

Mentors

It began with the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. I was working at Apple Computer in Cupertino, California in the Creative Services department, roughly 30 miles from the epicenter. Huddled under a drawing table with a colleague, listening to objects crash to the floor, my only thought was that I'd wasted my life. I had meant to be a teacher, a scholar, a writer, but had let myself get distracted by the graphic design world and the smart people creating an industry and business that, in 1958, the year I was born, had never heard of a personal computer.

That moment, when the lights were swinging and the floor was pitching and I was hiding beneath the worst choice of refuge, was the moment I decided to return to college and pursue an MA in English. It was the moment I decided to extricate myself from the well-paid, glamorous tech world and pursue my dream of teaching literature and writing at a community college. It was also the moment that led me to Dr. Gabriele Lusser Rico.

In 1991, I enrolled as a part-time, evening student in the nascent Masters of English program at the College of Notre Dame in Belmont, California, unaware that Dr. Rico would be invited to hold an Endowed Chair and work with graduate students for two semesters in the following year. My first encounter with her was at a Saturday seminar open to all students in the Humanities department. I arrived ten minutes early and was surprised to see that almost every seat in the lecture hall was filled. There must have been more than a hundred people of every shape and shade and age. Being short, I was a bit peeved because I had to sit in the back.

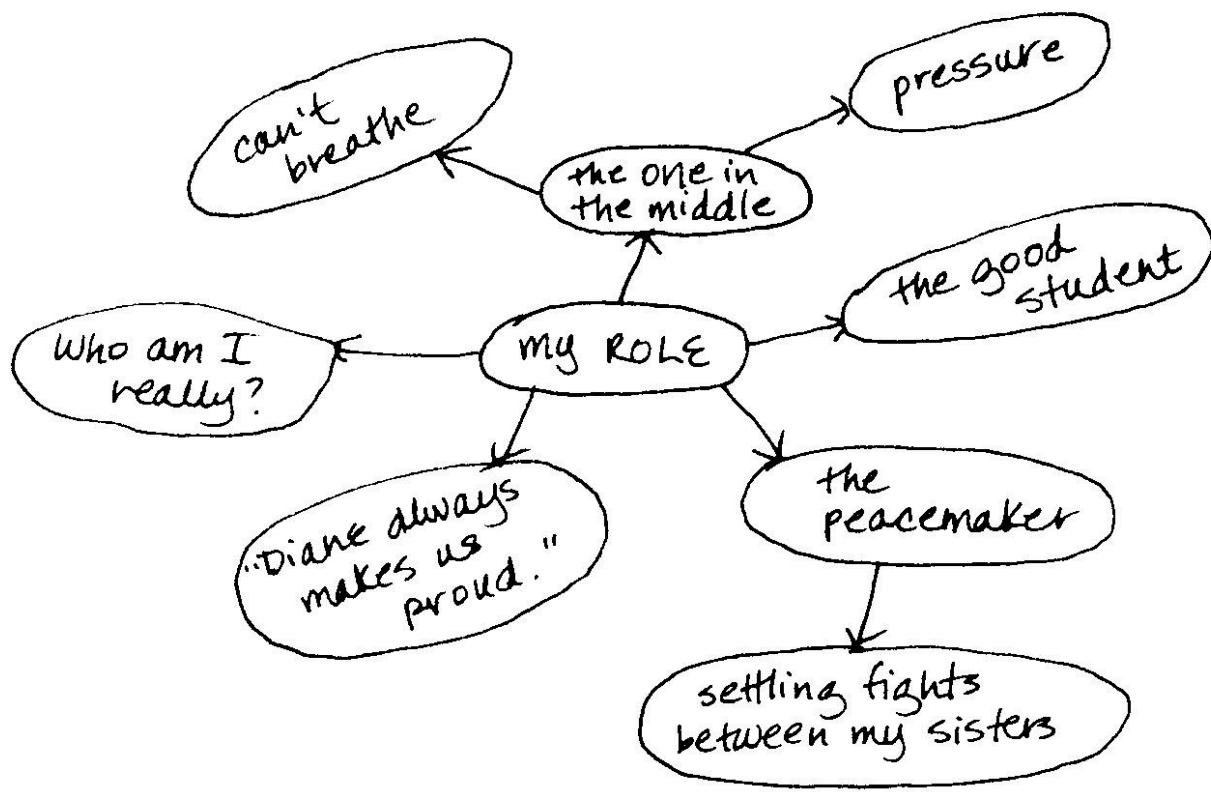
When I attended college in the late 1970s, a freshman English class consisted of learning to write a 5-paragraph essay underpinned by the rhetorical modes of thought: Narrative, Description, Definition, Exemplification, Compare and Contrast, Classification, Process Analysis and Cause and Effect. Learning the rhetorical modes and the patterns human beings use to order their thoughts profoundly changed my life. It was like I was given a key to how to see the world. I clearly remember feeling as if my brain was shooting off fireworks. It also made me angry, because I felt as if I'd been asleep for 18 years and that I was the product of a dumbed-down high school education. (When I finally taught writing nearly 20 years later, many of my students would echo this experience.)

I had always loved writing and had always received high praise from my teachers. However, my first college essay, a description paper, garnered me a “C”—and I hadn’t made any technical errors. The professor wrote that my writing was too abstract. I was devastated. I’d never received a “C” before. What was worse, I didn’t understand the professor’s criticism. But I knew I was capable of improvement; I just needed help. After class I asked the professor if she could explain her comment and show me how I could make my writing better. She was gracious, patient, humorous and reassuring. I rewrote the essay and in the process found a mentor, Professor Cynthia Lee Katona, who became a lifelong friend.

What I didn’t realize was that other students were not as enamored of writing as I was and even with help did not improve. But it was a reality Dr. Rico (and I’m assuming most professors) experienced semester after semester. “As I was teaching more or less in line with traditional composition methods, [it made me wonder] why so many students had such intense distaste, fear, even loathing for writing. I also noticed that despite my experimenting with a wide variety of techniques, my students left my class just as they had entered: good, mediocre, or poor writers.”

Her wondering led her to develop an approach to writing that was born from Joseph Brogen’s hemispheric brain research and a diagram of the creative process she found in Anton Ehrenzweig’s “The Hidden Order of Art.”

Her method begins with the writer placing a topic in the center of the page enclosed in a circle. For ten minutes or so she asks the writer to create lines of whatever thoughts come to mind. Through this unfiltered outpouring Rico believes a shift takes place in the brain that lets the writer create “coherence, unity, and a sense of wholeness; a recurrent of words and phrases, ideas, or images that reflect pattern sensitivity; an awareness of the nuances of language rhythms; a significant and natural use of images and metaphors; and a powerful ‘creative tension.’” She called this process “clustering” and what Tony Buzan in England concurrently called “mapping.”



Right brain. Left brain. Chaos. Order. Details. Wholeness. Creator. Editor. It all sounded a bit New Age to me. But the examples she shared with the audience were astounding. Still, I resisted—until she imposed her method on us.

I can still see her standing next to the overhead projector, so vibrant, so sure of the magic that would transpire. After reading examples from J. Ruth Gendler's "The Book of Qualities"—"Beauty is startling. She wears a gold shawl in the summer and sells seven kinds of honey at the flea market."—she asked us to personify a quality, to take 5 minutes to make a list of qualities and then select one to cluster for 10 minutes and then write for 20. I cannot remember the quality I chose or my response but I do know I was amazed by what people produced. "Creativity can't keep her legs closed." The whole room laughed. This line and image is always with me and always makes me smile because, 1) only a woman could have imagined it and 2) it reminds me of my father's advice spoken to me right before my first date with a boy who owned a car: "Keep the pencil between your knees." Which at the time I didn't quite understand.

Dr. Rico made me fall in love with writing again. During the semester I studied with her, my writing, and the writing of my fellow graduate students, sparkled, surprised, and always produced twelve unique voices with twelve distinct points of view. One of the exercises she would begin class with was what she called “re-creation.” She would read from a poem or show a painting and then ask us to cluster for 5 to 10 minutes and then write for 15 to 20. How twelve people listening to the same poem or looking at the same painting would produce twelve different and beautifully written pieces of writing never ceased to amaze me.

Like learning the rhetorical modes under the guidance of Professor Katona, learning to “write the natural way” with Dr. Rico undid me. She made me feel alive again.

Dr. Rico’s final assignment brings her approach to writing full circle. At the beginning of the semester her first assignment is to respond to the word “writing” for twenty minutes, without using her clustering technique. She ends the semester with the same assignment, but nourished by sixteen weeks of clustering practice. This was my response.

Writing is finally, when all is said and done, when every paragraph is sorted, when every sentence is diagrammed, when every word is judged, a declaration of love. A love of language and silence. A love of beauty and ugliness. A love of spirit and body, sky and earth, reason and emotion. A love of the vast and small, the ridiculous and the sublime, the mysterious and the obvious. A love of male and female, youth and old age, life and death. Writing is finally a reconciliation of our mortality.

We are all given language. It’s hardwired. Not everyone is given writing. But writing is a gift, a gift that if nurtured is given again and again with every writer’s words we fall in love with, and with the words we give back.

“Linda,” she wrote, “I have spent time with your words, and every moment was a pleasure. Not only do you know what to do with words, not only do you know how to love and value them, but there is a strong streak of looking at the positive (without denial of the negatives) that your words tautly glow.”

I never thought I would be grateful for an earthquake, but then I'd never heard of Dr. Gabrielle Lusser Rico (1937-2013) and her book "Writing the Natural Way."

During my last semester of graduate school I finally made my way into a community college classroom teaching freshman composition; Professor Katona acted as my master teacher. Great teachers make teaching look easy. It's not. I have never worked so hard in my life. I poured everything I had learned about the teaching of writing into my students. I taught Dr. Rico's clustering method. I taught the rhetorical modes. I shared an essay by a copywriter friend who grew up poor in Sri Lanka and never made it past the ninth grade but learned to write by copying the library's book of Herman Melville's "Moby Dick." I taught how to read an essay, word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph. Every week Cynthia would give me a note on how to improve a specific aspect of my teaching. Every week I would make a course adjustment.

Teaching is humbling. At the end of the semester, Cynthia told me I was the only one of her student teachers who took her suggestions to heart and made changes. Really? Didn't they want to get better? I thought about the students who improved their writing.

Learning to write is also humbling. After reading hundreds and hundreds of student essays I learned that it is the re-writing that makes someone a writer. But re-writing requires guidance. To me there is nothing more generous than when someone takes an interest in your love of language and writing and helps you make it better.

Death has taken two of my mentors, but they are in every word I write. I only wish they were here to read this draft and give me their notes.

For the true student
Nothing is a digression
Everything pertains
Cynthia Lee Katona (1947-2016)