

On Children's Writing
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My daughter Dee lives with her mother Margaret in another state from where I live. Margaret and I are concerned that the middle school Dee goes to—she's in the seventh grade—isn't having her do enough writing. So we've encouraged Dee to write—on whatever topic she chooses, and whatever length—and share it with us for our reaction.

Last week, the three of us were in Scottsdale, Arizona, where Dee, who is avidly interested in golf and exceedingly good at it, played some of the golf courses in the area. A big success for Dee, she parred the renowned sixteenth hole at the TPC Professional Golf Association Tour course in Scottsdale. Dee chose to write about that experience, a page, and emailed it to me and asked for my response. I replied to Dee with my reaction and advice and, in another email, informed Margaret of what I had written to Dee about what she wrote and shared my thinking about how we can best support Dee's writing.

With the hope that what I wrote to Margaret will inform what other parents, and perhaps teachers as well, do around children's writing, I'll include here an edited and elaborated-upon excerpt from my message to Margaret.

Margaret—

Dee emailed her sixteenth hole writing to me and I found it to be excellent. She's a natural writer. [Dee's school] could do more with writing, but they are doing a lot of things right, and from this example I feel sure that Dee is not going to have problems with writing up the line. [Margaret and I were concerned about that.]

It seems to me that our challenge is to compensate for what the school isn't doing around writing. She could write in the same way she does her big-eyes drawings, do it whenever the mood

strikes her, and then show the writings to us and put them in a portfolio. [Dee saw the Tim Burton-directed film “Big Eyes” about the artist Margaret Keane, who was popular in the 1960s for her “big-eyed waif” paintings, and read a coffee table book on the film, and was inspired to do detailed pencil drawings reminiscent of Keane’s work.]

Here is what I emailed Dee earlier today. It’s sincere; I was knocked out by what she wrote. I went on at length with my response to the writing she shared with me, but I don’t think either of us has to do that. If she shows you some writing, I think you do two things: tell her it was a really good experience for you to read it; and, briefly, tell her a couple things you liked about it. No negative criticism. Dee will identify and fix problems. Our job, I think, is to encourage her to write and to like writing, period.

I won’t be as effusive as this in the future. I tried to cut my reaction down, and did some, but I still went on too long. But I wanted to get all this on the record, maybe more for myself than Dee. She probably didn’t need about 80% of what I said. So, from both of us, a quick “great to read, thank you for giving it to me” and “a couple things I especially liked in this writing were . . .”

Bottom line, Dee’s a fine writer. And she’s really flowering generally. A lot of what’s going on in her life is contributing to it, but I believe her involvement in golf has been particularly helpful. She’s very good at golf, and success is motivating (the idea that negative criticism and failure are motivators is highly overrated). And golf has helped her to see the importance of having the goal of being as accomplished as she can be with something, and how good it feels to try to max out your achievement in some area, and the importance of attending to details, specifics, in achieving success.

True excellence is the sum total of a lot of little things well done. Writing comes down to doing one sentence as truthfully and as well as you possibly can. It’s what you tell her about golf: all there is is the shot you are doing right now. If it is a five foot

putt, your life is about doing that five foot putt the very best you can, nothing else. And I'd add, if you clean the floor, clean the floor with all you've got; that's what your life is about, period. Doing things that way is what is going to make you happy and feel good about yourself and your life.

So here's what I told Dee in a message earlier today:

I loved this writing! The title is great ["The Sixteenth Hole"]. It oriented me. I knew it had to do with golf. And it got me curious, made me want to know what the sixteenth hole was about. I got lost in the story. Everything else went away for me. You created that good experience for me in the way you wrote. The order you told things—this, then this, then this, it's called a narrative line—was superb. The rhythms, the beats of the sentences, like in music--read your writing out loud and you'll hear them—carried me along, made the reading enjoyable. The starfish image ["The sixteenth hole is surrounded by grandstands like a starfish on a rock."]—it's called a metaphor, or more particularly, a simile--was fresh and accurate. [Perhaps it was a little off, but I didn't think this was the time to nit-pick.] That is what it was like there. I loved the specifics: your playing partners' names and what they did, what your caddy told you, what the setting was like—"green silky grass," such a great detail--the gusty wind, what was going through your mind, the ball changing direction a foot. All that helped make it real for me. It helped me imagine that time in my mind. It was like I was there. Great ending—the ball going in the hole for a par, a really nice way to conclude. I hope you had a good time writing this, because it sure was a good time for me to read it.

Writing can be like your big-eyes pencil drawings. A chance to express what's inside you. A chance to create something that lasts, that's permanent. And something that is yours and yours alone. No one else could have written what you did. The most important thing about writing is to find a way to do it that makes you happy. Writing makes me happy. Expressing myself through writing makes me happy. Writing gives me a sense of calm and peace and of being in control of my life. Doing something the best I can, and improving on it, makes me happy. I learn things from my writing. I bet writing about the sixteenth hole helped you understand better what that occasion was about for you and what you want to do in the future. And simply, writing is fun. Also, writing helps you learn a valuable skill. You will be writing all your life, for school and in your work when you are older, and you will be writing to your relatives and

friends. Like anything else, golf or whatever it is, you learn to do it by doing it the best you can, by practicing. You look over what you have done and see what went well and what you can improve, and then take that into account the next time you write.

Writing is good because you can do it anytime, anyplace. All you need is something to write on and, if it's paper, a pen or pencil. You can write in any form—fiction or non-fiction, it can be an account of what happened or your analysis of something or your views on something, anything--and any length: a few sentences, or a paragraph, or a page or two or five or ten. You can do it on your laptop, your phone, in a notebook, or on any piece of paper you see lying around. I write on my laptop and on notebooks made by the Mead company. I like the narrow lines in the Meads—it's called college-lined—and I like the paper. I mailed you some Meads that you should get today. You can see whether you like the Meads, or there might be some other kind of notebook or paper you like better. Or maybe you only want to write on a screen. In the mailing, I included the two kinds of pens I use. A lot of people write on paper with a pencil so they can erase and change things easily. And when they use paper, a lot of people write on every other line so they can insert words and phrases into what they have written (of course, with word processing, where it's easy to change things, you don't have to do that). You need to find what works best for you.

Please share your writings with Mom and me. It was great for me to read this one you sent me. It brought me back to that wonderful moment that you and Mom and I will never, ever forget.

Let me know what you think. Hope all is well.

Love,

Robert