

Becki Got Brave

Becki's bones defined her place in the world. Perching on her tailbone at her desk, she was all angles with a smile pulled tight over her cheekbones. Becki wouldn't allow anything as soft as flesh to comfort her.

Anorexia is not a foreign concept to me. I remember high school and the pressures to conform to a specific ideal of beauty, to certain behaviours of peer groups, to the expectations of others. Now, as a teacher, anorexia stares at me from many pairs of mascara-fringed eyes every day. My job is to stare back, and so I do: through writing.

Teaching English allows me glimpses into the hearts and heads of normally resistant-to-reflective-discussion teenagers. Becki, however, held back. Although her writing hinted at an electric mind, she scripted only safe subjects onto her pages. She wrote stories about her dogs, and I responded with encouraging feedback.

But by spring, Becki got brave.

After months in the classroom, reinforcing my students' creative expression with the *correct* way to respond to literature, the *precise* way to write a sentence, the *acceptable* way to reference a text, I hungered to escape structure, both bureaucratic and literary. I wanted to simply enjoy words again, and I guessed that many of my students did too.

So in May, 15 eager students, another teacher, and I spent a weekend on an island off the Strait of Georgia, writing and reading our work aloud. We used a format I'd learned from Pat Schneider's book, *Writing Alone and with Others*: in responding to someone's reading we would begin with "I remember." This structure taught us that it is possible to be appreciated without fitting anyone else's definition of 'good'.

Free from criticism and academia, many students discovered a passion for writing and sharing their work. But not Becki, who quietly refused to read aloud. On the last day, I pulled her aside and asked how she was enjoying herself. She described how ecstatically wonderful everything was. Then I asked her how she felt about her writing.

"It's okay," she said. She looked uncomfortable. "It's just that, everyone on this retreat is so good. And, well, I'm not really ... it's just they're so good." This was going nowhere. "All right, Becki. Let's write for a bit and then we'll share what we've got."

I read my poem first. After she'd told me what she remembered, I looked at her expectantly. "Kay, Ms. Moore, but you have to remember that this is, like, totally first draft. It's, like, really bad..." When she finished I told her what I remembered, and she smiled her sweet, stretched out smile.

"Can you share some other writing with me?" I prodded.

"Um, well, there is this one piece..." and, after more warnings about how bad it was going to sound, she read a poem that made my breath stop.

See

My body laced,
Scars crisscrossing the surface
Below the flesh
White marks, still
Painful
Life experiences,
Memories, incidents, accidents
Resting on their special spots
Unique stories
Hidden hatred for my body
Captured
Snapshots in time.

"Becki – the others need to hear your poem." Then, before fear could freeze her face, I told her what I remembered. "I remember the plea at the beginning for someone to 'See.' I remember how the girl's body is laced with scars; I remember the alliteration of 'hidden hatred'; I remember the power and strength."

She was silent. She had exposed herself. Writing can be dangerous.

"What about this?" I asked her. "I can copy your poem into my journal so it will look like mine. I can read it for the group and then, when they respond with what they remember, their words will be for you."

Still silent. So I tried once more: "If you want to share with the group, leave it on this shelf. If your poem is there, I'll copy it into my book. Your words are valuable, and I appreciate your courage."

Before she left the room Becki smiled. It wasn't the pained smile she normally wore but one that rested peacefully on her face. Later I found the poem on the shelf.

As the group gathered for the last reading of the weekend, I glanced at Becki and wondered how she was feeling. When it was my turn, I stood. But as soon as I gave voice to her first word, I broke into tears. Actual tears. In front of a group of 15-year olds. So I stopped, took a deep breath, furious with myself that I was crying in the effort of reading what appeared to be my own poem, then I tried again.

Again, I cried. The group looked worried; some looked as if they might leap up to hug me. I laughed my tears off. Knowing I was long past reading aloud, I handed the poem to my aunt, a poet who had joined us the previous evening. As she read, I looked at the girls in the room, wondering how they would respond. Becki was studying the floor. There was a brief pause and then,

"I remember the strong words."

"I remember 'scars crisscrossing the surface.'"

"I remember the rhythm of 'incidents, accidents.'" And so on.

Later that afternoon, my aunt came to see us off. Students busied themselves with taking pictures and commiserating over having to leave the island, but in the midst of the chaos I noticed Becki hugging my aunt and whispering in her ear. I asked my aunt, later, "What did she say?"

"She said, 'I wrote that poem.'" |

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