



Steven Harvey

The Humble Essayist's Paragraph of the Week: A Discipline for Heart and Mind

The Premise

When I retired from college teaching five years ago, I started The Humble Essayist (THE) website as a digital classroom for promoting the personal essay and memoir online. My idea was to select single paragraphs from personal essays and memoirs written by writers that I admire and couple them with a single-paragraph commentary that tricked out one of the governing ideas behind the work. I saw this combining of my paragraph with the original as a way to promote personal prose, demonstrate and examine the styles of excellent writers, and educate readers on the thematic obsessions of a variety of nonfiction authors. As often happens, though, the teacher learned as much as the readers in my online class because writing a THE Paragraph is not just a rote learning device or a way to promote the form, but a tool for discovery. I have found that the two-paragraph format is a scalpel to slice deep into a literary work exposing its hidden heart, and anyone, students or experienced writers, can learn about the secret life of prose by trying out the simple exercise.

Choosing a Paragraph

The first step, the task of selecting the paragraph from an essay or a book, turns out to be crucial in ways I did not expect. My job, I originally thought, was to select the best paragraph—a gorgeous set piece laden with significance—but the process became clearer when I realized that I was not looking for fine writing, but a personal invitation into the essay. I needed a passage in which the writer seemed to clear a space before putting both elbows on the tabletop of the essay to speak directly to me. A paragraph that chose

me. Fortunately, the kind of prose I'm interested in—personal prose—is defined by such moments and replete with them, though they may differ from reader to reader, so I usually found after reading a suggestive book or essay that there were many such spots and any one of them could take me to the heart of the matter.

The very first Paragraph of the Week in the inaugural issue of *The Humble Essayist* on July 4, 2014 was from “Walking” by Henry David Thoreau, but the paragraph I featured had chosen me decades earlier when I was a freshman lying in the college infirmary with bronchitis. The paragraph describes Thoreau climbing a pine tree and getting “well-pitched with tar” in order to clutch a pine blossom at the top, but it is really about seeing the world from a fresh perspective, a lofty but ordinary prospect that others had neglected, and reading the paragraph that day years ago changed my life. For the first time words shook me to the core as I discovered their power to suggest as well as say and offer unexpected insights. “What change of perspective do we achieve when we discover ‘new mountains’ embedded in a horizon that has until then bounded our lives?” I wrote in my commentary remembering the boy in the sick bed reading under lamplight.

Thoreau’s use of religious language—“heavenward” and “spire”—is one clue. The “delicate, cone-like blossoms” with their suggestion of both fertility and beauty is another. The notion that nature, like the architects of antiquity, lavishes as much attention on the blossom unseen in high branches as it does on the flowers we wade through in a meadow is yet another. The point is that we do not properly walk the earth on paths flattened by the footsoles of others, but as “saunterers”...Such vagrancy—committed when we cut our own path in the woods or when we mount a tree with childlike wonder—enlarges our lives.

I was smitten by the power of words that day in the infirmary—they beckoned—and the romance has lasted a lifetime.

Once the invitation is accepted, the paragraph serves as an emblem of the entire text and focusing on it for a while, to the exclusion of all else, reveals much about the rest of the work. I like to linger over the details, catch the various tones of voice, and ponder significant phrases. When I wrote about the description of a jellyfish in Kathleen Finneran's *The Tender Land*, I spent much of my precious space simply paraphrasing and quoting from her paragraph:

The canvas is bare—the time of day when beach and sky look the same—and the jellyfish itself is ordinary, like a “glossy spill,” but rewards a steady gaze: “dark maroon at the center, lighter and lighter red toward its edges, the whole shimmering expanse of it covering a wide circle.” We see right away that it is in trouble, in the wonderful verbs “heaved” and “collapsed” used to describe the maroon center, and the “pale edge” of the creature seems already lifeless, a part of the bland canvas it is becoming.

The Tender Land is a grief memoir about the childhood suicide of Finneran's brother, Sean, who loved the natural world and the creatures in it. Unlike her mother who hopes to meet Sean in heaven, Finneran is not a believer. For her what matters are the worldly wonders, all that Sean has missed, including this mysterious jellyfish, so I felt compelled in the commentary to stay with the details of the dying creature on the beach as a way to recapitulate her grief. “We feel, like Finneran, the urge to place a finger on this creature, feel invited but afraid of this slimy goo,” I explained in my commentary. “We are entering the arena of the taboo, which is the urge to touch what we fear, releasing powerful forces.”

In a similar way, I kept the focus on the paragraph itself in my commentary on Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk*. Grieving over the death of her father, Macdonald purchases a goshawk yearning to be as wild as her new companion who lives a solitary existence and eats her prey while it is still alive. Her identification with the hawk is a break from humanity that eases the author's pain for a while, but the flight from society eventually comes to an end. I selected a crucial passage in which Macdonald kills a rabbit

before her hawk can eat it, and in my commentary described the mercy killing in which Macdonald realizes that she is not wild like a bird of prey, but human after all.

“I’ve learned how you feel more human” Macdonald writes, “once you have known, even in your imagination, what it is like to be not.” The measure of the distance she traveled during her ordeal is the killing of the rabbit with her bare hands. “I’d reach down and put my hand on the bunched muscles of the rabbit, and with the heel of one hand at the back of its head where the fur was soft and tawny, I’d pull once, twice, hard on its back legs with the other, breaking its neck.” To be certain it was dead, she committed the taboo of touching its glossed-over eye. So much of the book—this immersion in wildness and the slow re-emergence into humanity—is right there in that *coup de grâce* so I lingered over it in my commentary exploring the taboo that released her demons allowing her “battered heart,” as she writes, to balloon “into a space the size of a cathedral.”

But all of the paragraphs I choose, even these which seem to speak for the entire book, require context beyond the paragraph, an exercise that turns out to be illuminating as well. Some of this background information can be taken care of in the brief introductions I make to the paragraph I’ve selected, but the rest needs to be woven into the commentary. One of my great surprises was the discovery that following the arteries of the idea back into the rest of the essay or memoir is not just supplying background, but is, in fact, revelatory. I sense the interconnectedness of the whole in a way that is far more intimate, more intuitive, than a structural analysis beginning with the big picture. Tracing these links inward echoes the discovery of the writing process itself bringing me into the writer’s solitary mind. Such intimacy is the gift of all reading, but writing about it this way fixes the attention and makes the experience more intense.

When I featured “Postscript to a Postscript to ‘The Ring of Time,’” I chose a paragraph about the moment when the author, Robert Root, realized that despite his fears, he had not ruined his daughter’s life. After he and his first wife divorced, he felt a palpable ache for the child, holding his breath over a lifetime

it seemed, fearing that he had cursed her with his own unhappiness, but as he was flying to her wedding he came to realize that he had not doomed her and felt that he could exhale once again. The job of my commentary was to follow his thought past the mistaken view of time as a circle in which his mistakes inevitably cycle back, to the more mature vision of time as a spiral rooted in family but opening to new possibilities. “As a student of E. B. White, and his well-known essay ‘The Ring of Time,’ Root knows,” I wrote in my commentary, “that time is not a ‘ring’ or a ‘circle’ with each day the same...but a ‘spiral.’”

We are not cursed with a selfish immortality that creates endless but lifeless replicas of the phases of our lives like the cycles of the moon. We make children, instead, an act of generosity as well as generation which spins away from us in a “corkscrew,” creating a new center. So Root can exhale “all the way for once.” Over time, his daughter will carry his love and longing into the future, but she will also live her own life, make her own mistakes, and find her own unique joys. “What a blessing” he writes, “to measure time this way.”

Writing the commentary was a moving experience for me. As I pulled together threads from various sections of Root’s essay I, too, was mentally holding my breath. When my search led inevitably to his final sentence about time’s blessing, I could, like the author, exhale all the way as well.

For the essay “The Avocado” by Jill Christman, I chose a section in which the author walks past a group of men in Costa Rica who hiss *que guapa*, “how beautiful,” as she clutches an avocado to her plain dress. She feels anything but beautiful. In despair at age twenty over the death of her fiancé Colin in a fiery wreck at an intersection in Oregon, she has escaped to Costa Rica, an alien environment with hissing men. The avocado is in contrast to her lover’s ashes delivered to her at the funeral home in a cardboard box, ashes she kissed before licking her lips in order to keep some part of him alive. He had taught her to be present in love-making, not to let herself drift off like “a curl of steam, a wisp of vapor” during sex, and now he was absent and in his place was an avocado. So, armed with my paragraph, I followed Christman’s avocado into the essay and discovered along with her what it meant. When she cuts it open,

she sees that it is not “the ‘desexed’ Avocado green of interior decorators,” I wrote, “but a complicated gradation from ‘buttercream’ to the green in the densest part of the forest.”

The bite she scoops out has the feel and texture of ice cream. “Stay here,” she tells herself, remembering the lesson in being fully present that her fiancé had taught her. “Don’t go.” Over time, change happens....She evolves from “grieving girl to lover, lover, lover, then wife, then mother, my baby thriving”...The avocado taught her lessons about staying alive, being present in life, of life embodied.

The avocado shows her a way to be alive and fully human, even in world of pain, echoing a lesson her body patiently taught her as well. “How will I ever be grateful enough,” Christman writes, “for my body and what she has done.”

The gift of this simple exercise is intimacy. These writers, Jill Christman and Robert Root, are dear friends of mine. We taught together as colleagues gathering blank-eyed at a coffee machine before classes began, gave public presentations together, took long walks, listened to each other read aloud from our works, drank bourbon in the evenings, and have had long and intimate conversations late into the night, but never have I felt closer to Bob and Jill than when I selected these paragraphs and wrote the commentaries, an intimacy available to any who read personal prose closely and pay attention this way. In the end, writing THE Paragraphs on writers I know, as well as writers I don’t know like Thoreau, Finneran, and Macdonald—especially with the writers I don’t know—has been a discipline of the heart and mind in the service of sustained intimacy with others.

Of course, I don’t want to be naïve about this process of discovery. By the time I have selected an essay or memoir by an author I have read the text, usually many times, and even before I start writing I have a pretty good sense of the big picture, the author’s comment on life. When I take on *The Circus Train* by Judith Kitchen or “Notes of a Native Son” by James Baldwin, I have studied the work, pondered its ideas, and taught it in classes. I do not discover the work for the first time while writing my THE

Paragraphs, and yet each one seems like a new encounter with the text. Letting the paragraph I select guide me opens up surprising paths to the theme, the old insights coming to me as a fresh discoveries. The goal of the journey may be the same, but the journey itself is new, and the new angle casts the goal in a different light the way arriving at a city at midnight is a different experience than getting there at dawn.

An experiment that I have been conducting since the beginning of *The Humble Essayist* illustrates the point. Each year near the July 11 birthday of E. B. White, we celebrate by featuring a paragraph from his best essay, "Once More to the Lake." The essay describes White returning with his son to the vacation spot that he and his family used to visit when he was a boy and becomes a meditation on the illusion of permanence in a life of change. Every one of its paragraphs invites me in whether it is the one in which he hears his boy sneak out in a boat in the morning just as he had as a child, or the one where he watches a dragonfly at the end of his rod that seems to be the same dragonfly he saw as a boy, or the remarkable paragraph about the storm crossing the lake like a theatrical performance in which the roles in the melodrama are the same but the actors have changed. What I find, as I settle down once a year with an essay that I have known and taught all of my adult life, is that each THE Paragraph I write finds a new essay there, as fresh as the first time I read it in college. White's theme may be the inevitable truth of the old giving way to the new in life, but the essay itself is apparently forever young.

I have tried variations of the two-paragraph form. Writers sometimes speak to me over a series of brief paragraphs and feeling constrained by the single paragraph idea, I have chosen on occasion a "Passage of the Week" instead. I have also indulged in multi-paragraph commentaries, and I do reserve the right to go longer as the work demands, but inevitably I return to the single-paragraph selection matched with a single-paragraph commentary. The paragraph, flexible as it may be, is a tight and bounded form and it does wonders for clearing away the brush of qualification, hedging, and meandering by cutting a sure path to the governing idea.

Denise Wilkinson, a tenth grade teacher at Carlton Public High School in Saskatchewan, Canada assigns THE Paragraphs to her students and says “no” when they ask her if they can go beyond one paragraph. “Having them write the analysis helps them to focus,” she tells me in an e-mail.

For most of my high-school aged creative writers, the idea of craft in writing is difficult to grasp. By looking at a small part of a larger text, we can “feel out” the writing. Why did the author pick this word? Why this image? Why this detail? I encourage students to speculate and then we discuss it. The final question is always: What have you learned from this that you would like to try in your own writing?

She finds the focused format particularly helpful for longer works like a memoir or novel which sprawl in a way that makes it hard for student to find a way in. For them, doing “a close reading of an entire novel is ridiculously overwhelming,” she explains, and her first year students don’t “know where to begin.” Having them write a single paragraph analysis allows them to sift through the long text with purpose.

I am always delighted when I hear that teachers use—and adapt—THE Paragraphs into their assignments. Denise Wilkinson uses them as a way to generate discussion in class. She offers various single-paragraph selections from a text the class is studying and lets the students choose one to write their own individual THE commentary. Then she mixes things up. Those with the same paragraphs meet and discuss, and then everyone switches so that each group has different paragraphs in it. Students are told to seek out connections such as repeated words or phrases and to “formulate ideas as to why these things matter to the writing.” Once that is done she reconvenes the whole class for a larger discussion.

This mixture of writing alone, followed by discussion in various formats, bears fruit. Intricacies of craft, invisible before, begin to reveal themselves. She writes:

Students have told me they didn’t realize how much went into crafting writing, and only when they really slowed down and analyzed small passages did they begin to appreciate it. It is also empowering for them as writers because they learn to see their own inherent strengths as writers

and mindfully build on them, as well as identify areas they want to work on or risks they might want to take. THE paragraphs of master texts are excellent for that.

Wilkinson's students are not alone. What I have learned after five years of writing weekly THE Paragraphs for The Humble Essayist is that this concise form is an instrument for discovery for those who read them and those who write them. The simple two-paragraph approach works not because it is some sort of magical formula, some abracadabra giving access to the text, but because a well-written piece of personal prose is radiant, harmonious, and whole, as carefully constructed as a poem, with the seams hidden away. When I select a paragraph and accept the invitation into the essay, the commentary lets me pick at the thread, unravelling the text to reveal its secrets.