



Megan Baxter

On Teaching Brian Doyle's "Leap" to Students Born After 9/11

When I pick up the photocopies of Brian Doyle's short essay "Leap," my hands shake at its leanness, the bone structure of a ballerina, a body made for flying. Usually, the class reads pieces in rounds, one paragraph at a time but because of its length and content I've decided read it alone, out loud. I take little breaths, sucking in the air, trying to settle the jumping choke in my throat.

"A couple leaped from the south tower, hand in hand."

I cry easily these days. My eyes slick over at every small moment of grace, a slip of elegant language, or the particular way a student reads out loud. I am teaching a nonfiction workshop for high school students in the very room where I took my first writing class fifteen years ago. The light in the space plays tricks on me, sometimes I'm sixteen again, stumbling through poems, my knee-socks slipping, my uniform coming untucked as I slouch over the table. Or here, with a marker and a plan, a book for sale downstairs but still stumbling. I'm so quick to tears at the sound of good writing that it doesn't seem remarkable to my students when my voice begins to break at the start of "Leap."

"They reached for each other and their hands met and they jumped."

My students cry all the time too. They come to class with eyes red, from sleepless nights, from weeping. I remember this same feeling from the hunger of my youth, when the world is simply too large to understand and you feel so small that nothing matters. Except, maybe, for what we work towards on the page. Every night at camp the bugle plays "Taps," laying the day in its grave. Then, in the private darkness after the last trembling note, when the loons start mourning for each other across the lake, as the girls shift

and then fall silent in their bunks, I begin to cry. I cry because time seems to be overlapping and I remember being a girl here. I cry because my students are so talented, so untamed, and I feel like an imposter trying to guide that energy on the page, a weatherman teaching a tornado. I cry because I believe in words and sometimes, in this world, art can seem tiny against impossible evils. When I wash my pillow in the laundry cabin the fabric smells like salt and is printed with the wet lash strokes of wept-off mascara calligraphy.

“Jennifer Brickhouse saw them falling, hand in hand.”

I notice that at first as I begin to read the essay, voice shaking, glasses glittering with tears, my students relax. Better to look away, I suppose. Let off the hook, their minds wander, where, who knows, out the windows where the junior campers are playing frisbee on the great lawn, to the branches of the ancient oak which I’ve told them was alive when Hemingway walked these Michigan woods, a fact that one boy from New York City has grabbed hold of, he wants, whenever we write outside, to sit under its wavering shade. They are thinking about the lunch menu, about the social at the girl’s side pavilion that night, about college, about their phones which I’ve made them put away. But when my voice starts to stumble over the words, they stiffen. They look up. Two empathetic girls grow wet-eyed at my tears. The boy who loves the tree stares hard at the table’s plastic gleam. It’s not a long piece so I trip forward until the room sits in breathless silence.

“But he reached for her hand and she reached for his hand and they leaped out the window holding hands.”

The playwriting class next door erupts in laughter. The squirrels in the huge oak snap at each other and rush through the canopy like little storms.

I take my reading glasses off in a gesture that makes me feel assuredly like a writing teacher. I can feel the tears drying under my eyes.

The boy from New York is the first to speak, as he often is. “Was that about 9/11?” he asks as if I have presented them with a riddle.

I swipe my hand across my wet checks. “It is,” I say.

I look down at my lesson plan, printed in the orderly manner of my morning brain, bullet-pointed, progressive, building, building to what I consider a fundamental revelation about the nature of nonfiction, that instead of being a selfish, self-centered, self-examining style, it is instead our best way to reach toward the universal. Faith? I’d written in the margins, because this soaring sense of unity, this oneness, is how I imagine believing might feel.

The lesson, as I’ve planned it, is about bringing in other voices, writing from the plural, rather than the singular “I” that stands like the lonely ionic pillar of the genre. The “I” does not appear in “Leap” until several paragraphs into the essay, when Doyle, finally enters the piece as the writer. But he isn’t shaping the story, or sharing his own. Instead, his known language of mourning—prayer is failing him.

“I try to whisper prayers for the sudden dead and the harrowed families of the dead and the screaming souls of the murderers but I keep coming back to his hand and her hand nestled in each other with such extraordinary ordinary succinct ancient naked stunning perfect simple ferocious love.”

I wanted to teach a lesson about collective memory, how a writer isn’t just a singular voice. I’d planned on using a well-known event, like the terrible unfolding of 9/11/2001 to anchor this in a writing prompt.

“We all have our stories about that day,” I say, spreading my fingers over my lesson plan as if to steady myself. “I’m sure Doyle did too, where he was when he first saw the footage. Why do you think he chose not to focus on his story of an event that we all have personal memories of?”

My students look confused. It had never occurred to me that they might not remember. In the voice of confession the class admits:

“I wasn’t born yet.”

“My parents’ told me about the city on that day, it was scary.”

“My Dad worked in a building nearby, I think.”

“My mom was pregnant with me so I guess I was alive.”

“I don’t have a story.”

But they do. We all do, even if the story is womb-pink and fear-hazed.

“Their hands reaching and joining are the most powerful prayer I can imagine, the most eloquent, the most graceful.”

I was a sophomore in a class called Global Studies with much of my debate team, kids who wore power suits and dragged briefcases with wheels and dreamed only of attending Ivies like Dartmouth, whose campus engulfed our small town. We were starting the day, as we always did, by watching and then discussing the morning news and so, shortly after 8:45 am, we saw the first plane vanish into the North Tower. Then, 18 minutes of frantic coverage later, with our teacher sitting with us, squeezed into one of those chairs with attached desks, the second plane sliced through the South Tower. I remember being too shocked to cry or think or say a single word. And then in a free period, shortly before school was canceled and we were bused home, the Towers collapsed in a cloud like a thunderhead, rolling across the face of the city. Facts flew around—Logan Airport. LAX. I knew my father was in the air, traveling from Boston to California on a business trip. He’d left that morning. I remember the silence in our living room as my mother and three siblings and I waited for news, my mother holding the portable phone like an injured bird and then rushing to the kitchen, the receiver wet with tears, to hear my father’s voice shouting “SAFE!” over the chaos of the terminal. I remember my littlest sister’s tears and snot on my skin. She’s 24, six years older than my students and remembers nearly nothing of that day, just sitting on the couch when she should have been in school, and fear.

“The pink mist...” begins one of the emphatic girls, the girls who cry in the bathroom after the workshop, the girls who cry on the beach at night when I’m sitting, reading their essays, trying to listen to music on my earbuds so I can’t hear them weeping, “It’s...”

“See,” says the quiet boy who prefers Nabokov above all the writers we read, “the jumpers.” He holds up his phone, which he’s been secretly using under the table. I had mistaken his posture for solemn

introspection. The screen lights the photograph “Falling Man” by Richard Drew which was printed in newspapers all over the country in the days following the attacks. A man plummets headfirst into death with controlled symmetry but the image is just a frame, a slice of time that quiets chaos. The boy passes the phone around the workshop table and I let them look. It’s as if they need this confirmation. They need proof that this is indeed nonfiction.

I had intended this class session to be about unity, and how a shared experience can sing on the page with the voice of a mighty chorus but instead the class shifts towards investigation. The use of research and historical materials is a few days out in my syllabus but here the students are, thumbing through news articles on their phones, doing google searches for photos published before they were born, before they were even pink flowers dividing in the womb.

“Can you remember when you knew history was being made?” I ask them, sitting now on the edge of the halo of tables, our tight workshop circle. My lesson plan tumbling, I reach for clarity.

If not this moment, then something else.

If not this memory, then another.

The class thinks about this a moment, and I see their eyes scrolling backward. One girl’s forehead is creased with wrinkles and she’s squinted her eyes as if to help her see better into a distant horizon.

“The election?” she offers.

“The tsunami?” her friend adds.

I grab a marker and make a list on the whiteboard. The students toss out memories until we’ve created a list of all the terrible moments in their lifetime. None of them are global, in the manner of 9/11 or the lunar landing but then again their news feed is a continuous stream of tragedy, held in their small open hands. Instead, what we generate are clusters of horror, natural disasters, police shootings, the sudden swift deaths of beloved musicians. What to do with this? I wonder at the litany we’ve intoned. I return to my tears.

“Jennifer Brickhouse saw them holding hands, and Stuart DeHann saw them holding hands, and I hold onto that.”

The tears are not so much for the dead but rather about how we are all woven into these moments, all part of history even as history is being generated in the vast engines of time. Doyle’s essay is about grief, but also about rising. He’s too skilled a writer, and too great a spirit, to work within only one emotion, the wail of grief gives way to this exclamation of joy:

“It is what makes me believe that we are not craven fools and charlatans to believe in God, to believe that human beings have greatness and holiness within them like seeds that open only under great fires, to believe that some unimaginable essence of who we are persists past the dissolution of what we were, to believe against such evil hourly evidence that love is why we are here.”

I look at the list we’ve written on the board. The boy who is in love with the tree is gazing out at that old oak as if looking for guidance and I was once him too, staring out that same window, at that same ancient tree trying to imagine the memories locked there is heartwood. My students have listed all of the terrible moments that united them through the gash of violence and fear, the gut-dropping whoop of horror, the shimmer in the glaze of an eye spilling into tears. What is it, if not unity, if not our desire to be more than the “I,” that allows us to imagine the space between a falling man and the street or the way two hands lace quickly into a knotted embrace? The lesson is to write into that overlap, a leap out from the self into the beautiful mess of living.