

Proximity in our Writing, with Other Writers & with Our Readers - Betsy Warland

Over the past five decades, I have been on a quest to understand the key role proximity plays in my own writing; when I teach and mentor other writers; when I edit other writers' manuscripts; and in my companionship with writers and authors.

The etymology of proximity goes back to: "nearness, closeness."

Evoking the narrative's nearness is what every piece of compelling writing has in common—it draws the reader deeply in—regardless of genre. The arduous quest of how to do this with every piece of writing makes our companionship with other writers all the more crucial. Why? Non-literary writers explain and elaborate. Literary writers evoke. These are profoundly different approaches to writing. As literary writers, we must learn precisely how to do this with every narrative we write.

My quest for understanding proximity began in Toronto in the early 1970s. At that time, creative writing courses and workshops were taught by male writers who maintained that subject matters based on the lived experiences of women were not literary topics. Although I was learning the essential skills of craft, feedback on my subjects and point of view was dismissive.

So, I approached the Toronto YWCA with the idea of offering a women writers' workshop. I wondered: "Would there be enough registrants to even run it?"

One hundred and fifty women writers registered!

Within a year, we formed the Toronto Women's Writing Collective that produced workshops, readings, anthologies, a literary journal and public literary events. The critical feedback and companionship in those workshops and numerous public readings enabled me to test out my topics and trust what kind of proximities each poem required. Did the poem's content keep the reader close-up throughout? Or did it hold the reader in the middle-distance? Or did it keep the reader in panorama proximity throughout? Or did the poem's content track and evoke a shifting proximity? All these factors enabled me to finish my manuscript and my first book was published in 1981.

I then moved to Vancouver. I began teaching creative writing and five books later in 1999, I was asked to design a Simon Fraser University Continuing Studies non-credit creative writing certificate program. The Writers Studio (TWS) created a new accessibility and, in turn, proximity, based "on learning in community," and it attracted a much broader range of writers seeking professional training. This dynamic diversity is evident in TWS alumni books that have significantly enriched Canadian literature.

The acts of thinking, imagining, writing, revising, reading, training in creative writing and finding companionship are interdependent acts of proximity like the fascia that holds our organs, blood vessels, bones, nerve fibers, and muscles together.

Writing this essay is an example.

From the early drafts to submitting a solid but not resolved draft to the editors twice, to receiving their feedback and thinking over their comments, to, subsequently, my numerous sessions of revisions—each time noticing aspects I'd skimmed over, left out, or were non sequiturs—has been an exercise in fine-tuning proximity. When all aspects of proximity are accurately activated—the narrative lifts off the page effortlessly.

A common proximity error is for the writer to do the heavy lifting for our reader. One example is frequent summation (instead of evoking via scenes, dialogue, atmosphere, extended metaphor, etc.). Another error is billboarding (inserting a cue explaining what a poem, scene or chapter means). Common, as well, is our numbing the reader by writing the narrative at the same pace throughout, regardless of what is transpiring. This tendency can be okay when we're just getting a first draft down, but then, in subsequent drafts, we must evoke ("score" as in musical notation) the proximity accurately. When we fail to do so, the narrative is oddly flat: monotone.

Another crucial reason to pay attention to creating shifting proximities is our tendency to leave out the narrative's switchbacks—the zigzag storytelling trajectory of a character or a personal account—that inherently transpire regardless of genre.

Switchbacks are crucial. Essential.

Why? They embody lived experience. All forms of perception build incrementally—transpire consciously and subconsciously—over a length of time. It's a process of absorbing/abandoning/reabsorbing. Our own switchbacks, as well as our characters', are partial, puzzling, false, exciting, frightening, enlightening, misunderstood, creative, comforting, and, sometimes, subject to untenable grandiosity!

They are the body language of every vibrant and engrossing narrative.

Regardless of genre and length, every narrative we write is like climbing a mountain that we must zigzag countless times in order to get to the top. Some switchbacks reveal an entirely new view, others reveal a similar view from a different perspective, and some are dead ends. The narrative builds incrementally. Unforeseeably.

All forms of emotional, intellectual, physical, spiritual, and socio-political awareness manifest in switchbacks, loops, reversals, and returns. When we fail to evoke this process accurately, we keep the reader emotionally, intellectually, and viscerally on the outside of the narrative. There is a lack of authenticity. Discovery. Our readers remain dispassionate observers robbed of the sensations of deduction that cumulatively enable them to gain their own insights; access their own feelings.

Every narrative we write knows precisely what it is and is not about, what its inherent form is (and is not), and most crucially, how to deeply engage its reader.

When there are problems in a manuscript or piece of writing, they are almost always proximity problems. A piece of writing that embodies searching and accumulating revelation (large and small) is a piece of writing that deeply engages us. Why? It's authentic. Visceral. True to lived experience. My prompt below provides one strategy for how to identify and explore proximity problems.

My 2000 memoir, *Bloodroot—Tracing the Untelling of Motherloss*, taught me a great deal about how crucial proximity is. It was my first book-length narrative in the form of entries of various lengths and genres. The un-inscribed spaces I scored on the page embodied what could partially be known, or never be known, said, or understood. When aspects of the narrative could be told in a traditional manner, the space was fully occupied with standard prose. When other parts of the story were more tentative—had flashes of memory or insight—these pages were partially occupied. And there were pages that held a solitary sentence of insight or fear floating alone. This scoring gave the reader space to absorb and navigate the feelings (and their own related memories) that the difficult passages in *Bloodroot* evoked.

My agent advised me that no publisher would agree to the use of so much unconventional blank space. Consequently, I deleted the spacing and inserted asterisks between each entry, then sent the manuscript to my decades-long first readers.

Silence.

This had never happened before.

When I enquired why, they reported it was hard to read, to stick with.

They stalled.

I rescored it exactly as it was before with the blank spacing. No other changes were made. The outcome changed dramatically. They couldn't put it down—reported that it was the best book I had ever written. The form embodied the emotional logic of how the story actually unfolded, and it also created the pacing readers needed.

Years later, when giving readings from *Bloodroot*, I continue to include the pauses. I need the pauses. So does the audience. One of my most popular books, a 2021 second edition of *Bloodroot*, includes a new essay about what that book taught me as a writer.

As writers, whether it is in our writing practice or with other writers, proximity is bedrock. We need one another's encouragement, but we also need one another's artistic challenges and ethical observations. This companionship differs from our other companionships. I can know a writer's writing and writing life quite deeply, yet have cursory knowledge about their private life, their work life, the details of their background. It is a different kind of intimacy based considerably more on the unknown than the known, on what our dissimilarities shed light on more than our likenesses.

Whichever way you look at it, being a student of proximity is our life-long quest.