

The Living Legacy of Donald Murray

TOM ROMANO

Donald Murray and his work have helped shape the teaching of writing in the English-speaking world for more than thirty years now. One of the early teachers responsible for the rise of the writing process movement in America, he has written many books about teaching writing, as well as nonfiction books, several novels, hundreds of articles, countless poems, and a weekly column in the *Boston Globe*—"Over Sixty." ■ In 1997—at the request of Driek Zirinsky of Boise State University—Bonnie Sunstein and I cochaired a session at the spring NCTE convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, to honor Don's life and

work—fifty years in journalism, twenty-six years in teaching at the University of New Hampshire, and all that wonderful, ongoing writing. Over two hundred participants packed the conference room that Friday afternoon. They leaked out the doorways into the lobby and adjacent room, where they stood or sat on the floor, listening through open doorways. Don and his wife of forty-six years, Minnie Mae, sat in the first row.

Early in the session Bill Strong of Utah State University captured the essence of Murray's writing and teaching and explained his irreplaceable role in the profession:

Imagine for a moment it is early April, 1997, in Charlotte, North Carolina . . . Imagine that Donald Murray is not here—in fact, never *has* been here as a voice to be reckoned with, a writer bearing witness in essays and admonitions, poems and polemics, to the recursiveness of process, the joys of surprise, the demands of craft. Imagine, in the silence of his absence, the enormous yawning hole in the knowledge base of your profession. Imagine your bookshelf empty of Murray's books and journal articles—and imagine that shelf without the work of those who have derived intellectual or spiritual capital from Murray. In other words, imagine hitting the delete key for most of the

Heinemann list—and a good part of the NCTE booklist as well . . .

It's no exaggeration, I think, to say that Murray is one of the High Priests of Process for our Tribe—but one who has always maintained an outsider's perspective, challenging orthodoxy, authority, and conventional wisdom. His book of thirty years ago, *A Writer Teaches Writing*, challenged a tradition that relied heavily on analysis of prose models. Murray's authority did not derive from the study of classical rhetoric, from literary criticism, from educational theory and research, or even from years of classroom experience. It derived instead from putting his butt in a desk chair each morning and writing readable, engaging, salable prose.

Murray's basic assertion, based on years of solid experience as a journalist and free-lancer, was that textbook prescriptions for five paragraph themes had little to do with the exciting, mucking-about processes of real writers. He challenged the Republican virtues of unity, coherence, and emphasis—first, because they contradicted his instincts as a writer. His was a rhetoric of dialectic, not unity—a rhetoric of tension, not taxonomy. Tradition valued certainty, predictability; Murray val-

ued surprise. Tradition valued rules and prescribed forms; Murray valued form following meaning. Tradition valued an objective, impersonal tone; Murray valued voice. He also questioned writing instruction grounded in the drill-and-practice of traditional grammar—instruction that emphasized correctness as a precondition for effective writing. As a dropout and flunkout from North Quincy High School—and a winner of a Pulitzer Prize—Murray clearly had the credentials to raise such questions. In his essays, conference presentations, and workshops, he invited teachers to consider a different framework for instruction, one that emphasized the development of fluency at early stages, with considerations of mechanics and usage postponed until later. Obviously, this formulation is firmly in place among informed teachers of today. In addition, he invited those of us who presume to teach writing to do it ourselves—to confront the whiteness of the blank page, to share our drafts and doubts with students, and to think aloud, making our processes both visible and audible. He invited us, in short, to give up the security of old forms—to demonstrate our own learning in authentic, personal ways, from the inside out.

Scary? You bet. But well over 1.5 million teachers in the National Writing Project have taken the Murray Challenge and are willing to testify about the tonic effects of the teacher-as-writer movement. And more than a few of those teachers are working with kids at the margins—bright, lonely, sulky kids like Donald Murray of North Quincy fame—kids with different accents, different skin colors, different ways of thinking. Whether he knows it or not, Murray has helped to make literacy education in this country far more inclusive and democratic than it once was.

Other speakers followed Bill Strong. Bonnie Sunstein had recently spent a few days with Chip Scanlan, director of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Florida, looking through eighty-three cardboard boxes of Don's papers and artifacts that had been sent to Poynter for archiving.

Bonnie told of a "report" Don had written in fourth grade about his hometown. She read the lead: It was quintessential Murray—active and direct, capturing a bit of interesting information, even using the good word *hewn*. He had decorated the cover and inside had drawn sketches and a graph. The only writing by the teacher on the report was a tiny, red-inked *B*. Even in the 1930s, noted Chip, grade inflation had been a problem.

Bonnie also had Don's eighth grade report card on which he had received a *D* in spelling. Susan Stires and Mary Glover—primary school teachers and authors—spoke side by side at the podium about the professional impact Murray had on their lives, even though, in Mary's case, she had seen Don only four times—on Saturday mornings for one

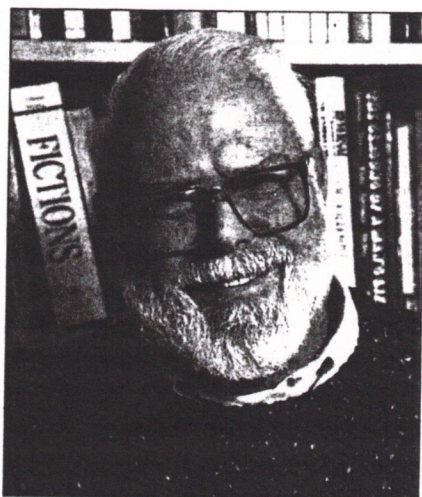
month in Arizona ten years earlier in a mini writing course. "You don't need to be with him," Mary said, "for him to be part of the rest of your life."

Linda Rief spoke humorously and compellingly about how important Minnie Mae has been to Don's life and writing. "Hemingway said that what a writer needed was a 100 percent shock-proof shit-detector," Linda said, "so Don married Minnie Mae." To conclude her talk she read Don's poem, "Minnie Mae Cooks a Poem," which had been published in *All That Matters*.

Although there were serious, heartfelt moments dur-

ing the session, the overall tone of it was fun, even raucous several times. We were there to celebrate. We were there to honor this writer and his work that had cleared the way for so many teachers and students. Murray's talk at the end was just right, about seven minutes long—humble, grateful, a tad self-deprecating, humorous, genuine. "For years colleagues told me I was too easy, not demanding enough, a bad teacher," he said, and then, extending his hand to the audience in his one gesture of boldness, added, "Look at this room."

I am this passionate, unsophisticated man of Italian ancestry who hugs those I am affectionate toward—men and women alike. Murray is the former



Donald M. Murray
Photo by Gary Samson, University
of New Hampshire.

paratrooper of Baptist Scot decent. Years ago I had moved once to hug Don in greeting. I could tell that he was awkward and uncomfortable with such outward affection between men. I never tried it again. And I'd always found it ironic that this man—so supple, accessible, and warm in his prose—was so wooden and distant in my embrace.

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That day at the spring conference Don wore a bright red sweater. He beamed as he climbed the podium for his remarks. I extended my hand to him, but Don moved closer, reached out, and grabbed hold of me in a bear hug. Caught off balance, I stumbled toward him—a wonderful twist in which I became the distant Scot and he became the passionate Italian. Expect the unexpected, Don would say.

When we began planning the session more than a year earlier, Bonnie suggested that we ask people from across the country who knew Don to write one-pagers in which they told of their relationships with him, of the important place he held in their personal/professional lives. One-pagers were sent in from past NCTE presidents, former students, colleagues, friends, and classroom teachers. We collected the one-pagers, bound them with a cover drawn by Karen Ernst, and presented them to Don. Those one-pagers characterize Don better than any words I can conjure. They show how the personal and professional are one in him. Here are excerpts from a few of them:

Danling Fu, an associate professor at the University of Florida at Gainesville and recent immigrant to the United States, when she entered a doctoral program at the University of New Hampshire, wrote:

When I went to New Hampshire, Don was retired from teaching. Even though I never had a chance to take his class, I still benefitted a lot from him. He was an unofficial advisor to us all. I couldn't remember how many individual meetings I had with him, talking about my writing, my research, my

dissertation, and my life, and he always showed great interest in my stories and words. Most of all, Don is a friend in need. Before my son came to join me, I told him that I was trying to find an affordable apartment. Early the next morning, Don and Minnie Mae were at the door to tell me that they found a place for me. As a poor graduate student, I never could afford to go to watch any sport games. The first ice hockey game my son and I went to, we were invited by Don and Minnie Mae. Now I watch a lot of sport games, but I always think of that first one, which to me, was more than a game, but memories and experiences that helped me make connections with the American people and its land.

Writer and composition theorist, Peter Elbow, wrote directly to Don:

My most personal memory is when I'd just put together *Writing with Power*. I was very nervous and scared about it, and somehow I asked you and you gave me permission to give you the manuscript. I didn't have the sense to say, "Dear Don, I don't really want a lot of feedback on this, I just want you please to tell me it's okay and give me a blessing." But you understood perfectly and that's just what you did. You understood that this was a very tender and vulnerable time for me . . . Your emphasis on one-to-one conferences continues to be crucial to me and my teaching. Actually it's taken me a long time to learn to put frequent conferences at the core of my teaching. What you teach here is about having *human contact* with our students, one-to-one as people, not just "knowledgeable contact" . . . You do all kinds of writing—fiction and journalism—not just academic writing. I would like to learn to broaden out even just a fraction. It seems to me that the academic world has shot itself in the foot by not communicating with the larger general public: No wonder so many people are annoyed and impatient with professors (and even teachers). But you give us a model of someone constantly writing and getting the important insights to the larger audience. I hope we can learn from you there . . .

You are always putting *yourself* in your writing and your presentations. You are not scared to be personal, to ham it up. You invite your feelings to be out there. You make a place for your family in your public writing. You expand our notion of what it is to be an academic and a writer—fearlessly.

In all these ways—all these ways of insisting on the links between being human and being academic—you help make us all *braver* and more *hopeful*. I'm now thinking that courage and hope are the virtues that lead to all the others.

Brock Dethier, who now teaches at Utah State University, wrote out of eighteen years of Don

Murray as his “mentor, friend, supporter, critic, model, teacher, confidant, therapist, coach, cheerleader, informant, agent, and bi-weekly passenger in the Poetry Van.” He listed moments when Don or his ideas popped into his mind. Here are three:

- when I remember that you taught me to borrow and share writing and teaching ideas without guilt, and I can’t even remember the originator of most of “my” good ideas, but I still give you credit when I speak of clichés as “blank checks that the reader fills in” or say “Don’t try to be objective, be fair,” or give as an example of a revealing detail the fact that Vietnam war helicopter pilots picking up bodies would stick Vick’s Vaporub up their noses.
- when academic snipers start sniping at student targets, I think about your faith in writers at all levels, your argument that many bad papers are logical responses to bad assignments, your contention that student writers will take control of their own writing and tell us what they need to do next if we will only listen . . .
- when I sit down eager to work on another poem, pursuing a genre that revitalized my writing life in mid-career, I think about how I began writing in lines largely so I could join your poetry group. Ever since you have been if not my muse at least part of my inspiration, my audience, and even on occasion my subject: “Write to remember/remember to write.”

Don Daiker of Miami University, joint author of *The Writer’s Options*, wrote about memorable times he had interacted with Don:

I met Don in 1982 when he was a featured speaker at the Wyoming Conference of Freshman and Sophomore English. He was attending my presentation on responding to student writing . . . and, as usual, he was alert, interested, and engaged; I remember that he contributed several times to our discussion. As he was leaving, he left a note thanking me for talking with him rather than at him and commenting, “One of my favorite written responses to student writing begins ‘I like the way you . . .’” Ever since then I’ve been telling student writers “I like the way you open your essay with dialogue” or “I like the way you support your key assertions with concrete examples.”

For a good decade afterwards, it seemed we at Miami University were inviting Don to Oxford every chance we got, and, as always, he had a tough

time saying “no” to his friends. Don was a keynote speaker at our sentence-combining conference here in 1983 and again at our conference on teacher research in 1988. He returned as consultant to the Ohio Writing Project, and it was in that capacity, I think, that I saw Don do for the first time what I had never seen another writer do before: write in public. He actually composed before our eyes. He began by listing a half-dozen topics on the board; he was prepared to write about any of them, he said, and asked someone in the audience to choose one. Then he was off—writing with marking pen and transparency on an overhead projector so we could all see his false starts, his struggles with focus and direction, and his eventual movement toward meaning. He illustrated for us that evening the process that he called, in one of his many superb essays, “Writing Badly to Write Well: Searching for the Instructive Line.” Just last year I finally mustered the courage to write in front of my own students.

Caught off balance, I stumbled
toward him—a wonderful twist
in which I became the distant
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passionate Italian.

Pat Sullivan of the University of New Hampshire writes about the inadequacy and intimidation she felt as a new faculty member in the English department, the person who was hired for the position Don Murray vacated when he retired:

Try as I might, I could not get ready for school in the morning without my own lack staring back at me in the mirror. I hadn’t an ounce of Don-ness. I tried bulky green sweaters and khakis. I affected a low, booming voice. I began sporting a little leather daybook. I tried puffing up my height and poofing out my belly. I bought a bottle of white hair dye. But alas the lack was still there. I was the farthest thing from Don Murray this side of a nose ring.

And then Himself performed the grand miracle, the undoable surgery, the great deed that only a great man can do. Don took me to lunch. As we walked side-by-side from my campus office, down

Main Street in Durham, winding our way to a local restaurant through throngs of students, faculty, and townspeople, we were stopped a dozen times by women and men, young and old, who wanted to say hello to Don, to inquire about Don, to share a story with Don, to hug Don, to bask for a fleeting moment in Don-ness. I wanted to disappear. To be, at most, a shadow. But before anyone could utter more than hello, before the smile had a chance to leave their faces, Don introduced me . . . and took a small, almost imperceptible step backward. He said, "This is Pat Sullivan, our new professor in composition. She's the one we've been waiting for. I've had the godawful task of trying to fill her shoes all these years. Now that she's here, I can really retire. And I'll be walking a great deal more comfortably, I can tell you that."

Do you know what it's like to be there when someone whose great gift it is to say the right thing, at the right moment, with a grace and wit and a generosity of feeling that leaves you speechless—utters that right thing, in that unforgettable way, about *you*?

I know what it's like. Maybe all of us who know Don Murray do. Linda Miller-Cleary of the University of Minnesota at Duluth writes about one of those times when Don said just the right thing at just the right time in just the right way:

In 1984, I was a UMass graduate student and delivered my first "paper" to 200 English teachers and a panel of researchers and writers at the Simon's Rock of Bard College. Donald Murray was also speaking, and it was really his presence that upped the ante of anxiety. How do you disclose your tentative graduate student findings in front of a man who has jolted a stolid group of scholars into the realm of humanity? Before I went into the auditorium, I reminded myself "take deep breaths" and, acting on an inspiration, "pretend to be your confident sister." So I sat on the stage, watching teachers chat their way into the aisles, pretending I was my sister, taking deep breaths until I felt dizzy, stealing glances at Murray four seats down, and making myself remember, "He looks human; he too must have gone through this." When the presentations were over, I hadn't hyperventilated, and I was pleased with the questions I had drawn about my research. I was even more pleased when I found myself placed next to Murray at lunch. Actually, I'm not sure whether it was my sister or I that ate lunch with Murray because I managed what seemed my sister's equanimity. But after lunch I felt thoroughly myself—and worthy in being so—because Donald Murray said in parting, "I think that the voices of the students in your research interviews are very powerful. Let me know when

you get farther along in your work. I think something important will come from it."

Bruce Ballenger, a former student and then, later, colleague of Don's at UNH, describes his first one-to-one writing conference with Don. When Bruce stepped into Don's office, he saw a stack of papers on Don's desk. His paper was atop the stack. Instead of the "strong editorial hand" of the teacher, all he saw were tiny red check marks in the left hand margin. Later in his own teaching career, Bruce began to make small check marks in the margins of students' drafts. He recalls the occasional brave student who asks, "What do they mean?"

A lot of things, of course, but there is one thing they always mean to me. A check mark in the margin reminds me that I may have something to say about that place in a draft, but it is a response I cannot commit to words unless they arise in conversation with the writer. They mark, I think, an opportunity to explore some possibility in drafts that I cannot yet know until, in conference or in conversation, I see what might be said.

This may be the most important thing Don Murray helped me to see: He helped me to become a writer and writing teacher who saw the value of suspending judgment, and in the space that creates, to invite those lovely accidents of language from which new meaning might arise. A check mark marks the clearing, it signals hope at the possibilities.

Too few of us actively working in the field of composition have had the chance I did, to sit in conference with Don, huddled over a draft, playing out its possibilities. But through Don's rich legacy of writing on writing, many of us have been profoundly touched by his work. Imagine the mark he has left as no more than a small check, hovering in the margin. Imagine it there hovering next to your text, your career, your life.

That session in Charlotte to honor Don Murray's life and work was one of the most fulfilling days that I've spent in academia. A few weeks later Don sent me a letter to tell me how he felt. He wrote, in part:

Dear Tom:

I have enjoyed fantasies of scoring a touchdown while playing right tackle. That actually happened. Of being pursued by naked women panting with passion. No such luck. Of my parachute going up rather than down. It did once. Of a publication day party in a Manhattan penthouse. Never. But I could never have imagined that day in Charlotte and the book of one-pagers . . .

In reading the collection I am struck at how we teach most when we do not think we are teaching—in the corridor between classes, with the causal comment, the quick instinctive response, and by attitude more than subject matter.

The book is also a strangely healing document. It brought me closer to my father, for he could have received similar tributes for his church work in retirement. Even Mother might see her mark on my life and be surprised, even proud—although she would never admit it. I have been what they thought I would never be—the person they felt they should shape. He doesn't go to church and vote Republican, but perhaps he isn't worthless after all.

I haven't yet been able to absorb the implications of all that has been said. I feel loved beyond all expectation—and beyond all deserving. And the child who did so badly in school, whose teachers so despaired has made it—with teachers.

I'm not going to rest on these laurels—a prickly seat—but still keep writing. If my ego starts

to swell, the blank page—and Minnie Mae—will keep me humble.

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Call for 2000 Hoey Award

The NCTE Edwin A. Hoey Award is given to an outstanding teacher, grades 5–8, in honor of Edwin A. Hoey, who brought limitless imagination and creativity to the pages of *Read* during his nearly forty-year career as writer, editor, and managing editor of the renowned educational magazine. The Edwin A. Hoey Award recognizes exceptional English language arts teachers who instill their own love of learning in their students. The winner of the award will receive \$2,500, plus up to \$1,000 for expenses to attend the NCTE Annual Convention in November; a one-year complimentary NCTE membership; a one-year subscription to *Voices from the Middle*; and the opportunity to present at the NCTE Annual Convention. You may obtain an application form by calling NCTE Headquarters at 1-800-369-6283, ext. 3612. Applications must be postmarked no later than February 11, 2000. Results will be announced in Spring 2000, and the award will be presented at the 2000 Annual Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

1999 Hoey Award Winner

Elizabeth A. Close is the 1999 recipient of the NCTE Edwin A. Hoey Award. Betty is a middle school teacher at Farnsworth Middle School in Guilderland, New York. She is also currently Associate Chair for the Secondary Section on the NCTE Executive Committee.