First-World Problems, Whole-World Insights

By “Joe Student” (revised/expanded draft)

To call myself a true writer would be an overstatement. I write, but not with the eloquence and grace that defines some of my more talented friends, to say nothing of the writers I’ve been introduced to in school, everyone from Homer and Shakespeare to Toni Morrison and Khaled Hosseini. I cannot communicate grand stories of valor in which the reader is entranced by my words. Writing has generally been merely an escape for me, a way to get lost in the beauty of words and to discover thoughts that lurk deep within the confines of my soul. Writing is my method of archiving important events, of releasing tension that builds from the stresses of my life, and of bringing clarity to complex situations. Sometimes it's a bitter medicine that I am forced to take if I want to feel better, but I know I am ultimately healthier for it. Writing has also brought me great joy and pride in myself. My writing has been a mirror that helps me look into the very core of who I am.

Conversely, the reading I do helps me look outward, helps me see into lives very different from my own. For instance, when we read Sherman Alexie’s essay “Superman and Me,” I was startled by the idea that for him, honing his intellect by reading extensively and deeply took an act of defiance because the world he lived in told him that “[a] smart Indian is a dangerous person, widely feared and ridiculed by Indians and non-Indians alike.” Since I myself grew up in an extremely nurturing environment, where every child was treated as special and given everything needed to bloom, I found it appalling to contemplate a world where children were set up to fail. How many kids with great potential go to waste in that kind of community? On the other hand, it is wonderful that Alexie managed to rescue himself through reading and writing his way to greatness. It’s even more impressive that though he faced bullying as a kid on the reservation, he goes back there as an adult and tries to show how today’s Indian kids can rescue themselves with literacy, too.

I have to say I have never used writing in such an ambitious, selfless way, but I have used it to connect with others and to try to offer helpful advice to those closest to me. One such piece was a letter to one of my friends who was undergoing problems in his love life. I felt real anguish for him as I tried to help him without overstepping boundaries. He was contemplating re-entering a relationship with a woman who had brought him much pain yet also great happiness. In this letter I expose my own over-romanticized vision of love and sounded overly harsh and pessimistic. Still, it was a difficult situation. I am not afraid to say something that I feel strongly about, but I could see my friend might not really want my advice, might just need me to listen and support him. I wrote this after having an actual conversation with him where I gave him a very mixed reply. Writing this piece later was my attempt to clarify my thoughts and maybe help him clarify his own choices. Even though I didn’t send the letter, it helped me understand the situation and be more empathetic. I learned that writing can bring clarity to a murky situation. Later when we talked about this again, I was able to be more objective and help listen while my friend worked out his own decision, and I think it was a good one.

Again, when I think about the much harsher situations other young people have to deal with, such as those growing up on Sherman Alexie’s reservation, it makes me realize that my own problems are pretty small, “first-world problems,” as we say now. For instance, I was brought to tears when my dog was hit by a car, and it seemed like the end of the world for a while. But while I was dealing with this, in school I read *The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini, which describes how a young man from Afghanistan lost his best friend in a war and had to escape as a refugee, losing all of his worldly goods and fleeing to California, where he and his family would be viewed with suspicion and fear because they are Muslim. I can’t even imagine how I would deal with something like that. I am not heroic, merely a young college man struggling through the trials and tribulations that his relatively privileged life entails. Still, I am glad I have the stories of others to help me keep it all in perspective, and to give me some empathy for those who have it harder. As I grow up and learn more about the big world outside of my own community, I hope I will be able to understand where I fit in. I might not be able to rescue despairing youths from their own sense of defeat, as Sherman Alexie does, or to help Americans have some empathy for those affected by wars we participate in, as Hosseini does, but I know I can connect with others through writing. I plan to develop these skills further in college to see where they will take me.

Overall, I think English 1A will be good for me as I begin my college career. I am not experienced in writing multiple drafts that actually build upon multiple perspectives, but I think this will help me get deeper into any subject and produce better work. In the past, my multiple drafts have been miserable attempts to increase my word count, which actually reduced the quality of my papers. I selected this class because I want to develop my writing skills to the point where I become worthy of the title of "writer."

(original 717 words, expanded to 1004 words)