

Chapter Two

The Woman Who Resurrected Words: Writing as Renewal

SUSAN BRUFFI

Sackman High School, St. Louis, Missouri

After all, I've known Alex for five years now, and I've spent two hours every working day carpooling with the woman. I should know all about her by now, right? Maybe two hours a day gives one a little insight into a person, but I'm finding that describing this sometimes wild, sometimes pensive, larger-than-life enigma of a woman is a hefty task. I sit here now and write, and the same things that always swirl in my head are back again, bewildering me. How do I write about someone I admire and, to be fair, someone I am still a little intimidated by? How do I stay true to who she is? How do I make sure that I don't just start writing and, pleased by the way I phrase something or by a colorful word, let the writing take over and dwarf her story? At some point, Alex is going to have to see this—what will she think? Will she say it's a fine piece of writing, but it's not about her—it's not honest? Her words chime in my head: "When you write, you don't have to be faithful to the facts. But you *must* be faithful to the truth."

Will Alex, a veteran writer, whip up a new draft and say something like, "I thought this might be closer to the real story?" Will she take a look at my draft and begin to "workshop" it? I have been in at least two writing groups with her and have more than once heard something along the lines of, "This part . . . hmm . . . I'm not sure this works here. . . ." While these self-doubts assault me, I try to fight back by repeating chunks of this mantra:

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Relax. Who could write her story better than you? You know her. You've argued with her about movies, you've squashed her (and been squashed by her) on the racquetball court. Long before you knew you would ever write about her, you studied her as she puffed on candy cigarettes and cruised down Highway 36. You've compared family histories and you've road-tripped with her—six hundred windy, nausea-filled miles. You've shared your writing with her, reviewed hers. Remember, Alex is the one who pushed you to start writing. She is the poster child for a study on how teachers reinvigorate and reinvent themselves—and you are a decent enough writer to capture her essence on paper, even if you don't know everything.

And then, after a few minutes of pumping up my writer's ego, I am ready to sit down and start writing. For at least a half hour. Until I have to take a deep breath and repeat my mantra. Now, though, I have to tell you about our first meeting. We were at Mountjoy High School, where Alex taught Spanish and English. It was early August. She was cleaning her classroom, packing up piñatas and posters. I was standing there feeling awkward, trying to figure out how I could possibly decorate the bulletin boards of my first classroom.

The Alex I met that day was the post-Missouri Writing Project version, and to hear her tell it, the previous version was quite a bit different. Really, to tell her story right, I have to go back about ten years before I met her, when she was a new teacher at Mountjoy High School. The following excerpt of a poem she penned during her early years there might give you a glimpse into her state of mind back then:

The Contract

Over there on my desk it silently sits;
It's driving me crazy, it's giving me fits.
Now it starts talking, it's calling my name,
"Next year will be different, it won't be the same.
Come here and sign me, you know it's your fate,
I'm due the fifteenth, you don't want to be late!
With me signed and delivered your job is secure,
Don't think of the year you will have to endure."

The fact is, Alex walked into her first Mountjoy classroom ready to teach Spanish. She had studied the language extensively in the United States and in Costa Rica and had

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helped develop the Spanish curriculum for the district where she began teaching. A great start, since her six-hour teaching day would include Spanish I and II. But what about the four different English courses she was expected to teach? Because Alex had only completed six hours of English in college, she crammed as many college English classes as she could into her after-school and summer schedules. She also attended as many English conferences as possible. Despite her efforts, she remained unsatisfied with her teaching.

I always knew that I was supposed to teach writing, but all I could teach them to do was to capitalize, indent, and maybe organize a little--all surface stuff. It was like I had to teach them to build a building without ever talking about what we were building and why.

It's not too often I hear Alex reminisce about those years, but she got a little agitated remembering The Teachers' Lounge Incident.

I told you about the time when I talked to Marie and Joan in the lounge and said something about "How do you know what to do in the English classroom, how much time to spend on what things, what to concentrate on?" Then one of them looked at me and said, "If you don't know, Alex, then you shouldn't be teaching." They were acting like God was speaking to them, telling them what to teach. Well, it wasn't the first year I'd been teaching; I'd been at Mountjoy for a number of years. But it made it obvious to me that they didn't have the self-doubt that I had about teaching, and I had a lot of very strong self-doubt. I felt like what I was doing was junk.

I'd heard about The Teachers' Lounge Incident before, but this time Alex clarified her frustration. She had taken a shot at collaboration, trying to get practical feedback from her colleagues, but all they offered was sophomoric condescension. This agitated Alex because it emphasized not only her floundering but also her isolation; these co-workers weren't anywhere near throwing Alex a lifeline, let alone encouragement. Even as she sought their advice, Alex realized that these two women "didn't have the answer, but they did a good job of making me feel stupid

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anyway." The irony was that they were doing just as much "junk" as Alex, but they were both comfortable with their mediocrity. The combination of Alex's self-doubt and professional alienation motivated her to continue looking for answers—in arenas outside of the teachers' lounge.

The Writing Project: Getting Rid of the Junk

Nine years after Alex walked through Mountjoy's front doors, she felt dangerously close to "becoming one of those teachers who don't know what to do, so they give their students a lot to do." She was fed up with wasting her students' time. She had heard about the Missouri Writing Project and hoped it would provide some answers. She was on the verge of committing a large chunk of her summer to this seminar—at least seven hours a day for four weeks to writing, talking about writing, thinking about writing, researching writing, and sharing writing.

She even had a problem just writing the application (she had done little more than compose anniversary ditties in the past). Simple questions like, "Describe yourself as a writer" intimidated her. Application in hand, she called the institute director and bargained to forgo the \$500 stipend and pay the course fee—in lieu of submitting the application. According to Alex, "I very honestly went into the Writing Project without wanting to write!"

Finally, she got her ink flowing, finished the application, and was accepted. Surrounded by twenty other teachers, she found herself in a small writing group with three other people. There it was, her tiny captive audience, and she immediately felt a responsibility—not to her writing, but to the group. Alex explains, "Here are these three other teachers who are going to sit here and listen to what I've written. There's no reason to skimp or waste their time."

Every day without fail Alex and her writing group met for at least an hour. (Writing group time is "sacred," exempt from any scheduling changes.) By the end of the project, the four named themselves The Fireside Chat Group. The group's bond has held them

together for the last seven years, and they meet regularly to share their most recent writing. This solidarity was not forged over time but was soldered at The Fireside Chat Group's very first meeting.

Megan, one of the group members, passed out a piece on her father's recent retirement. As she read, Alex scrambled to correct all the grammar errors and all the run-on sentences, but as Megan reached the halfway point, Alex remembers,

She got really choked up and started crying as she read. Carla finally hugged her, and John and I joined in. But it was a real revelation for me. Something I was treating as an inert thing, waiting for me to fix up, was obviously much more to the person who wrote it. It taught me about ownership and also, what a piece of writing says is much more important than how it says it.

And that is how her stifling assumptions about writing—which Alex had never been able to shake—were jolted free on the first day of the Writing Project. Finally, after years of seeking answers, Alex discovered how to radically rethink, resee, and revise her attitude toward teaching, learning, and writing.

Building a New Classroom

According to Alex, teachers unknowingly but *constantly* waste their students' time.

Writing for punishment is still going on. There are teachers out there who think it's perfectly okay to have kids copy five-hundred-word reports verbatim out of *The World Book Encyclopedia*, even taking points off if they don't stop at exactly five hundred words! They consider this a writing assignment! We have all these English teachers who are teaching their students to write who don't believe that they, or their students, *can* write. So we set up false parameters; we stick to things that are "safe," like the five-paragraph essay and the term paper. We have had it drummed into our heads that we are successful if students can pump out a decent term paper. But what does the term paper have to do with life? Name one great five-paragraph essayist in the world! We will force-feed our students with bibliographic form and grammar terminology because we don't know any better, because that's all that we—without being writers ourselves—can grasp. We teach them not to be readers, not to be writers—because, basically, *we're* not readers, *we're* not writers.

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Of course, this is Alex's thinking after spending three weeks in a National Writing Project Summer Institute. Alex isn't shy about admitting her faults as a writing teacher before this transforming summer:

When my students did write, most of it was in response to other people's writing. It was like telling them, "All the good stuff's already been written. Don't you try and write anything; just write about this really great writing by someone else."

A fledgling graduate of the Writing Project, Alex was ready to overhaul tradition. She was ready to model her English classroom on Writing Project philosophy, ready to put into practice some of the strategies she had tried during the institute. The next year, her English classes devoted three periods a week to writing workshop, and students chose the type of writing and their own topic. At the end of each quarter, students were evaluated on a certain number of polished pieces. Alex diligently protected these blocks of writing time. She set up two desks off to one side of the classroom for kids to talk about their progressing works with someone *other than the teacher*. While theoretically a great idea, Alex had reservations: "I was just sure that it was going to be a mess—that I was going to have kids fighting to get over there to sit and gossip." She kept vigilant, ready to break up any chatter about the homecoming dance or football rivalries. Instead, she found that the students

genuinely got up to go over there to talk about their writing to other kids. I mean, they saw each other as valuable resources. Plus, they wanted to conference with me all the time about their work, even before or after school. I cannot tell you the number of rewrites they did on their work.

There were other obvious successes. One of her students published a writing workshop creation in a book about rodeos; another won a contest for her composition on wildlife. But the less apparent successes—such as kids giving up those few minutes of pre-

first bell socializing so that they would have a little one-on-one time to ask for Alex's writing feedback—are the ones that convinced Alex that she and her curriculum mutiny were on the right track.

Resurrection: Life after the Writing Project

Participating in a writing group was the catalyst for Alex's first revelation about writing and teaching. I've never known her to turn down an invitation from a writing group, even when her daily planner was crammed. She has juggled commitments to three or more writing groups simultaneously. She dragged *me* to my first writing group. Therefore, I would have bet that the most valuable part of the Missouri Writing Project for Alex was her writing group. I was wrong. According to Alex, the value was a lot more abstract. First of all, the Writing Project demystified writing for Alex:

Most people will tell you that writers and artists are born. Gauguin was born Gauguin, Hemingway was born Hemingway. Now I realize that isn't necessarily true. Maybe I can't write Hemingway's stuff, but I can write good stuff—and I never did that until I was forty years old. There was never anything in my life before the Writing Project that taught me to do that, or that it was a worthwhile endeavor—writing just to write. And if I could, anybody could.

Second, the Writing Project led Alex to see the power inherent in writing:

If you need something—bookshelves, a telephone, whatever—and you can put down cogent reasons why you want it and put it in the right style, you can get it. You gain credibility. If you write something creative that's decent, the whole world thinks, "Wow, only really intelligent people can do this." All of the sudden you have this new persona as a really bright, talented person.

Third, the Writing Project introduced Alex to her potential:

There was something about somebody saying you have to sit down and write for an hour every day. You owe yourself that hour every day, and it doesn't matter how it turns out. This gave me the discipline to sit down and do it. But then the possibilities opened up. What could I do with my writing? I learned how to invest myself in something, and I got to build whatever I wanted.

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And this is why the woman who decided to give the Writing Project a chance, to try one more thing to transform her classroom into a valuable learning environment, ended up with a whole lot more than she bargained for. Although she could not have anticipated it, Alex ended up on a pilgrimage toward resurrecting words.

Writing and Truth

Alex might have started out her writing career producing "little more than cute little ditties for people's birthdays"—in fact, she still might whip out a few limericks for fun—but that's certainly not the extent of her work these days. I have sat with her in many writing groups and been blown away by the way she can turn a phrase, click out a rhythm, or build a piece to its climax.

At one writing-group session, I listened to her read her satire about Washington politics. I loved listening to the way the words flowed from Alex's mouth. I loved that the piece was full of her spunk and attitude, her humor. But I also felt miffed. The poem was a workshop piece, and we were supposed to give her suggestions to improve the poem; but what could I say? We all agreed that it was a finished, polished piece. Alex became sort of agitated, stuffing the paper back in her bag, and I knew what was bothering her: that sort of feedback, the fatal, "It's-perfect-the way-it-is" kind, seemed to lack sincerity. Alex thought the readers or listeners owed her piece more thoughtful, probing counsel than that. For Alex, writing is never a detached exercise. That is, no matter what form her writing takes, it always remains a part of her, an extension of her worries, attitudes, regrets, philosophies, outlook.

I have pieces of myself that I didn't have before, and I have outlined pieces of myself. It worries me a bit, but everything I write turns out to be, in some way, about me. But there are truths and revelations in writing. You have to face things you never faced before.

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Her analysis here definitely applies to her piece "The Perfect Picture," which explores one of the less picturesque realities of life. "It doesn't particularly work as a story. It's not one of my best pieces of writing," admits Alex. "But in another way, it *is* one of my best because it puts things in perspective." In this excerpt, Alex remembers an uncomfortable childhood scene: eavesdropping on her parents as they circuitously refused to let an African American couple tour the house they were selling (the same parents who banished a child from their home for using the word *nigger*).

The Perfect Picture

. . . I didn't confront my parents then. I was too embarrassed and ashamed. But a month later, after the house really had sold, to a white family with four children, I was alone with my mother in the attic packing, and I confessed I had been home when the Andersons came. I asked her why she and Dad had lied. She at least had the grace to blush before she answered. "We would be happy to have the Andersons in the neighborhood. But you have to remember, we won't be living here. Some of our friends don't feel the way we do, and we can't impose our beliefs on them, especially when we won't be here. Besides, there is the ugly but very real fact that if we sold to the Andersons, property values would go down. We don't have the right to do that to our neighbors." She held my eyes then, and I was the first to look down.

Nothing more was ever said either by my parents or me. It was one of those painful moments of doubt in a basically secure life that children are afraid to examine too closely for fear they will lose something important. I dealt with it in my dreams, where I haughtily presented them with a set of crisp white sheets and invited them to try them on for size. In real life, there were no more confrontations. But I remembered and from then on, I think I felt tainted and burdened with the guilt of racism.

When we moved to Missouri and actually saw Klansmen handing out leaflets in a mall, I cringed and looked away, but it was no longer terror that made me do it. I had lost my mantle of righteousness, and I was afraid, if I looked, I would see something familiar in their eyes. Or worse yet, they would find kinship in mine.

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According to Alex, all of the story's details aren't necessarily true, but that's not the important part:

There is this real dichotomous thing going on: when you write, on the one hand you don't necessarily have to be faithful to the facts, but you must be faithful to the truth as far as who you are.

In real life, Alex never dreamt about the gift of sheets. Plus, she never made the connection between her parents' actions and the rally of Klansmen until many years later. For Alex, committing this memory to paper was essential:

"The Perfect Picture" gets to the truth of how I felt, and of course it helped me get to the truth of how you can't say things. If I didn't commit it to writing, it would have always been kind of amorphous, kind of uncomfortable. If I were not writing, but only telling the story, I would have made excuses for [my parents]. . . . You commit to writing some of those things you could never say, things that would be familial treason or something. A lot of my writing is an attempt to resolve or explain something I see. I avoid talking because that's sometimes seen as a betrayal, but in writing you get resolutions you don't get in real life.

Lamott (1994) would likely agree:

You need to put yourself at the center [of your writing], you and what you believe to be true or right. The core, ethical concepts in which you most passionately believe are the language in which you are writing. . . . But needless to say, you can't tell them in a sentence or a paragraph; the truth doesn't come out in bumper stickers. . . . Your whole piece is the truth, not just one shining epigrammatic moment in it. There will have to be some kind of unfolding to contain it, and there will be layers. (103–4)

Maybe this is what we rookie writers find so intimidating. We know we are good with words, that we are adept at phrasing and playing with language until we mold what

others call "good writing." But it's not so simple once we realize that writing demands more than the skillful arrangement of words, once we accept that real writing exists in multiple layers.

Writing, Alex-Style

I have spent many carpool hours listening to Alex rave about the transformational powers of the Writing Project. As a walking sandwich board for the project, Alex has goaded, cajoled, and prodded several struggling teachers into participating. This includes me, but we'll get to that later. Somehow, I always pictured her fresh out of the project, religiously carrying around a little notebook to record insights that popped into her head and writing impromptu vignettes. She would lay that little journal on her nightstand so that whenever she awoke with the inspiration for a poem, editorial, or novel, it would be within arm's reach. The random hours she devoted to writing would flower into lengthy spans, until she would be completely consumed by each piece, oblivious to the ringing of the telephone, the growling in her stomach, the twitching of her tired eyes.

Well, this certainly wasn't and isn't Alex's experience—and my scenario definitely would be too Harlequin romance for her anyway. Alex would never claim that the act of writing is her passion, her obsession. She's frank about it: "I don't stay awake at night and say, 'I've got to write!' It's not this, 'There's a song in my soul, and I've got to let it out.'" Many contemporary writing gurus agree with Alex that not all writers live with pen in hand, writing constantly. Goldberg (1986) attempts to dispel writing myths like these by claiming that writers, like runners, need to practice. "You don't wait around for inspiration and a deep desire to run. It'll never happen, especially if you are out of shape and have been avoiding it. But if you run regularly, you train your mind to cut through or ignore your resistance" (11).

Alex no longer heeds anyone's writing prescriptions. She writes prior to each writing group meeting. That means that even during periods when she belongs to three groups simultaneously she averages only three hours of uninterrupted writing a month. That's okay, though. For Alex, the magic in writing has nothing to do with romantic inspiration

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or even tenacious, scheduled, methodic commitment to practicing. The beauty of writing for Alex lies in one simple truth, which she often states: "Before the Writing Project, before I really tried it, I never knew I could do it.

Overcoming Limitations

During our carpooling, Alex muckered about how she was surrounded by artistic people and how she was the least creative person in the world. Then one day she jumped into my Honda and announced that she had enrolled in a drawing class. Later, as we sat in her living room to talk about her writing, we digressed: we giggled about her thirty minutes of fame as a contestant on the TV game show *Jeopardy*; we discussed the pros and cons of sponge painting her bathroom; we argued about the worth of Quentin Tarantino as a director; she even tried to pawn her cat off on me. But when we touched on the work she had produced in her art class, she lit up and started talking rapid-fire. I didn't interrupt.

Pulling out a how-to-draw book and watercolor pencils, she showed me her terriers and Scotties. She talked about the shingles on the house she was sketching, how the instructor would point her in the right direction, and how she was able to go with it, experimenting with brush strokes and shading, so that the result was distinctly hers. She bent close and lowered her voice:

I'm never going to be a great painter, but, um, I'm working on this piece for Frank [her husband] for Christmas. He doesn't know about it, but I've got to finish it up this week. You know, she [the instructor] has to show me how to do it, like I was doing the shingles, and she has to show me how to put down the paint. It's a watercolor and you go like this [she demonstrates]. To see that physically happening on paper and to know that I did it, and that I could do it, was just amazing.

After Christmas, I was back at Alex's house, and there it was, hanging next to the entranceway and matted in a light blue: the watercolor winter landscape of Alex and

Frank's house. That day, she talked more about the painting and its importance to her:

This became the most intense project perhaps of my life and largely because I didn't believe I could do it. I honestly believed I could not do this. It was like starting with nothing. I had no talent. But you can sit down and just do art. There ain't no way in the world that anybody would hang my painting in a museum, but it's a picture of my house, and there's lines on the eaves, and I did it. And I learned things I didn't know anything about. I would never have done this before the Writing Project.

According to Alex, art, like writing, is mythologized into a herculean task. So when the Writing Project redefined writing for her, showed her that the average person could create some extraordinary prose and poetry, it gave her a glimpse into other areas of life that might be conquerable. Now, with a pinch of anger, Alex talks about our tendency to view creative endeavors as "off limits to the regular Joe. You would never say, 'You can't drive; Mario Andretti can drive.' But we do this with writing, and we do this with art!" Those people who never graduate past paint-by-numbers are missing out. They never get to experience the high that comes with wading into untested waters, and according to Alex, they are denying themselves something essential to personal growth: "Something comes out of a new and different experience, some self-knowledge. You are a different person when a piece of art is done." So, will Alex limit herself to writing and art as her paths to personal enrichment? I doubt it.

After the Writing Project, I found out that I really can accomplish things, that I can figure out how to do it. I am much more powerful than I ever was before—I can write, I can paint, I can do anything!

The Tough Part

It is easy to see that the Writing Project was a necessary force behind Alex's personal and professional rejuvenation: it gave her the practical insight into how to revamp

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her English curriculum to make writing relevant for her students; to expand her writing repertoire to uncover personal truths; to unlock potential and reveal new possibilities. It is easy for me to enumerate Alex's successes. Yet it is not so easy to explain how the Writing Project contributed to Alex's decision to leave the classroom, or how this exodus is also testament to Alex's personal and professional renewal.

At first, this was the part of Alex's story that was difficult to explain. I couldn't quite grasp why, just one year after her Writing Project experience, just when her classroom practices had finally started to gel, Alex decided to leave her position as Mountjoy High School's English/Spanish teacher and become the middle school's media specialist. I have long wrestled with this thought: here I am, writing one story about what keeps teachers vibrant in their professional world, and somehow I need to justify Alex's decision to leave her classroom.

At first, it seemed like the end of a teacher's story, because Alex offered no enlightenment. She hedged, gave evasive or labyrinthine answers to my questions. I pushed a little more: "You taught English and Spanish at Mountjoy and then you did the Writing Project, and after that you became a librarian? You figured all this out [how to make writing meaningful for her students] and then you left the classroom?" She picked up some watercolors.

Think of all the people who, if you asked them to pick up a pencil and draw, would say, "No, I can only do stick figures." I guess I'll go back to what the guy says, that the best English teachers are those who do it for themselves. And being a really good English teacher, given the structure of the school system, may be impossible. It's really such a hard thing to do, so time-consuming, so outward-focused. For me, being an English teacher is the guiltiest job in the world because there's always a billion things being written that you should read and there's your kids' writing. No matter how much you have them read, no matter how much you have them write, it's never enough. You never really feel like you're doing a good job. . . . I feel like the year we did writing workshop [the year after the Writing Project] was my most successful year of teaching, and I got their writing back to them in two days, tops. But we did workshop three days a week and I had seventy-five students in English classes alone.

It is problematic to consider that teacher renewal has been successful when the teacher opts to leave the classroom. We at first assume that a white flag was raised, that the teacher left an impossible situation because he or she didn't have the chutzpah to stick it out and triumph. A primary aim of the National Writing Project is to help teachers become writers themselves, so that they in turn become better teachers of writing. But what happens when the teacher abandons the teaching of writing? Has the project failed? Knowing Alex, my answer is, "Positively, absolutely not." It's almost tragic to lose any teacher who values student writing. It's tough to lose a colleague who is committed to becoming a better teacher, willing to go back to school, give up a summer, tap dance—or whatever it takes—to make his or her classroom a potent learning environment. Unfortunately, not all teachers share Alex's zeal. I agree with her estimation that

most people out there who teach don't really know what they're doing. Most of the better ones will tell you they don't know what they're doing, but they are trying to figure it out. The poorer ones will tell you they know exactly what they're doing, and their curriculum is written in concrete.

Now, as a media specialist, Alex sees part of her job as helping those teachers who are fighting to make their curriculum meaningful.

I guess I like this job so much because I get to work with both the teachers and the students, and I feel more effective than I did as a classroom teacher. . . . I am able to stay current with the technology and the literature, and a major focus of my job is to help the other teachers on the staff stay current. I try to funnel information and programs and curriculum ideas to them. I get to collaborate with them in lesson planning. This keeps me in direct contact with the kids. It also helps me influence the way things are taught.

Of course, Alex did not make the change to middle school media specialist easily. In an extended confrontation with Mountjoy's superintendent, Alex explained why she should be considered for the newly available position. The

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superintendent did not agree, so Alex asked to address the school board personally. The superintendent refused. But Alex ignored his mandate and contacted board members individually to plead her case.

I would never have done this before the Writing Project. But now I knew that I knew more about what was supposed to happen in the classroom than the superintendent did. He had no power over me. He had made up his mind that he did not have to give me this job, and I didn't feel he had the right to do this. I knew I was justified. I valued myself. And I prevailed.

Alex alludes to the fact that her success was due in part to the Writing Project, though she has never fully explained why. I think the answer lies in a *cycle* of renewal: once Alex revitalized her own voice as a writer through the Writing Project, she created a domino effect. Her revived words led to the "resurrection of [her] students' writing souls," which in turn led to her increased confidence as a professional. Each step of this process of empowerment and self-validation naturally guided her to resurrect her words in an unexpected venue: a confrontation with Mountjoy's superintendent. And consider the result of Alex's efforts: After nine years of struggling at Mountjoy High School (and one year of triumph), she is now in a position to collaborate with every teacher and connect with every student. As a media specialist, she finally feels potent, powerful, and influential. How's that for renewal?

Alex and Me

I have come full circle: I met Alex as she was packing up her classroom, the one I was inheriting from her. She seemed—even in the act of cleaning—a seasoned, confident pro. Tossing a Julio Iglesias cassette in my direction, she simultaneously rifled through the file cabinet and kicked crumpled papers toward the trash. In those first few minutes, my arrogant, first-year-teacher attitude shriveled, and I had the uncomfortable realization that I was a bland and awkward successor to this woman.

Quixotic and paranoid, I spent my first days at Mountjoy trying to ferret out information about Alex. I uncovered a few facts: she was leaving the classroom to become the media specialist; she was about forty; she had a dog named Lulu; she had lived in Central America for a year; she owned a boat and was an avid sailor. Not exactly what I was looking for. At the end of the day, I summoned the courage to look the counselor straight in the eye and frankly probe: "So, what kind of teacher was Mrs. Columbo?" He raised his eyebrows, screwed his mouth into a sarcastic scowl, and I was sure I had hit the mother lode. Images swarmed in my head: students tied to their desks, mechanically filling in worksheets; Mrs. Columbo at her desk, slumped over the latest *Soap Opera Digest*. I waited. Finally, he responded slowly and deliberately: "She was one of those feminist types who kept her name when she got married."

I wasn't exactly sure how the decision to keep the name Columbo had any relation to her classroom persona or ability to teach. But I didn't like what I thought I was hearing either: Alex Columbo sounded a bit more progressive than I wanted her to be. I smiled politely at the counselor, grabbed my book bag, and figured I'd just have to continue the investigation on my own.

Before the first full day of school, I heard about some out-of-district teachers who carpooled to Mountjoy's schools. Great, I thought, that will save me some cash. But included in the package was Alex. I began to imagine a nightmarish ride with the ex-Spanish/English teacher. I could see her climbing into the car and shooting questions my way—in Spanish, of course—and I would haltingly mumble answers in my unpracticed tongue. Then she would give me unsolicited tips on how to arrange desks, how to teach *Romeo and Juliet*, how to introduce the argumentative essay.

And so I silently and consistently worked on excuses to escape the carpool (and Alex specifically): I was going to have to stay after school for this or that; I was claustrophobic and allergic to perfume. Then, about one week into school, the thermostat of my 1987 Caprice up and quit. I was stuck. The first half of the drive was usually okay; I asked the other three teachers questions about how to fill out and submit requisitions, how to get the janitor to empty my trash. We chatted aimlessly about the weather, the school calendar, the school board president.

The Woman Who Resurrected Words: Writing as Renewal

Then we picked up Alex. Surrounded by two or three tote bags of books, computer disks, and random papers, she shoved herself into the back seat. Then everything changed. The three other women, who for the last twenty miles had been rather reserved, were transformed. In lightning succession, the four exchanged stories about their families, latest love interests, dogs, realtors. They laughed about principals' antics, argued about the origin of one urban legend or another, discussed how best to deal with prickly classroom situations, and even belted out show tunes. Silent and distant, I daydreamed of lower gas prices and a new, dependable car.

Five years later, I honestly can't pinpoint the moment that my opinion of Alex changed. At some point, I stopped worrying about her judging my faulty Spanish or my ability to teach writing. (In fact, about the only time she brought up my classroom was to ask if everything was going okay or to give me something to use in it, like her authentic Mexican sombreros.) I started to realize what most of the people around me already knew: Alex was an amazing woman.

When she convinced me to visit her writing group, I had a somewhat mixed reaction. With a master's degree in English literature under my belt (which meant I had written a smattering of papers about Milton, Hopkins, and other authors I cared nothing about), I felt overqualified to join this writing soiree. At the same time, underneath my cockiness, I was scared to share my writing with anyone. At our first meeting, I read my own piece of writing, which was extremely stilted, wordy, and artificial.

Thankfully, the group, with Alex at the helm, was kind, restricting its feedback to questions and gentle suggestions. I exited my first writing group feeling exhilarated, validated, and ready to start writing. Before long, Alex raved about how the Writing Project had changed her life. She soon convinced me that I could have a similar experience if I committed a chunk of my summer to learning about myself as a writer. To top it off, Alex offered to write a recommendation for me. The deal was sealed. Along with twenty other participants ranging from elementary teachers to college instructors, I spent four packed weeks exploring writing. I left the project motivated, rejuvenated, and powerful. I was ready to write my young adult novel and anxious to jump back into the classroom.

That post-Writing Project feeling is one that does not dissipate, and as I watch my students give each other thoughtful writing-group feedback, I realize that the project saved me from becoming one of those lecturing, podium-glued teachers who, in the words of Alex, "constantly and consistently waste their students' time." I am also relatively sure that without that "Writing Project feeling" working in me, I would never have had the moxie to attempt to write this chapter. That's why I stay connected. This will be my fourth summer working in some capacity with the project. Without a smidgen of doubt, I thank Alex for all of this. Without her support (and, let's face it, her relentless nagging), I never would have attempted the Writing Project.

Right from the start, Alex took special care to mold me into an assured, risk-taking educator. But now I understand her concern for me as more than mothering or mentoring: it was an outgrowth of the Writing Project philosophy. As Alex once wrote, once you are "Redeemed by the cleansing waters/ Of the Missouri Writing Project," you cannot help but shepherd others into the flock. And that is how two past graduates, two women who *could* be joined by nothing more than a couple of sticky, cramped hours carpooling each day, ended up on a similar mission.

Alex speaks for both of us.

Most people spend their lives bitching about how everything in the world has kept them from accomplishing what they should have. What a terrible way to see things. But all life is really about thinking like this: "This is not the way I want this to be; what do I have to do to get where I need to be?" After the Writing Project, I figured out I really can accomplish things, that I can figure out how to do it.