.

After that consultation, I knew I had a big case on my hands. Barry's multiple personalities were all telling him to write in a different way, much like the different personas in Betty Flowers' essay "Madman, Architect, Carpenter, Judge: Roles and the Writing Process." These multiple personas were setting up barrier after barrier in his writing process. The writer that Barry used to be was hiding somewhere in his brain amidst other characters who were hindering his creativity and stifling his confidence. If Barry could learn to gain control of these voices, then he would be able to see that he is still a malleable student and can learn new things to apply to his writing. However, if the kiln door has been shut, there is no escape for this unfortunate figurine and these voices will dominate his mind for the rest of his academic life.

Barry is the type of person who would never admit he is wrong. If he got into an argument with someone and was wrong, he would research his side until he found the minute shred of evidence that proved he may be right. This ego had him constantly arguing with people who were telling him that he was wrong. When he wrote, there were voices that he heard telling him that he was writing badly and would not be successful. Then his ego kicked in and he fought back with reasons why it would work. However, there were so many voices telling him different things that he would simply give up. To be able to help Barry, I had to meet each person who was clouding his thoughts and attempt to amplify the supportive voices and silence the malevolent ones.

One such obscurity in Barry's mind was someone of great importance to him. This person was constantly giving him imaginative ideas and urging him to do better. This voice belonged to his loving father, who taught him how to read when he was a boy. When Barry was young, his father would read novels to him, and Barry would follow along with his finger. At a certain point his father would stop, throw in a bookmark and slam the book shut. He would say, "Alright, Barry, what do you think happens next?" Barry would be so distraught that the flow of events ended, and his mental movie was put on pause, that he would let his imagination explode with ideas that may attempt to connect the dots and tie loose ends to the story. This voice is much like the Madman in Flowers' essay." It gives the writer countless ideas so that they can slap them on the paper and decide what to revise later. The Madman's voice is of supreme importance and needed to be much louder in Barry's mind. Otherwise, this voice would be unable to be heard through the din of the other personas in his brain.

Like many others, Barry was a student for all of his life in Central Florida. The standards have long been the same for Floridian students, set by the government in Tallahassee. There were two snarky, ignorant, cold voices that were prominent in Barry's mind. One held a cold, pale, shaky finger to his work and wanted to see where every comma would find its resting place. The other asked why he was choosing such a wretched format. The first Witch was his sixth grade English teacher and the second was his writing teacher from his junior year of high school (unfortunately, neither of the two was struck by a flying domicile). The second his Madman threw ideas on the page, they shrieked and shunned his creations, asking why he wrote subjectively and in more than

These multiple personas were setting up barrier after barrier in his writing process. The writer that Barry used to be was hiding somewhere in his brain amidst other characters who were hindering his creativity and stifling his confidence.

five paragraphs. The second Witch would not even allow Barry to write using any linking verbs or subordinating conjunctions. Throughout Barry's academic life, he constantly heard these two voices. They were bitter, sarcastic, and diminished his ability to think clearly. It is very difficult to concentrate when you have someone in your ear constantly saying, "Really? Do you really expect that to work?"

In "Calming the Inner Critic and Getting to Work," Allegra Goodman writes about how, on good days, all of the voices of famous people from the past come to the table and speak to you about your writing. She also says, "On bad days, however, only unwelcome visitors appear: the specter of the third grade teacher who disparaged your penmanship. The ghost of the first person who told you that spelling counts. The voice of reason that points out that what you are about to attempt has already been done—and done far better than you might even hope" (Goodman 308). Since Barry had what Goodman considers a "bad day" every time he wrote, it is no wonder writing was such a difficult task for him.

The last personality was the courier of new ideas, or the Innovator. The person that this personality represented was unclear, because there is always someone who will push new ideas on Barry. It could be any of the people mentioned in the first paragraph. At the time, Barry was a freshman in college and his new ideas as a writer came from his professor. He was being taught new ways to think of writing that contradicted everything he had learned in the past. This is confusing to someone who knows one way and is told that his way is wrong. Barry's ego combats with this voice the most, because it tells him that he has more to learn. Deep down, Barry thought he was all-knowing and had reached his peak as a writer since he was in college. The hardest thing that Barry had to overcome was his own ego. He needed to give in to the fact that he is not always right, and had much more to learn. To be an effective writer, Barry had to learn new things, and incorporate them in his writing.

After pulling apart all of the different voices that were latched on to Barry's mind, I contemplated what help I could be to someone so troubled. I had Barry read "Shitty First Drafts, in which author Anne Lamott writes about not needing everything in a draft to be perfect from the start. I told Barry that he needed to be able to relax and quiet his mind just as Lamott does while writing her first drafts. I explained that he needed to be able to separate each voice and imagine them as a switch on a soundboard. Then he needs to slowly lower the volume of the Witches and the Innovator and listen only to the nurturing male voice. I asked him to write for ten minutes about his favorite college experience so far. After taking deep breaths, Barry began to write. He was not writing quickly; however, his pencil never left the paper. He had a continuous string of words for the full length of time.

Then, I prompted him to turn the Witches up, and the other voice down. Suddenly, Barry looked at his paper with disbelief and before he was able to throw it off of the table, I told him to stop. I asked him to put the Innovator to half-volume along with the Witches, and he suddenly realized that there is more to learn than what is in his past. The Innovator reminded him about what he had read in class. A piece by student Kelsey Diaz, "7 Ways High School Prepares You for Failure," spoke to Barry. It let him know that he needed to let go of what he had learned in the past that was setting up barriers and constraints in his writing.

Five-paragraph essays are in Barry's past, along with writing objectively. After his epiphany, he never wrote objectively again. If a professor wanted him to write objectively, he would write his paper emotionally, and then alter it to suit the teacher's needs. Now, the only time Barry turns up the volume for the Witches is when he needs a few suggestions about grammar and wording which is the last step in Betty Flowers' writing process. These Witches are Barry's "Judge," and are just as important as the other voices to establish Barry as a well-rounded, malleable, successful writer.

Works Cited

- Diaz, Kelsey. "Seven Ways High School Prepares You for Failure." Wardle and Downs 706-10. Print.
- Flowers, Betty S. "Madman, Architect, Carpenter, Judge: Roles and the Writing Process." *Language Arts* 58.7 (1981): 834-36. *JSTOR*. Web. 31 May 2013.
- Goodman, Allegra. "Calming the Inner Critic and Getting to Work." Wardle Downs 308-10. Print.
- Lamott, Anne. "Shitty First Drafts." Wardle and Downs 301-04. Print.
- Wardle, Elizabeth and Doug Downs, eds. *Writing about Writing: A College Reader*. Boston, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. Print.



Steven Heller

Steven Heller is a central Florida native and a freshman at the University of Central Florida. He is majoring in Biomedical Sciences and hopes to go to medical school to become an ophthalmologist. Steven is a LEAD Scholar and has been awarded a place on the Dean's List. When not studying and doing schoolwork, he enjoys surfing and being with friends and family.