

The Teacher

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I am 13 years old and want to be a writer. It was the teacher who explained to me what it means to be a writer.

I was 10 years old when I met this teacher. I did not like him when I met him. He was an ugly and old man, that looked at us as if we had done something that deserved punishment. The teacher's gaze hurt when it was sudden. The teacher's look was almost always fixed. He wore dark glasses that lightened when he came in the classroom. Behind those glasses two little eyes were hiding that you could hardly see. The skin of his hands and arms had brown stains and was very thin, almost transparent, with thick veins. I thought that the teacher was about to die, that he would die after class ended. The teacher coughed a lot, and at times, when he coughed like this, I swear that I saw little tears popping out from behind those half-darkened lenses.

I was outraged when my parents asked me to participate in a pilot program with the teacher. This meant that I wasn't able to go to my motocross classes. Besides that, I didn't know what a "pilot program" was. My mom explained to me that a pilot program was a special scientific experiment, "a pedagogical experiment," she said. There was a teacher in the city that had strange ideas about the ways of basic and higher education teaching. The teacher was looking for students to test these strange ideas.

My mom insisted and I agreed so that she would stop insisting.

On the night before the first day, I could not sleep. They said many things about the teacher and the pilot program. For example, they said that the teacher would ask that all of the students use paper and pencil. I have never used a pencil. Nor paper. I have seen a pencil. My mom has one saved deep in a drawer, but does not let me or my brothers play with it. Not even my dad is allowed to use it. My mom said that it was a keepsake, an antique, that belonged to her grandmother, that they don't sell pencils in the stores anymore, that you won't see

them anywhere, and for this reason, no one was allowed to use the pencil in that house. Much less sharpen the pencil. (At the time I didn't know what it meant to "sharpen a pencil." Now I know.)

I was also inexperienced with paper. One time I saw a sheet of paper fly through the air, in a movie. The sheet was big and thick. The size of a boy my age. It happened to be a boy my age that caught the flying sheet. It jumped, he grabbed it in the air, folded it, saved it in a backpack, and started walking down the street, all smiles.

My friend Jaime didn't have just one sheet of paper, but a whole notebook, hidden in the attic of his house. My friend Jaime would say that writing on paper was "forever." Because of this, caution was needed. It was needed of us to think well in what we wanted to write before writing words that would stay on paper "forever." I didn't believe in everything that my friend Jaime said. I didn't believe, for example, that what you wrote stayed written "forever." One day Jaime took back what he had said. He said that he had exaggerated: "forever" was a long time, in the end it wasn't "forever." But he also said that if we wrote a word with pencil, on paper, we could press all of the keys we wish to imagine (paper doesn't have actual keys, it only has the keys we want to imagine) that the words would not be erased. We could shake the paper as much as we wanted, or even stomp on the paper, that the words would not disappear. My friend Jaime would also say, half-kidding, half-serious, that we could go years without charging the paper's battery, because it did not get charged. "But why?" Jaime would ask, starting to crack a smile. "Because paper does not need a battery!" My friend Jaime would laugh a lot after saying these things. What I enjoyed hearing Jaime say the most- although I didn't believe in everything he said- was this: we could keep a paper in a drawer that, ten years later, you could still read what was written on it. Ten years later! That we could bury a paper in the ground and that if we dug it out fifteen years later, or twenty years later, the words would still be there. This I believed. And since that day I went on really wanting to learn to write on paper. With a pencil.

There were four students in the class. They had not gotten more volunteers for the pilot-program. I don't know if the teacher was disappointed; he didn't appear disappointed. The first thing he did was ask us our names. With a fine, white cylinder stick (called "chalk") he drew lines on a black wall (which was called a "blackboard") and the traces stayed completely still on the board, without twinkling, without disappearing, without transforming or multiplying into other lines, smaller or larger. The traces didn't respond to any buttons or keys

that we would have pressed, because there were no such buttons nor keys. There were no cursors. No batteries. Nobody told me this, nor did I tell anyone, but I came to the following conclusion: if, for some reason, no one erased the letters written on the board—in twenty, thirty years- the traces drawn by the teacher would still be there.

I kept thinking about this.

One day the teacher said that the moment had arrived for us to write on a sheet of paper. (Now in each desk there were a pencil and some sheets of paper). Writing on paper with a pencil is not easy. It's like drawing letters with a stylus made of carbon (or what the teacher called "graphite"). In the beginning it's difficult, but after we get used to it. A lot of practice is needed. You have to sharpen the pencils frequently, yet be careful as to not over sharpen with too much force and break the tip.

The teacher also let us take some paper books home since we promised that we would try to read a few pages. It was not easy to read paper books. It was necessary to turn them page by page. "Turning the page" meant holding the corner of the sheet between your index finger and thumb, very carefully, and transfer each page from the right stack to the stack that is forming on the left. I tore a few pages, but the teacher did not protest. It is easier to read e-books because the stories are there "temporarily," or "on loan," and for that reason, reading has only the importance of stories that exist "temporarily" or "on loan." In e-books the stories change. They change from day to day. From hour to hour. From minute to minute. Sometimes even from reading to reading, or while they are being read. Stories change because "the circumstances" change, said the teacher. Technology itself changes. "The products that have just come out" change. The news changes, the current topics that are fashionable change, the interests of boys my age change. And the books should reflect "the rapidly changing world" or "the rapid change of the world," I no longer remember exactly how the teacher said it. On the other hand, it is easier to read books on paper because the paper book does not tell me that it took me too long to read a word. Or that I skipped words. It does not ask why I like certain words, or why I do not like certain words. Nor does it tell me that a candy made from strawberry extract, but without a strawberry flavor (with a raspberry flavor ...), has just been invented and we can order it from the link below. It does not even tell me that I'm already late for school (for the "other" school, not for the pilot program) and that, because I'm late, "it would be convenient to resume reading another time."

One day the teacher looked at the time sheet where the letters of our names were drawn, saw the letters of our cities and states, and said that all names and cities and states were spelled correctly. The teacher must have been satisfied because he was not so angry that day. And if we continued this way, one day we could do two things that few people knew or could do: read the paperbacks in library museums and write more of the paperbacks that exist in library museums. And he said that on paper we could write whatever we wanted, and not just what the computer screens would let us write. This was important, said the teacher. At the time, I did not quite understand what the teacher meant. Now I get it.

The teacher must have been really happy that day because he shook hands with everyone at the end of class and said, “See you tomorrow.”

The next day, in addition to the teacher, there was a school inspector in the room. Right in the middle of the room. The teacher was sitting at his desk, his eyes lowered, as if he did not know there was a school inspector in the middle of the room. The school inspector was a big man. He seemed even larger when he opened his arms and spoke loudly. And when he spoke – the inspector spoke very loudly – he pointed at the students, at the blackboard, at the big paper posters with their painted letters and, finally, at the sheets of paper and at the pencils on top of the desks. The school inspector had never seen anything like it. He said that, with these materials, the students will never learn to use “the adequate pedagogical tools” for the age in which we lived. The “adequate pedagogical tools” for the age in which we lived, said the inspector, were the digital materials. And to not learn how to use these materials was “harmful” to the students (the inspector pronounced each syllable of the word “harmful” very carefully). He said that using paper was terrible for the environment, that it decimates the trees, that the chalk dust isn’t good for the lungs, that the students were going to get sick, if they weren’t all sick already. The inspector had an enormous coughing fit when he said “all sick,” and he went on to say that “our learning capacity” would be “seriously,” maybe even “irreversibly” stunted. (I could even swear that the teacher, who coughed so habitually, made a great effort not to cough in that moment, as to not give that satisfaction to the inspector).

The school inspector said these things with arms raised, turning his body in our direction, in the direction of the board, in the direction of the posters, in the direction of the professor, who continued to look downward as if there wasn’t a school inspector in the middle of the room. The inspector seemed like a priest who frightened the faithful instead of consoling them. He also seemed

like a dancer who holds his hands wide open and waves his arms a lot; that has more energy than one can spend if one started to run with all their might and only stopped after ten kilometers. The school inspector said further that, with the method of the teacher, there wouldn't be time to complete "primary school," "secondary school," "a bachelor's degree," "a masters degree," "a doctorate," and "a post-doctorate" before we were thirty-five. It was necessary to complete these courses – the inspector called these "steps of life" -- before the age of thirty-five, at the maximum. That afterwards there would be time to live "the rest of one's life" in "peace, harmony and wisdom." The school inspector said that we shouldn't waste time, that it was necessary to respect time, that time was "a limited resource."

The school inspector stopped turning around and shrugging his shoulders and shaking his arms. He stopped looking at us, at the board, at the posters, at the teacher. He took a few steps towards his desk – where the teacher continued to sit as if he didn't know that there was an inspector in the middle of the room – and said that he felt sorry for us. So very sorry. Then the teacher looked the inspector in the eyes while sharpening a pencil, with his legs crossed, while the shavings fell on the floor.

When the inspector left, the teacher said that there wouldn't be lessons the next day, nor the day after, nor ever again. The students were silent, without knowing what to say. I was silent, without knowing what to say. The teacher said that he needed to return the key to the room – "tomorrow afternoon." I raised my hand and asked if I could come back the next day to learn to be a writer. It was just that—as I had announced to the class—I wanted to be a writer.

The teacher said that I still could not be a writer. The school inspector had interrupted the school year before teaching the lesson on how to be a writer. And this lesson could not be given "out of order," that is, "out of the sequence of lessons" which prepared students for such a lesson that taught them to be writers. The teacher approached my desk, bent over, and instead of telling me that he was very sorry, he whispered something different in my ear.

The next day, I was in class at the usual time. There were not any students, just the teacher and I. The teacher seemed happy, or maybe less angry than usual. He asked me if I knew what it was to be a writer. I said that I did not know well, but even so nothing would make me give up being a writer. The teacher explained that to be a writer, one must not like to write. "Not like to write?" I asked. "You actually like to write?" he asked. I answered yes. The teacher stood quiet for a few

seconds, and then said: “You want to be a writer because you don’t know what it is to be a writer.”

The teacher said that being a writer is to access the pages of the publishers on the internet and engage in “complicated negotiations” - I did not know what he meant by “complicated negotiations” with “writer assistance programs.” “Do you know what a “writer assistance program is?” he asked. I did not know but the teacher opened his computer and showed me. We visited a publisher for writers my age. I signed up, putting my personal information in the spaces and I began to write a story: “I visited my grandmother for Christmas”. The program asked the following questions: “How old is the grandmother?” “What funny things does the grandmother say?” “Is she kind like all grandmothers?” “Smiling like grandmothers should be?” “Does she have wrinkles like grandmothers should have?” “Does she have warts like grandmothers should have?” And so on. The program would not let me write another word if I did not answer the questions. If the given answers were not those recommended by the program one of the two would happen: one could not continue to write the sentence - or the paragraph, or the story, or the book; or two, one would have to convince the automatic editor of the “validity of my options,” or “the relevance of my arguments.” (At the time I did not know what “validity of options” or “relevance of arguments” meant. Now I know).

The automatic editor “recognized the difficulties in the career of a young writer” and even apologized for causing that inconvenience. It also reminded young aspiring writers that writing was difficult. Very difficult. Difficult because it was necessary to “grab” the readers, “seduce” the readers and, above all, “keep the readers seduced.” The automatic editor said that readers were not a “given.” (I did not know what was a “given” but I did not dare to ask). The automatic editor added that one should not have the “arrogance” to think otherwise than he had written. It also insisted that readers like funny grandmothers, smiley with many wrinkles and warts. They have more wit, more interest, and more mystery.

The teacher said that he had already been a writer and that he hadn’t liked it. Now I understand that what he had been in reality was not “a writer.” The teacher said that he had once written the following: “A boy hit his head against a wall and it split into two equal halves, like two halves of an orange.” The program didn’t accept that. The teacher justified the sentence as best he could, but the program continued to stop the sentence from staying written that way. The teacher decided to “engage all the necessary mechanisms to defend what he

had written,” and requested an interview with a more sophisticated automatic editor. He was lucky; instead of a more sophisticated automatic editor, the publishing house allowed him to speak with a real live flesh-and-blood editor. That flesh-and-blood editor rejected the sentence even more quickly than the automatic programs had. The teacher was not discouraged and decided to submit the same sentence to the automatic programs of other publishing houses. The publishers of realist literature rejected it, without any explanation. The publishers of children’s literature said it wasn’t appropriate for children. Those that published horror literature said it wasn’t horrific enough. Those for fantastic literature said it wasn’t fantastic enough. Those for serious literature said it wasn’t serious enough. And those for comical and absurd books said it was neither comical not absurd enough. One of them—a publishing house with problems, one that urgently needed authors—recommended “The boy hit his head.” Why not say what you intended to, simply and concisely? Why complicate things? Indeed, why complicate things when the world was already complicated enough?

These programs—the teacher said, without ever taking his severe gaze off of me—were “too logical, sensitive and useful.” So “logical, sensitive and useful” that they were unbearable. The teacher put his hand on my shoulder. His hand had never rested on my shoulder for so long and had never felt so heavy. He took my pencil and sheets of paper from his desk and gave them to me. They were mine. I could keep them “forever,” he said, halfjoking, half serious. The teacher told me whatever letters I wrote on those sheets of paper, with that pencil, would last at least as long as I would last. Maybe more. Maybe quite a bit more. And that I could write whatever I wanted. Anything I wanted. Complicated or simple things. Intelligent or stupid. Terrifying or comforting. Harmful or uplifting. Funny, or not funny at all. Sentences that were illogical, insensitive or useless. Or—why not?—ones that were logical, sensitive and extremely useful. Or even, and at this point he got more serious, sentences that were all those things at the same time, or that were combinations of all these things according to my own desired proportions.

He said that I could address my words to whomever I wanted. To specialists and to the ignorant. To the tormented and the happy. To the insane and the lucid. Or else, if I preferred, not to address them to anyone. I could write to a reader who did not exist. One who was yet to be born. And that was what being a writer was. That’s what the teacher said.

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