

FINDING GRIEF:

How fiction-writing helped a teenager connect with and communicate his experience after the death of his mother

ABSTRACT: This paper tells the story of how a 15-year-old boy, in the aftermath of his mother's death, discovered a way to articulate and share his subjective experience through writing, particularly through the creation of a fictional character. The paper looks closely at the relationship between the teenager and the adult with whom he worked and at the way in which fiction offered a unique opportunity to create a character that is "not oneself" while paradoxically allowing for a deeper exploration of one's own emotional landscape.

KEY WORDS: adolescents, grief therapy, writing therapy

If it had been described as therapy, he never would have agreed to it. Or his consent would have been halfhearted, noncommittal, the kind of agreement teenagers make with adults that says, "I won't protest this right now, but I can't imagine actually doing it so I'll figure out some way of getting out of it later on." I don't know if that's how he felt about the grief therapist that his family – grieving themselves, too, but aware enough of his need to set something up for him – had arranged, but I'd been told that he only kept a couple of appointments and was reluctant and uncomfortable when he did show up. His mother's death from cancer the year before had shaken him profoundly; there was no doubt about that. But acknowledging that devastation as directly as he would have had to in a therapist's office, looking at it straight on, *talking about it* – well, knowing him as I came to in the subsequent months and years, I can see how it didn't happen.

But if his twice-weekly meetings with me had been described as “English Class,” I doubt he’d have agreed to them either. He thought of class mostly as the place where you drew furtively in your notebook and tried not to pay attention to the teacher while trying to look as if you were. In various kinds of conflict with the adults in his life, inchoately angry at what had been taken from him¹ and not having felt school to be a place of comfort or success in any case, he was not thriving in the school classroom. His family knew that I led writing workshops and met with young writers individually,² and when the idea was presented to him, Jeremy agreed to meet with me to do something involving reading and writing without (I’m guessing) having much idea of what that could be like.

The first piece he wrote was about Andrew Wyeth’s painting, “Oil Lamp.” He had suggested writing about a work of art, and I was as amenable to that as I would have been to just about anything he had suggested. I was glad he’d come up with a possibility, glad that he understood so readily that I would not be giving him assignments and that the idea was for him to figure out, or for us to figure out together, what he might actually want to write.

He told me his mother had been a visual artist and that there were several other artists in his family, so choosing to write about a painting might have been a way of identifying with that family history, or a way of letting me know

¹ Death had taken his mother from him, and the resulting family disruption, which led to Jeremy and his sister living in different homes, took from him the familiar life that he had known.

² In developing the blend of writing work, teaching/mentoring, and therapeutic engagement that I have been offering to teenagers for a couple of decades, I have been deeply influenced by the work of John Holt, George Dennison, and others who have written about respecting young people’s own ways of learning and responding to the world. In another but equally important sense, I have been influenced by the poets and writers whose work has been significant to me and by my own participation in writing workshops, about which I will have more to say further on in this paper.

that visual art was important to him – or just a way of picking *something* that he could vaguely imagine writing about at that point.

This was the piece that he developed after several meetings' worth of work:

“Oil Lamp”

Close to completing the portrait, Andrew Wyeth learned that his father, N.C. Wyeth, had been killed at a railroad crossing in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. The shock of Andrew's dad's death really comes through in the painting, and puts a real effect in the detail. Alvaro, the subject of the portrait, was also so affected by Andrew's dad's death that he refused to pose ever again because he was so emotionally upset.

The expression on Alvaro's face in the painting is very meaningful; you can see the sadness and heartache in the way his eyes drape. The shadows and the dimmed candlelight really set the mood of the portrait. You can see the effects of Andrew's dad's death on Alvaro by the look of depression in his posture. I love the detail, and the overall outcome of the painting.

When I read this now, I'm amazed at how many of the later themes of Jeremy's work, and our work together, are contained within it: the shock of death, the visible evidence of grief, and the fact that we talked about none of this directly but only looked at it in terms of what made the painting so powerful. While he was working on the piece, I went and looked up Wyeth's painting, and I told Jeremy that I saw what he meant. Later, when he was working on a long piece of fiction, he would again try to tell me something by directing me to its representation in a work of art, and I would again try to say *yes, I see*.

After he'd finished “Oil Lamp,” it was time once again to figure out what he might want to write. I could see him stretching out tentatively, feeling for the contours of this new arrangement – no assignments, no grades, and, to his surprise, a finished work that seemed to express something of what he wanted

to express. He wasn't sure what to do next, though. He asked for suggestions. I scribbled down a few memory prompts – phrases or questions that might generate a written memory, including “smells that make you remember people or places” and a question about what the word “home” evoked for him -- and he began working with these ideas, sometimes by speaking while I took down what he said, and sometimes working with his own hands on the laptop keyboard. After he had tried a couple of the prompts, he said, “Do you have any more of these?” and I knew we'd found the next thing to write.

The short vignettes he generated during our next several meetings are somehow both spare and rich. Their poignancy, for me, comes from the way that they seem to reconnect him with a sweetness and little-boy-ness that had gotten obscured – in other people's eyes, but maybe even in his own – during his recent troubles. So, for example, he wrote about feeding ducks in the park with his mother, getting his first skateboard, catching tadpoles with his sister and getting in trouble for putting gum in her hair. He wrote about places he'd lived as a child and memories he had from the rooms in those houses – letting himself re-enter those rooms, and remember that he still remembered them:

The smell of incense reminds me of my old house on Miquon Lane. It was a really homey house. It was on a dead end with a loop at the end; it felt like the houses were secure and there were always kids playing in the street. We had a big warm house with a fireplace and a pool. That was where I lived with my mom and Paul³ and my sister. When I think of the smell of incense I think of being in my room at night. I'd read or draw and light incense and just chill. I'd usually be listening to music. I was in my own world. I had a lot of good memories there.

Something that says “home” to me is my warm comforter. My Grandma likes LL Bean⁴, so she always asks me and my sister what we

³ His stepfather.

⁴ A large catalog retailer in the United States.

want. About four years ago she got us each a comforter. I love it now because it's all broken in. It's soft and you can hug it, wrap your arms around it. You can wrap yourself up into a cocoon, just like when you're born; it's warm and cozy. The comforter has come with me when I've moved to different places.

Jeremy's homey house was gone – at least, that specific one, as it existed for him in his childhood and in his memory – and in some sense the cocoon of comfort was gone too. But in another way it was still present, or could be. It could come with him.

Along with early memories of comfort came early memories of fear – in the same setting as the comfort:

Lying in bed in the pitch black scared the hell out of me, especially when I turned 6 and got my own room. I'd take my blankets and completely wrap them around me to protect myself and make so there was a little hole I could get one eye to see through. I used to make up this idea that if I didn't hold my breath for 10 seconds the goblins and scary people would attack me.

And in addition to some early memories of his mother, which he could speak of more easily, it seemed to me, in the context of dictating these specific vignettes, came stories about his father, with whom he was not currently living even though it had been assumed that that's where he would go after his mother's death.

We had a house in back of Friendly's with a big yard, and when I was 6 or 7 I could roll a ball of snow and be fine with it. One time we made a giant dog. It was bigger than I was – we used big mounds for legs and the body and everything. We made igloos and forts you could sit in. Both of us would squish into the fort. We used to make snow angels too. It was just the two of us. You'd expect to fall back and hurt yourself, but you just fall into it and land like landing on a bed. The

snow kind of comes around you, the imprint, and it's so relaxing. The sun's shining and the snow's starting to melt. When you're 7 you don't really decide what you're going to wear and your parents don't want you to freeze, so you're bundled up and you're not cold. It was pretty fun for a kid, I'd have to say. The snow was pretty cool to a 7 year old.

This story, simple enough on the face of it, brought tears to Jeremy's father's eyes when he read it. Jeremy let me show his father some of what we were working on together as long as he didn't have to be right there while his father read and reacted to it (he didn't say that stipulation outright, but I inferred it). His father was, understandably, moved to see that Jeremy, for all the conflict they'd lately been having, still remembered scenes of playful companionship. Indirectly but with all the power of a vividly evoked story, Jeremy brought his young self back into his and his father's shared narrative.

Then came this memory, the longest one he'd yet written:

I went up to Maine with my stepmom and dad for winter vacation. I was about 10 years old at the time. We took walks on the beach and walked around town. Even though it was the middle of winter and very cold, it was still fun to walk on the beach. The last day in Maine, before we left, we took one last walk on the beach. We drove our car from the hotel and parked it in one of the several parking lots. We all started walking along the water. In the middle of the parking lots and the beach there were massive snow mounds, making it so you couldn't see the parking lot over them. My dad went back to the car to grab his camera.

While he was in the car me and my stepmom looked at cool rocks on the shore. She was interested in one of them for her rock garden and asked me to bring it back to the car. So I did. On my way to the car I got lost because the snow banks were so huge. I ended up walking down the whole beach lost. Half way down I decided to lose the rock so I threw it down. Now starting to get scared and frustrated I asked a couple on the beach if they had seen my parents. No luck. My dad and I were wearing the same hat so I said, "Have you seen anyone with this hat on?" They said no and they didn't even ask me any questions. I was a 10-year-old kid and they didn't ask if I was lost.

I kept seeing the same image of never-ending brown and then the ocean on the right. I was old enough to think to myself what if my dad never found me and I was stuck in Maine forever. I started thinking about where to go and how to find a phone.

I must have been gone for about 45 minutes now when all of sudden a big police truck pulled up to me and asked if I was Jeremy I said I was and got in. I was still confused. When they brought me back to the parking lot there were 3 police cars and 1 ambulance waiting for me. I ran into my dad's crying arms, and explained what happened.

Now the snow, which had been such a joyful image in the first memory, is an occasion of loss and confusion and fear. "I was a 10-year-old kid and they didn't ask if I was lost," he wrote, and I think now that he could well have been saying it of himself at 15 (as he was just turning when this was written). Of course, the truth is more complicated than this implies: many people around Jeremy *were* asking if he was lost, and trying to help, and in one way or another opening their arms. But there is an indignation here that comes up again, more forcefully, in Jeremy's later work of fiction, the resonance of which I feel instinctively even if I also recognize that a lot of good people *were* asking whether Jeremy was lost. The indignation, whether literally justified or not, says something important about Jeremy's internal experience at the time. He did not *feel* found.⁵

Before turning to focus on the long work of fiction that became in many ways the heart of Jeremy's and my work together, I want to say a thing or two

⁵ He did not feel that people could *see where he was* emotionally or could figure out how to get to him. Over time, in part through our work together, I think that he came to feel increasingly *found* in the sense that his subjective experience was recognized. Through writing, he was able to discover a way of articulating and giving shape to that experience so that he *and someone else* could see it and know it as it was, without worrying about what he ought to be feeling or what others – because of their own grief and anxiety – seemed to need him to feel.

about the way in which he used our meeting times. As is apparent even in his early work, Jeremy was discovering a sense of himself as a writer and of writing as something that he could use for his own purposes. That sense gained momentum and depth as he went on. But both with the early work and after he had plunged into a long work of fiction, he wrote only during our twice-weekly meetings, and on my computer, so that I was the one who carried the physical work around with me. Very occasionally Jeremy asked for a printout of what he'd written so far, and once in a while, especially in the early stages, he would make a vague promise to work on the story in between times, or I would make such a suggestion as I handed him the printed draft. But as the weeks went by and he didn't write in between our meetings, I simultaneously stopped referring to the possibility and began to question the assumption that that was necessarily a goal to be working toward.

Of the many young writers I've worked with, both before Jeremy and since, some certainly do write at home, sometimes quite extensively, and they use our meeting times to show and talk about drafts of what they've written, or talk about what they're working on and struggling with and thinking about. The fact that some young writers do write outside of our meetings could be partly what leads to the notion that, along a continuum of writing growth and development, the ability to work on one's own exists at a point farther along than the need to have someone sitting with you while you work. But that assumption is also reflective of a belief or feeling about independence, and perhaps particularly with respect to teenagers, that I came to question most acutely through working with Jeremy, though he is by no means the only teenager who has chosen to write, or enter into certain kinds of conversations, primarily while sitting with me.

The common notion is that adolescence is about striving for independence. In another but perhaps parallel way, a teenager's high school experience – occasional murmurings about cooperation to the contrary – is mostly supposed to be about learning to *do your own work*. Seen this way, Jeremy's inability or refusal to write except when an adult was sitting right there with him, in this hour set apart from other hours, looks like a deficit. And, too, if teenagers are typically trying to escape responsibility and avoid *what they're supposed to be doing*, then this adult sitting with Jeremy must have been there to ensure that he buckled down, stayed on task, didn't goof off. From that view, I would have been there as taskmaster or at least as training wheels, with, again, the goal being that he learn to write on his own, work on his own, *not need me there anymore*. Because growth, as we've come to understand it, means moving away from need rather than more fully into it. It means crossing people off the list of those you can't do certain things without, or go certain places without.

Eventually, some time after our regular work together, Jeremy and I talked about this explicitly, and I will return to the topic and to his own reflections on the value of having me sit there in the room with him while he wrote. But for now, keeping all this in mind, let's turn back again to the time when he and I didn't acknowledge any of this directly and when the only evidence of my growing awareness of the process was that I stopped bugging him about trying to write during the week.

He had been engaged with the work of memory-writing in a way that I think took him by surprise, and then after a few weeks it seemed to run its course and he began casting around for something else to try. I mentioned several very general possibilities and he seized on the idea of trying fiction, something he said he had never done before (I don't know whether he had ever been

assigned to write a fictional story in school; it seems possible, but if he had, it hadn't stuck with him enough for him to remember it now).

He decided at the outset to write about a boy in middle school. He made the location and various details of the boy's life different from his own, but he also acknowledged with pretty visible enthusiasm that he was going to be drawing on his own middle school memories. So, in the opening scenes of the story, there are some vivid evocations of the middle school atmosphere: the sound of feet squeaking on the freshly waxed floor, the rows of lockers, the hallways with "lights [that] hurt my eyes" and are "crowded by many other kids." And, above all, there's a student who isn't doing well and a teacher who doesn't understand:

The halls are almost empty now, and I enter the classroom looking down and ignoring whoever is staring at me, which is most likely half the class. My desk is in the back corner near the pencil sharpener. I sit next to a girl named Sarah Himmer, she too gets picked on, but we never speak to one another. The first period bell rings, and Ms. Kennedy tells the class to settle down and to pull out last night's homework. She begins to scan the rows giving a red check mark if completed. Ms. Kennedy makes her way towards my desk. Like always she makes a scene, announcing to the class that once again Andrew does not have his work.

Sometimes I want to stand up and yell to the whole school that they have no idea. No idea what's going through my head, how much they make every single day a living hell, how they make it worse than it should already be.

I stare into Ms. Kennedy's eyes trying to get my point across by looking at her, staring her down, but keeping my mouth shut. Someday everyone will know.

Ms. Kennedy asks to speak to me after class. I don't say anything, just stare at her. She continues to the front of the room to her desk and grabs a pile of papers and distributes them to the class.

One of the most striking things about this passage, to me, is the silence of the character Andrew. Reading this over I see that Andrew doesn't actually *say* anything to anyone in this entire scene. His outward wordlessness contrasts so sharply with the interior monologue that we, the readers, get to hear. Andrew tries to communicate to Ms. Kennedy by staring at her, and we can easily imagine how such a scene would look to the teacher, who would likely experience the boy as intimidating or insolent or both. But meanwhile what Andrew is describing here is the experience of wanting, but being unable, to communicate to everyone what they have no idea about.

These richly evoked scenes gave us an opportunity to talk in ways that even his own more directly rendered memories hadn't made possible. Excited by his ability to create a character and invent scenes and dialogue and plot, Jeremy was interested to see what I thought of each day's work and ready to talk back and forth about it. He would work for a stretch – sometimes only ten or fifteen minutes, sometimes as long as three-quarters of an hour – while I sat across from him, reading to myself or sometimes just thinking. Theoretically, I could have left the room after saying something like, "Let me know when you're ready," but I sensed with increasing clarity that it was important for me to stay. If nothing else, Jeremy was often so wordless in his communication to me that, rather than look up from the computer and say, "OK, you can read this now," he would simply slide the laptop across the table to me when the moment had come. Since I couldn't predict exactly when that moment would arrive, I didn't want to risk being out of the room and missing it.

I would read over what he had written and make observations about the writing, the images, what I thought was effective, what I was curious to read more about – all the usual sorts of comments one might make on a draft. This often led us to conversation about why Andrew behaved as he did, or what he

might have been feeling, and what might happen next. The structure and conventions of a fictional story not only demanded that Jeremy think about a character's motivation and the deeper reasons behind his behavior; they also gave us a way of talking about these things that was easier for Jeremy to tolerate than my asking about his own behavior or motivations or feelings.

Although Jeremy's original enthusiasm had been for writing about a boy's middle school experience, other themes also emerged right away. The character's struggles with his parents, and experience of loss, are introduced immediately and become increasingly central themes of the piece. In the opening scene, Andrew is called to the principal's office because his mother has come to tell him that his father has gotten into trouble – been arrested, it turns out. In all of this material, which is emotionally rich in all sorts of ways, I see the character's outward silence, or inability to speak, once again. First, there's the scene in the principal's office:

I open the door to find my mom crying and talking to my principal. There's a painful feeling in my stomach, and I prepare for the worst. She notices that I am now in the room; her deep bloodshot eyes stare into mine.

“Andrew, your dad got in some trouble.”

Tears continue to roll down her cheeks, and I start to think what might have happened, which could have been a lot of things. I don't see much of my dad; he spends most of his time around the local bar with his drinking buddies causing trouble with the police, at least that's what my mom says.

I don't say anything, just think where he might be, or what he might have done.

In the car on the way home from the school, the boy and his mother exchange one line of dialogue:

I put my seat belt on and tell her to put hers on as well; as normal she doesn't listen to me. We leave the parking lot, neither of us saying anything.

They arrive home, and there's this scene:

"Andrew, sit down."

I close the fridge and head over to table where my mom is already sitting down. I pull out a chair and sit down as well.

"Andrew, your dad robbed the country store last night."

She pauses and wipes her tears. I look at the ground not wanting to look at her.

"Don't you have anything to say?"

"No." I get up and walk into the living room without saying another word to my mother. I walk into my bedroom and take off my shoes and I lay on bed. My eyes close, and I drift off to another world, somewhere much better than here.

Here again the adult sees an outwardly recalcitrant and perhaps even uncaring teenager. But readers are offered a view into Andrew's inner world. After his mother has come into his room and announced that she's leaving for the night, Andrew replies with a simple "Okay" and doesn't "bother asking her where she's going because I never get an answer." On his own now, he heads for the bathroom:

I turn on the shower, and wait for the hot water. An emotion of feelings smacks me in the face, hitting me at full speed. My life is very different than a normal 12 year old should have, and it sucks. The hot water turns my skin red, but I just stand, let it drift down me.

The hot water begins to get colder so I turn the shower off and step out. The cold air hits my body and creates goose bumps down my back. I wrap myself in my towel, and I begin to dry myself off. The hole in my stomach still grows. I step into the hallway and walk in to my bedroom, I look at my floor looking like a tornado just passed through and ripped everything in to one big mess.

I wrote earlier that the story became a way for us to talk indirectly, but in a sense much more directly, than we ever had, both in the implicit conversation that occurred through Jeremy's writing this material and showing it to me and through the discussions we would have after I read each installment. I need to emphasize, however, that I never viewed the Andrew character simply as Jeremy by another name. Not only were their lives too different in some key ways, but, more important, such a literal reading of the story would miss, or insufficiently respect, the range of possible ways that art may correspond to actual experience. The striking thing to me as a writer was that Jeremy was figuring out how to use writing in one of the more symbolic or evocative ways; he was discovering how to draw upon, make use of, but not necessarily literally represent his own feelings and experiences.⁶ And he saw how it is possible to

⁶ My years of participation in writing workshops had accustomed me to this attitude and had, I believe, helped prepare me to recognize the range of possible relationships between the character Andrew and the person Jeremy. The one question students learn *not* to ask in writing workshops is "Was that about you?" or "Did that actually happen to you?" This convention of strictly respecting the anonymity, or ambiguity, of the "I" in a poem or story is partly about respecting privacy, partly about maintaining a disciplined focus on the writing itself rather than on any conversations that may grow out of that writing, and partly about an implicit acknowledgment that the answer to the question "Was that about you?", were it in fact to be asked, would be something like, "Yes, and no." From my own experience as a writer and close reader of others' writing, I recognized that a person might witness a house burning down (for example) and then write a poem about a house burning down. Or he might experience the divorce of his parents and write a poem about a house burning down and there might be some relationship between the life event and the poem. Or, just as possibly, he might write a poem about a house burning down because that idea somehow interests him without his fully being aware of why it interests him; perhaps he has heard about it happening to someone else and wants to imagine his way into what the experience might be like, or perhaps the burning house is a representation of some emotional territory in himself, or perhaps it's some mix of all of this. Writers themselves don't always know precisely which of these sources is paramount for any given piece of work, and certainly readers cannot (or should not) presume to know.

All of which is why I was careful not to read the Andrew story as a direct, literal representation of Jeremy's own experience, *even as* it became increasingly interesting to

explore the territory of one's own feelings by, in some sense, turning up the volume or intensity through a fictional character's more flamboyantly difficult experience. Jeremy keenly felt his mother's absence; more subtly but no less powerfully, he (I believe) felt the solitude of his own grief and anger even in the midst of loving, caring family and friends. Andrew's stark and in some respects more dramatic abandonment by his parents offered an arena in which to explore all this.⁷

So I never spoke to Jeremy as if I believed he and Andrew were one and the same or as if every time I read the word "Andrew" in the story I was mentally substituting Jeremy's own name. I respected the oblique-yet-direct nature of the work, the complexity of the process, too much. Aware that sometimes the story might more obviously be a working out of Jeremy's own feelings and at other times it might reflect an interest in imagining his way into someone else's

me to see the ways in which he did seem to be drawing upon and working through his own emotional experience by writing the story. It interested me tremendously that, as he began framing his writing as fiction, he was able to create a character who was not literally himself but who could be used in ways that were valuable to him both artistically and therapeutically.

⁷ In a sense, as I alluded to at the start of this paper, it could be said that Jeremy was turning *down* the intensity by engaging in therapeutic work indirectly, through the vehicle of fiction writing, rather than in the office of the grief therapist, which (I think) felt uncomfortably stark and direct to him. But when I say that the fiction writing allowed Jeremy to turn *up* the intensity, I mean that it offered him the safety of exaggeration. In Jeremy's fictional story, the adults are pretty unequivocally uncaring, unsympathetic, and unavailable to the main character. In life, Jeremy's situation was less clear-cut; his own family offered him much more care, sympathy, and availability than this, but the fiction allowed him to explore or speak from or represent the *part* of his emotional experience that more closely matched Andrew's. I believe that by situating this emotional experience within a fictional story, Jeremy found a way not to have to worry about or apologize for the apparent discrepancy between what was externally true and what he felt internally. He didn't have to reckon with the apparent paradox: "I *feel* uncared for and alone even though I see objectively that my family is there for me and seems concerned about how I am, so how can both be true?" Instead, he could just write the subjective truth by situating it within a fictional landscape. Seeing him do this helped me to articulate the enormous possibilities that this kind of fiction-writing offers.

experience – an equally valid reason for writing fiction, after all – I never presumed to know which it might be at any given time. Perhaps above all, I respected the fact that these two motivations, or sources, were not always distinct; often, the two were so closely braided together that it wouldn't have made sense to try to tease them apart.

Because of this, I let Jeremy be the one to initiate direct conversation about the occasions when he was consciously drawing on his own experience to write about Andrew. A passage showing Andrew walking around town on his own included these lines:

I cross the street, and there's people standing outside the bar smoking cigarettes, their conversations are filled with commotion and loudness. It bothers me, brings back all the fights and yells, the darkness of my bedroom, the loneliness.

I commented on how the darkness, though not a sound, felt like a sensory image along with the rest. I also mentioned that the loneliness, though obviously Andrew's, could also perhaps be his parents'. He agreed with interest and then said, "Where I got that from ..." and began to tell me a memory of being very young, no older than 4, in a crib and frightened of the darkness in his room. He described climbing out of the crib and then trying to get out of the room – and here his memory got confused, because he started to say that the door was locked, but when I asked if someone had come to let him out, he said, "No, I did it myself," and added that maybe that meant the door wasn't actually locked, then.

He continued to seem puzzled by this, and a little disturbed by the contradiction: he so vividly remembered the feeling of being locked in, but it didn't quite make sense to him that he would have been, and it didn't fit with

his further memory of letting himself out. He said aloud that he wished he could ask someone now which it had been: had the door been locked or not?

Turning back to the story, he said, of Andrew's parents,

"I think I'm going to make it that they locked him in!"

He said it with a certain satisfaction. Whatever had been literally true in his own memory, he could now take that feeling of being locked in, left in the darkness, and write it into Andrew's story.

I speculated a bit about why Andrew's parents might have locked him in during those nights. Maybe they were going out – the story had already established that Andrew's parents often went out at night – and they thought it would be safer to lock the door of the boy's room so he wouldn't wander around.

"I think they just didn't want to deal with him," Jeremy said, again with a kind of certainty that I didn't want to challenge. This was his material; this was what he was working with.

After another couple of awful days at school and equally awful days at home, including one really bad fight scene with his mother, Andrew walks out of school in the middle of the day and eventually walks out of the town to strike out on his own. For a long stretch, the story chronicles Andrew's adventures on his own, his efforts to find food and shelter, the characters he meets along the way. At some point throughout the weeks of writing these scenes, Jeremy announced that his plan was for Andrew to meet someone who would help him, take him in. I often arrived at our meeting thinking that this might be the day when he would write that scene and we would meet this character, but Jeremy was taking his time getting there.

Finally it came: Andrew, sleeping one night in the back of an apartment complex, is woken by someone who thinks he's trying to break in and punches

him hard enough to knock his front tooth out. But that same man who mistook Andrew for an intruder ends up taking him in, offering him physical shelter and, also, a new kind of care. When Junior, as the man is named, listens to Andrew describe some of what he's been through and then says he can stay with him for a while, Andrew is so stunned that he doesn't speak, at first:

I don't say anything. I try not to cry but the tears roll down my cheeks and hit the dark green carpet. I've never had someone treat me like this.

“Junior, thank you.”

As the story continues, Junior – in addition to being his own distinct character with his own particular backstory – is, I think, a kind of combination of the various adults who were offering Jeremy shelter and comfort in his own life but also, and maybe most especially, a personification of Jeremy's renewed belief in the idea of help, the possibility of help.

By this point, Jeremy was often planning ahead; after finishing one passage, he might tell me what he was thinking of writing next time. After writing the scene in which Junior invites Andrew into his house and shows him a room where he can stay, Jeremy said that he was planning to have Andrew fall asleep and then wake up to find Junior gone, off to work, but he will have left Andrew a note.

This led us into a conversation about different kinds of being alone. I observed that Andrew had been left alone a great deal in his old house, but he would wake up not knowing where his mother had gone, whereas in this case, with Junior, he would wake up with a clear indication that the adult had thought about him and left something of himself behind. We talked about the difference between being alone and abandoned and being alone but having the other person with you, in some sense.

Talking further about what he wanted to write next, Jeremy said, “I want their relationship to be like, they can get angry at each other but not worry that it’s over. Andrew will know that any feeling is OK.”

The next time we met, Jeremy did write the scene of Andrew’s waking to find a note from Junior, but he preceded it with a dream that Andrew had that first night at Junior’s. In the dream Andrew is a young child in the car with his parents:

My mom rolls down the window and lights a cigarette, the smoke stings my nostrils as the wind blows it at me. I can hear my dad humming to the radio with his dry raspy voice. It’s night and I can’t wait to see Grandpa, hear his laugh, and feel the strong hug he always gives me.

I was struck powerfully by the understanding Jeremy showed here: that Andrew, now getting a glimpse of a return to a feeling of comfort and care, would dream a scene that was his last vivid childhood memory of those very feelings. He had written about Andrew’s grandfather earlier in the story:

When I was five my grandfather died and I remember going to my grandparents’ house for the wake. My grandpa was the nicest man out of my family, the only person I could talk to. When he died everything got bad. I remember walking into my grandparents’ living room and seeing my grandma sitting in her chair crying, crying all the time.

So the grandfather, the last person Andrew could talk to, the one who gave strong hugs, is gone and has left Andrew to behold his grandmother’s grief, which burns a powerful image into his memory: the seemingly continuous (“crying, crying all the time”) grief of an adult, and the sense for the boy that after this loss, “everything got bad.”

Given all this, the return of his grandfather, in this dream in Junior's house, is incredibly moving. Andrew does wake up to Junior's note explaining that he's at work and will be home later and letting him know there's plenty of food in the kitchen. As Andrew goes to help himself to that food, he observes that "the house is silent, but not the normal silence I am used to. It's a calming, warm silence, one that makes me smile."

Things are clearly getting considerably better for Andrew. Throughout all of this, there are occasional moments when he remembers his mother and father and knows that he will have to reckon with his past and his home in some way. At one point, thinking back to his previous life, Andrew vows to be better than the people there and adds, "And I want to show them how much they hurt me, not only physically but mentally."

This recalled, for me, the line in the classroom scene when Andrew is staring at Ms. Kennedy, trying to communicate wordlessly, and he says (to the reader), "Some day everyone will know." I had been interested, then, in the open-endedness of that phrase: *what* will everyone know? In the later line, "show them how much they hurt me," the desire is more specific. Jeremy and I talked about the various ways that a character can "show" something like this – sometimes through violence or other destructive acts, sometimes in more positive ways. Jeremy said,

"Well, I'm writing the story *about* him, but *in* the story I want to have him discover that through writing he can see himself in a different way. Like, the book will be the way he shows them."

This was so moving, and such a succinct summary of what Jeremy was learning through writing Andrew's discovery of it, that I was the one who didn't have words to respond. I just nodded.

Jeremy worked on the Andrew story for about a year and a half, writing a total of about ten thousand words. Sometimes he spent time revising what he had written before rather than generating new material. Our meetings, as I've described, were part writing time and part conversation – sometimes more of one than the other. In all this time, he consistently referred to the story as a book, and, with a couple of very brief exceptions, he didn't show it to anyone else. His family grew increasingly curious about it and eager for the day when he would announce that it was completed. They even talked now and then about binding it into some kind of simple publication. I offered that once or twice as well.

Jeremy was at least indifferent and sometimes clearly resistant to these ideas. One time he said, "I'm really just writing this for myself." I began to make comments to his family about the process really being the most important thing: I wanted to lessen the expectation that there would be a finished product at the end of this. Of course, it was understandable to me that they would be curious, and easier for me to value process over product when I was the one getting to see the writing as it was unfolding. But I could not ignore what Jeremy was saying, in this and other ways: this experience was about the doing of it, the meeting twice a week and generating this material and showing it to me and hearing my comments about what he had written. It was about what was going on for him as he wrote the scenes and, I was increasingly coming to see, it was about what was going on between us as I sat with him while he wrote and then as I read the computer screen that he slid across the table to me.

By this time, I had long since stopped suggesting that Jeremy work on the story in between our meetings. Once, some time back, a member of his family

had asked if he wrote at other times – not with any particular irritation but just inquiring – and he said, “I don’t really have time during the rest of the week.”

As a literal answer, this was almost comically false. Jeremy had very few other obligations during the week and, at least technically, he had plenty of time to do this or anything like it. He did, in fact, sometimes *read* over the course of the week; this was another aspect of our work together, though less central than the writing. But his reading of memoirs and similar kinds of nonfiction, which he did a lot of during this period, certainly influenced his sense of how he wanted to write such a piece and his sense of what good writing sounded like.

Later, when we had stopped meeting regularly but got together now and then just to catch up, I began to broach the idea of writing about our work and so invited him to a reflection and a deliberate awareness of our process that I had carefully avoided at the time, out of a sense that too much explicit discussion of the process would mess with it. But now Jeremy was ready to think about it and interested in my questions.

He laughed when I reminded him that he’d said he had no time during the rest of the week.

“Well, we both know it wasn’t that I had other things to do the rest of the week,” he said. “But it was like I could concentrate better during those times when we met.”

I said, “I always figured that when you said you didn’t have time during the rest of the week, you meant, I don’t have *this kind of time*.”

“Exactly!”

We talked about that: the value of designating a special time for something, setting that time apart from the rest of the week. But he could have done that for writing, or I could have helped him to do that, without my actually sitting

there with him during the designated hour. He agreed that it wouldn't have been the same that way, though.

“As I got comfortable with you,” he said, “I knew you were interested in what I wrote, what I thought, and I wanted to show it to you.”

The process was, indeed, a dialogue, as he was acknowledging here on so many levels. As we continued reflecting on our work together, I said, “You're not someone who just sits down and goes, ‘This is how I'm feeling.’” He laughed in agreement, and I laughed back and said, “It's OK, not a lot of 14-year-old boys are –” we paused to remember that he'd been 14 when we started meeting. “ – but I think you were talking to me through the writing.”

“Definitely,” he said, nodding firmly.

To talk to someone, you need them to be there, in the flesh or in your own mind. Jeremy could have written his material without me there physically, knowing that I would be interested to read it when we got together and he showed it to me. As I've said, plenty of young writers have done just that. But with Jeremy what was paramount was the experience of those hours, the experience of doing this together, and the particular space that my presence helped both to carve out and to protect.

D. W. Winnicott writes about how children learn to be alone *while in the company of someone else*. The adult's presence makes it safe for the child to venture into his own thoughts, his own imagination. Winnicott was speaking of young children here, but it's not hard to see how the same could be true of a teenager, particularly when the journey is into difficult thoughts, difficult feelings. It was easier, safer, for Jeremy to venture into the territory that he was exploring through writing about Andrew, knowing that someone was there keeping watch.

In Lewis Hyde's wonderful book *The Gift*, which is about the labor of art and the tensions inherent in trying to create art within a market economy, he has a line that has stayed with me since I first read it over twenty years ago: "An essential portion of any artist's labor is not creation so much as invocation. Part of the work cannot be made, it must be received; and we cannot have this gift except, perhaps, by supplication, by courting, by creating within ourselves the 'begging bowl' to which the gift is drawn."

We create within ourselves a space to which a poem is drawn; we create within ourselves a space to which another person's trust is drawn. And then we offer up that space like a bowl; the discipline is in holding it steady. Every time I arrived at a meeting with Jeremy with expectations, especially expectations for a particular kind of conversation, I had to steady myself not to have them. I had to hold out a space for however he was, however he would be when he stepped into it: scruffy, tired, some days hardly able to talk, let alone write. The demand to articulate, to name, to reach down into the swirling or tightly packed mass of feeling would be too great, too overwhelming, and the discipline then was to sit with *that*. Just to show up, step inside the space. Which was no more and no less than what I asked of him.

Without expectations for a particular kind of thing to happen, I was able to marvel, each time, at what did so frequently happen, what did fill the space that Jeremy and I created by sitting together twice a week. The bowl is the receiver, but also the vessel that holds what is received. It shapes the huge and amorphous space of the world at large into something specific and contained, in which things can happen, in which it is *safe* for things to happen, things that would not, in exactly that way, have happened otherwise.

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