

Writing What They Know

Students' Stories About All of Us

Writing well is critical to success in most careers. And it is also one of the most difficult skills to teach. A professor can correct grammar, punctuation and transitions, but how do you teach a student to have style, to find a voice, to connect with a reader? "Write what you know" is standard advice for those who aspire to move others with words. In the following pieces, three students write about life as they've known it. Although their perspectives are personal and specific, they are also universal, inviting and relating to all of us, putting in writing what so many of us have experienced but not captured on a page. These selections originally appeared in Glassworks, an anthology of Rowan students' writing edited by Professor Martin Itzkowitz. Rowan art alumni complement each piece with an original illustration.

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The Law of Relativity

Kimberly Davis '02

Without a doubt, some of the best moments of my life involve my parents. As the eldest of three girls, I cherish the memories of when it was just the three of us: my mom, my dad and me. Even though I adore my baby sisters, it was fun being an only child and not having to share my parents' attention. Nothing can compare to the feeling of being the center of someone's life. The most vivid memory I have is not of an exciting moment or profound experience that changed my life; it's of a memory game that I used to play with my father.

When I was about four or five years old, my father decided to go back to college. He wanted a degree in materials engineering, so of course he always came home with a ton of scientific and technical books. Back then we had a tiny house with just enough bedrooms for each of us. To give Dad a place to concentrate, we converted our miniature enclosed porch into a study. Inside sat a hand-me-down desk inherited from my grandfather and a huge swivel chair, the kind with the green cushions that squish when you sit down on them. The final touch was a floor lamp that would sway in a slight breeze and, at night, cast giant shadows across the room.

Every night after taking my bath, I would wander into Daddy's study wearing my Care Bear pajamas. They had the feet attached and made a comforting swishing sound as I walked across the carpet. He pretended not to hear me and acted surprised when I bounced into the room. I would ask the same question every night: "Daddy, what are you doing?" Just to tease me, he would recite the scientific theorems that he was studying at the time. Even though I could not possibly

understand what they meant, I was able to memorize and recite them back to him. My favorite was Einstein's Basic Law of Relativity: "Nothing can exceed the free space velocity of light."

My favorite part of this ritual was Daddy's response. He would lean back into the squeaky cushions and fold his hands over his stomach. I always watched as his eyes—blue, just like mine—crinkled into laugh lines as he smiled. Then he would laugh at my performance as I stood there pretending to be highly insulted. It was the kind of laugh that only a parent can make. It came deep down from the belly and managed to sound both amused and proud at the same time. Then I would add my high-pitched, giggly squeals to his laughter. Together, we would laugh until my mom heard the noise and came to bundle me off to bed.

When that summer ended, I started kindergarten. Class convened in a room with wide windows; under the windows sat kindergarten-sized bookshelves full of Dr. Seuss and Little Golden books. But the best part of the room was a huge brown piano that I loved to sit next to and lean against during story time.

One day, my teacher, Mrs. Wilson, asked us to tell her about our summer vacations. There was the usual assortment of stories about amusement parks, with a dash of dead pet stories thrown in for good measure. Then it was my turn. I stood up, smoothed out my yellow corduroy dress with the flowers embroidered around the collar, and pronounced, "Nothing can exceed the free space velocity of light."

Later that month, during the parent-teacher conferences, Mrs. Wilson brought up my little speech. Perhaps she thought she had a child prodigy on her hands.

By Domenick Annuzzi '00

We're all slides

In a projector

Revolving

Around

The

Carousel.

Projecting our-selves

For our viewing pleasure.

Entranced

By the photogenic image...

An excellent composition—

The perfect subject.



Needless to say, that was not true. I was not even trying to impress her; I had thought she would laugh the way my father always did.

Thirteen years later, my family has long since moved into a bigger house and added two little sisters and an assortment of pets to the family. It is hard to find a quiet moment, but every once in a while I find my father sitting alone in a room. To break the silence, I recite my little speech, just to see his reaction. And even though it is in a different house, in a different room, and in a different chair, it is the same laugh.

Kim Davies '02 will be a junior at Rowan working towards a bachelor's degree in mathematics and earning her certification in secondary education. She loves being active in her community, especially her two younger sisters' schools. She has been writing essays about her family since she was in third grade; she happily calls her parents and baby sisters her greatest source of humor and inspiration. This essay placed first in the annual College Composition I essay competition.

Domenick Annuzzi '00 is an account manager at Disc Makers in Pennsauken. He will graduate in the fall with a bachelor's degree in communication specializing in Radio/Television/Film. At Rowan, he wrote and performed the music for the Lab Theatre production of Alice in Wonderland. His fractal artwork is appearing in an exhibition, "The Frontier between Art and Science," on tour in Europe. An online gallery of his fractal-art can be seen at www.system.com/fractal.

Checking In

Dan O'Neill '00

It was obvious my father didn't really know what to say. I mean, how do you sum up 18 years of turbulent co-existence? So he just stood there grinning, being careful not to show his teeth, and told me how proud he was. He should have been. My entering the Navy had been his idea.

Dad had convinced me that my 3.3 GPA and 1100 SAT scores were not good indicators of my readiness to enter college and that I was undisciplined. So in a fit of self-conviction, he had dropped me off at the local recruiter's station 11 months earlier. Today, he dropped me off at the Philadelphia International Airport. My plane left for Recruit Training Command in Orlando in ten minutes.

While my friends had scrambled for college interviews, I had signed a four-year contract that obligated me to serve as an electronic warfare technician. The basis for my decision had been a 3x5-index card that read, "You will monitor the electromagnetic spectrum for possible hostile emitters and take passive or electronic countermeasures on them." No one, including the personnel at the Military Entrance Processing Station, could begin to translate.

Calling for final boarding, the airport intercom interrupted my reverie. My dad, who had served six years himself as a sonar technician, hugged me hard, his squeeze pushing the air from my lungs. I felt him shaking as I hugged him and averted my gaze. I didn't need to see my

dad crying.

I said good-bye to the rest of my family and walked down the ramp toward the waiting plane. I made the mistake of looking back. The rungs of the metal stairwell framed my ten-year-old brother's face, and my sister stood above him, expressionless. My mom forced a smile, but my dad looked down, embarrassed at his loss of self-control.

I wouldn't see my family again for eight more weeks. And as I stared back at them, I could almost see an apparition of my old self next to them. I sensed things were changing. With a final wave, I said good-bye to the first 18 years of my life. I was entering the Navy, or, in military parlance, I was "checking in."

Eight hours later, I rode in a faded yellow school bus that bounced its way toward Orlando's recruitment center. I had waited in the airport's USO, as my recruiter had told me to do, until the others arrived from across the country to start their enlistments. But even after being packed with nervous people, the bus had waited to leave the airport. Company Commanders (CCs) liked their recruits tired. Tired sailors were less likely to resist and more pliable for reshaping.

Everyone went silent as the bus screeched to an abrupt halt. The driver yanked the door open and a kid in blue dungarees bounded up the steps to order us off. We would find out later that this boy, no older than most of the passengers, attended boot camp too. He was in workweek, the fifth week of boot camp when all recruits must leave their training to work at some station. He had been placed in processing, which meant he greeted all the new recruits and made them feel welcome.

"Get off the bus, maggots," he screamed, jerking his thumb toward the door.

Suddenly, a kid only five weeks ahead of us in our own training had reduced us all to maggots, but no one said a word; instead, we scrambled out of the bus. He shouted for us to form a line against the bulkhead. Evidently, forming a line in boot camp would require considerably

more effort than any other line I had formed during my life. We stood silently, praying we were close to this “bulkhead.”

“Why are you maggots so stupid?” he screamed again, expletives accompanying the most mundane words. “Stand against the bulkhead, shipmates. Get against the wall.”

Once in line, we started our midnight march toward our barracks. More workweek recruits waited for us with more instructions. They issued us ditty bags, a collection of toiletries that would get us through the night. My second military duty, after forming another line, was to shave. Everyone fell out of line into the head, or bathroom.

“I don’t care if you’ve never shaved a day in your life,” barked some smooth-faced recruit. “Get in there and shave.”

So I didn’t protest. I shaved my hairless face as instructed, careful not to cut myself. After I had removed the first layer of my tender skin, Uncle Sam wanted me to pee for a drug test. It was the only thing that stood between me and going to bed. I drank constantly, coaxing my bladder to forget its nerves. When I was ready, a hospital corpsman accompanied me into the bathroom with a small white bottle.

“Stand over there,” he said, motioning to an “X” taped to the bathroom floor. I stood on the “X,” which was a couple of feet from the closest urinal, and tried to look composed. He watched intently as I provided my sample, making sure I wouldn’t try anything sneaky.

I fell into bed at 3 a.m., my family farewell a distant memory. Tomorrow I would meet my company commanders.

I heard them long before I saw them. I heard the metal trash can crashing down the aisle that separated the two endless rows of bunk beds. I heard them screaming, calling us lazy. Everyone clumsily rolled out of the racks and faced each other, waiting for further instructions.

One guy, impervious to the cacophony, still slept. Every eye fell on his prone body as our female company commander tiptoed over to his rack.

“Sleeping beauty,” she called in

motherly tones. “Wake up, sleeping beauty. WAKE UP,” she howled.

The startled sleeper jumped from his rack, forgetting he was in his underwear in front of a female. She seemed equally oblivious.

We got our first good look at our CCs at that point. The charming female was Petty Officer Annette Roper. She was tall, blonde and pretty despite a permanent scowl lined into her face. The guy, Petty Officer William Evans, was short with a thin mustache and sinister eyes. He had altered his dress white uniform to include black leather gloves and



a thick nightstick that he had slipped under his belt.

“C’mon, get your butts in gear,” he said. “We’re going to the galley for chow.”

When we entered the chow hall wearing our civilian clothes and long hair, other diners stopped eating to look up. We were that morning’s new recruits, and everyone in the galley, including yesterday’s recruits, outranked us. We were nobodies.

The Navy has a very generous dining plan. It’s all you can eat—in 15 minutes or less. In fact, eating is all they will allow you to do. You’re not allowed to talk. We would break that rule in future weeks,

but this morning everyone ate silently.

Fifteen minutes later, we marched over to the barber in the Navy exchange. We filed in, then took our turns sitting in the chairs. The barber said nothing. He simply and swiftly sheared off hair in long, careless strokes. We would get four more haircuts as our hair started to grow back.

Hair was the best indicator to other recruits of how far along you were in your training. People could predict, and accurately, what week and day you were in, simply by looking at your hair. Our short hair labeled us as new arrivals, but it wasn’t as telling as the long hair we had arrived with.

From the barber, we marched over to clothing issue. The sun had still not risen, but our eyes had grown accustomed to the dark. Our CCs kept telling us to hurry, but wherever we went we waited in long lines for other new companies to leave.

We marched in, holding green canvas sea bags open to accept our new clothes. Chits, pieces of paper with our clothing sizes, were placed in our mouths. We walked past matriarchal ladies, who removed the chits and threw the right clothes into our bags. When everyone had been issued clothing, we went back to the barracks. The Orlando sun had just risen over the distant horizon and shone down on our newly shaved heads, heads that would need sun block in the weeks to come.

In the barracks we obediently took our positions on the line in front of our racks. We were told to strip down to our skivvies, which all of us did, too tired to remember any modesty. We packed our discarded clothes and everything else we had brought from home into small white boxes. Once we had jammed it all in, our CCs dictated this letter:

*Dear Mom and Dad,
I love and miss you very much. But don't worry—the Navy has already begun to take good care of me.*

Checking in was over. ■