Opening Windows: My Journey as a Trainer of Writers

by Nancy Thomas

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I discovered my calling as a writer when I was seven years old. I remember sitting on the rug, tablet and pencil in hand, playing with words, when it happened. I wrote a poem. I really didn't know what I was doing, of course. It was pure play and imagination. What I did "know" was that a poem had to rhyme, so after writing that first line, "This is a poem by Nancy Forsythe," my immediate task was to find a word that rhymed with "Forsythe." The closest I could come was "knife". The second line, "about a girl and her dangerous knife," led into a rhyming story about a serial killer.

But I was doing what my father did—writing. And liking it. I immediately showed the poem to my father, and his delight probably did more than anything else to cement the call. I knew this was who I wanted to be—a writer. (I appreciate my dad's loving response. If it had been my kid writing that poem, I probably would have made an appointment with a child psychologist, thus killing any instinct to write.)

Mrs. King, my third grade teacher, further encouraged the call by bragging about my writing to my parents and pinning my poems up on the bulletin board. I wrote this poem years later, reflecting on her influence:

THIRD GRADE

Rows faced forward military style,
but spring poured in through a wall of windows.
Jelly fish and sea anemones
waved between strands of fixed kelp on the bulletin board.
Above the blackboard the cursive letters of the alphabet
swam in a race to the door.
Mrs. King taught us gull droppings, barnacles,
and the moon's strange dance with the sea.
She also taught us the mystery and music of words.
I titled my first poem, "Tide Pool Life," and began it,
"Oh, how I love to go down to the shore,"
but somewhere in the middle the poem grabbed me,
an undertow I couldn't resist.
There in the second seat, third row, I learned
how language splays like starfish, stings like salt.
Through scratches on paper I began to breathe underwater,
dive for the treasure on the bottom.
Mrs. King--did she know what she was doing?--pushed me
beyond tide pools.

Ever since bits of sea weed cling to my hair.
Words swim like minnows through my brain.
All the windows are open.

So I grew up writing, thanks largely to the mentors who walked beside me. As I made my way through the college years, God enriched my life with another call, inviting me to partner with him in cross-cultural mission. Hal and I met, married and went to Bolivia to begin our ministry career among the Aymara-speaking peoples of the high Andes.

One of the first tasks the mission team assigned me was writing the extension Bible school materials on the Pauline Epistles. With some fear and misgivings (which at least show the beginnings of wisdom), I accepted and began the research and writing project which ended up taking two years and resulted in a three-volume programmed textbook. I look back now and shudder at my audacity. I was a young woman with a college education but no ministry experience writing on a complex and important topic for Aymara adults, mostly men in those days, who were leaders in their communities. What was I thinking? By God's grace, the textbooks proved useful and served the church for many years. But through the more than 27 years we lived in Bolivia, I gradually came to see that my role among my Aymara brothers and sisters was not as a writer. God was calling me to facilitate and encourage them to develop as writers in and for their own context.

This calling grew slowly. I was still a first-termer when invited to teach a writing-for-publication course in the interdenominational San Pablo Seminary. I accepted with some misgivings. I was to teach in the Spanish language communication concepts I had learned in English to these young men and women who grew up speaking Aymara. Furthermore, this was a writing class in the context of a traditionally oral society. How could it possibly work?

Yet somehow it did work. Ramón, Salomé, Sadrach, Romualdo, and others caught the vision for capturing in print the stories, insights, and challenges—born of their own background and needs—that could energize the church and reach out to the larger Aymara community. At the end of the course, the writers organized themselves into a group and invited me to be a consultant. We called ourselves "The Bolivian Association of Christian Writers," and over the course of several years met regularly and produced a small interdenominational magazine. I felt like my third grade teacher, Mrs. King, opening windows for my students.

I think of Ramón. He kept his enthusiasm under cover that first class. It danced in his eyes, but I knew he was holding back. The idea of Aymara men and women writing their own stories, editing magazines, and eventually publishing books sounded good. The Christian bookstores in La Paz were stocked with glossy translations from Europe and the United States. Billy Graham, James Dobson, Joyce Landorf, and many others offered advice on all aspects of Christian life and ministry, suitable for a western audience, but not for the Aymara people living on the Bolivian altiplano. Even Aymara Christians in the city found it hard to identify with the western life styles depicted in the imported literature.

We discussed this and related issues in that first session of the class, "The Christian Writer." Ramón and the 20 other Aymara seminary students responded eagerly to the challenge to begin exploring ways to put their own experiences, insights, and dreams on paper, to look at themselves as writers.

The first assignment was a first-person narrative article. "I don't think I can do this," Ramón said. "I'm still young, and I haven't led a very interesting life. I can't quite see myself as a writer." I challenged him to consider all the ways God had been at work in his life, ways that his testimony might encourage other young Aymara families.

The result was, "She Doesn't Hear!" the story of how Ramón and his wife discovered that their baby was deaf. It began rather bluntly: "My small four-year-old daughter, Yanina, is a deaf mute." Ramón described the gradual discovery that something was wrong with his beautiful baby, the doctor's verdict, the ensuing grief, the torment of "What did I do to deserve God's punishment?" (a typical Aymara reaction), and the slow growth to maturity, accepting the responsibility and joy of caring for this special gift.

The story moved me. It spoke a culturally appropriate word of "good news" into the Aymara context. We published it locally in the magazine the writers club produced, and it also came out in the Latin American edition of *Decision* magazine (1984). The Billy Graham Association even sent Ramón $20.00 for publication rights.

In the midst of the excitement of applying my passion for writing to the encouragement of Aymara writers, questions began to surface. As I became more familiar with Latin American writers, reading the novels of Mario Vargas Llosa and Jesús Lara, the poetry of Pablo Neruda and Ernesto Cardenal, even tasting the popular literature of the *foto-novelas*, I sensed stylistic nuances I could not always put my finger on. I also entered into Aymara study and became fascinated with the flow and beauty of this complex language. I started learning the folktales, listening to the songs, hearing the old men and women tell their stories.

I began to wonder if "good writing" might look different in different cultures and languages. Were there universal principles for communicative text? Were there cultural and even individual variables? If so, how would a writer or trainer of writers go about discovering these? These questions set me on a journey that continues to this day.

After 18 years in the highlands of Bolivia, we decided to accompany our children home as they adjusted to life in the USA and began college. Several years later the nest deserted the birds there in Oregon, and Hal and I moved to southern California. My task was to earn a living and encourage Hal through the process of getting his Ph.D. in intercultural studies at Fuller Theological Seminary. We then hoped to return to ministry in Bolivia.

Through God's grace I found at job at the seminary itself, as faculty secretary in the School of World Mission. And it was through my contact with faculty members, including Betty Sue Brewster, that I began to consider doing my own doctoral program. This was definitely not on the agenda, but when Hal added his persuasive voice, I began to get excited.

I've always been an undisguised nerd, and the opportunity to formally research the questions I had been informally wrestling with for so many years couldn't be resisted. So I did it.

I dove into the waters of research questions, dissertation proposals, tutorials and, of course, writing it all down. I entitled my dissertation, *Weaving the Words: Writing about God in Culturally Appropriate Ways,* and wrote the following in my acknowledgements section:

> Several months ago a colleague in the School of World Mission observed that I seemed to be completing my doctoral program in very good time and asked me, half in jest, to reveal "my secret." I answered intuitively with the first thing that came into my head: "Joy." Reflecting on my answer, I know it to be accurate. This is not to imply that I have never known moments of agony or self-doubt, or that I have not struggled with the mounds of data to be sorted through, the abstract theories to be tested against experience, the contradictions to be dealt with, or the sheer hard work involved. But the joy of discovery, of finally seeing the patterns emerge, of knowing that what I was doing might make a difference in the work of God's kingdom—this joy has undergirded my research. Frankly, I have had more fun than is probably legal in an academic program (1998, p. v.).

Strange, but true. Somehow it all connected to the original joy of writing my first poem and, years later, the satisfaction of seeing Aymara writers emerge to bless their own context. Now I was retooling for a more effective ministry in the future, or so I hoped.

While in the midst of my doctoral program (and still working full-time as secretary) the seminary invited me to teach as an adjunct professor. So I developed a course called "Writing in Context," and sought to actively apply the principles I was learning. This was a new experience. My previous cross-cultural training had been done in an Aymara context, with all students coming from the same background. Now I was interacting with scholars and would-be writers from Brazil, Ghana, Korea, Ethiopia, India, Taiwan, Japan, South Africa, Hungry, and the Hispanic, African-American and Chinese communities of North America. All in one classroom. I offered the class two different years to these colleagues who were all church leaders in their own countries, people who had been educated in western models and were now desiring to communicate the gospel through writing to their own people.

The final assignment in the class was to write an article for a specific group of receptors in the student's home context, addressing an issue relevant to the context and using local communication styles. We all learned much from each other.

One student focused on needs of Christians in the megacities of his homeland, Brazil. He saw these as people "facing needs for affirmation as followers of Jesus Christ in a turbulent society," educated people, but, at the same time, people who have not had "the opportunity to confront their existential questions in depth. Many of them are afraid of coming to their pastors because they seem to be ill equipped to handle deeper questions about faith and contemporary challenges such as AIDS, homosexuality, nuclear weapons, ecology, and their responses as Christians to their own environment, be it an ecological challenge or a theological statement."

This student shared with the class his dreams of addressing these needs through articles, poetry, perhaps a novel, and a book for non-Christians on rock 'n roll. He has published articles in Brazilian Christian magazines since the class, and he continues to focus on the needs of Christians in Brazilian cities.

Another student, an Indian woman from the Naga people group, focused her research on the needs of women in her male-dominated culture. She pointed out the high rates of suicide among Naga women and the needs for women to voice their rights and begin making a contribution to Indian society. An Hispanic student targeted the struggles faced by Hispanics in the process of assimilating into US culture, identifying the issues of social dislocation, disillusionment, culture shock, trust, shame, and the need for identity. He expressed his desire to explore the themes, symbols, and stories that will address these issues.

Since completing our doctoral degrees, Hal and I have continued active in mission, spending eight more years in Bolivia in a university setting. We currently live at home in Oregon and participate in a creative semi-virtual doctoral program in theology that has us flying around the Americas, when we're not home at the computer. As a corollary to our travel with this program, we also are able to visit Bolivia and other areas where our denomination, the Friends Church (otherwise known as Quakers), has raised up congregations. I am still living out my calling to train and encourage writers, mainly through a series of workshops among Friends.

This is another new challenge. My previous experience and research have convinced me that the most fruitful way to train writers is through long-term involvement and accompaniment. Mentoring relationships are key. Formal or informal courses can be helpful, but longer term follow-up is needed in order to grow writers. Perhaps the least productive training happens in workshops or writers conferences where the outside expert drops in, stirs up excitement, then leaves.

Yet this is now where I find myself—the drop-in outside expert. "Expert" is one of my all-time least favorite words. "Outsider" is another. So when Hal and I were invited to do a series of writers' workshops for Friends throughout Latin America, we began to brainstorm on ways to do this effectively. We decided to experiment with the model of doctoral seminars we had participated in at Fuller where peer review of the different research steps was a requirement.

In 2009 and 2010 we offered three-day workshops in narrative writing in Bolivia, Peru and Guatemala, with participation from Friends in Honduras and El Salvador as well. Over 50 women and men took part in this project that aimed to encourage the church to begin capturing in print the stories that show how God is at work among us.

We invited participants to write a testimonial article and bring it to the workshop. After a time of orientation on the principles of communicative writing and discussion about the communication styles prevalent in the context, people divided into small groups to do the work of revision in community. We supplied guidelines to make the process positive as well as evaluative, but then basically kept our hands off. Each person read his or her contribution aloud; the rest of the group responded, pointing out strengths and suggesting changes. I was pleased at what I was hearing. People were applying the principles (a great way to learn them) and gaining

confidence in their ability to revise and polish. And they were doing it while the "outside expert" kept her mouth shut.

Of course not everyone who participated in the workshop followed through. But some did and apparently are continuing to develop as writers. As a result of the workshops, a new book of 26 stories is currently being published in La Paz, *De encuentro a ministerio: la vida y fe de los Amigos latinoamericanos* (*From Encounter to Ministry: The Life and Faith of Latin American Friends),* and people are already asking when we are going to work on volume 2. Other workshops are taking place, led by some of the participants in the earlier experiences. Not only is the "outside expert" silent; she's not even present! She's home in Oregon, smiling, knowing God is at work, opening windows, building the church.

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