

# The Soup Kitchen Writing Workshop

By Bob Blaisdell

**I**n 1995, when author Ian Frazier invited me to teach at the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen with him, I was eager and, in spite of having taught college classes for a dozen years, naive. I had no idea, and neither did Sandy (we all call Mr. Frazier “Sandy”), what was going to happen in an open-door writing workshop at Manhattan’s largest soup kitchen. Would we “teach” the participants? Would we work one-on-one as writing coaches? I didn’t know then that for the most part we would simply make suggestions as to topics and ways to get started, write along with all who felt like writing, and then read aloud

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our work, one by one, around the table and offer a few mild observations. We didn’t impose that routine, but it seemed to develop of itself. One of my happiest and most interesting experiences there occurred before our meetings, sitting behind a table during the lunch hours, advertising and promoting the writers’ workshop. Over the years we have done less promoting as our band of regulars and returnees has developed and cohered, but sitting behind that table at the soup kitchen, before the class starts, with the hubbub of conversation and eating, has continued to be a joyful experience for me.

I like to take notes, and over the ten years of the workshop I have taken notes during classes and while sitting at that promotional table. For the purposes of writing the narrative essay that follows, I returned to the 1995 anthology we published through the church and to my notes of that year.

It was February 15, 1995, the morning of the third meeting. While Sandy and I were sitting at a table advertising the workshop, a man wearing a Texas Rangers hat stopped by and told us, “If I wrote a book about my life it’d be a bestseller.” We of course suggested that he start writing, and if possible in our workshop, but he explained that he was too busy for that. We bade each other farewell.

A while later a large man, I guessed about 30 years old, stopped and leaned forward, placing his knuckles on the table. He had none of the caution or deference or politeness that most of the men and women who stopped to question us had. “Writing workshop?” he said. “I killed eleven people in fifteen years. I want to write a book about that.”

I was hoping I hadn’t heard “killed.” So I said, “Yeah?” Usually the next thing out of my mouth, automatically really, to anybody who stopped by the table was, “You should come today. One o’clock. Come in by the front of the church.” But I caught myself and said nothing.

Sandy didn’t say anything either.

The man continued, “Killed eleven men—four in Jamaica, seven here.” (He didn’t have a Jamaican accent but an American one.) He smiled now, showing off the gold caps on his teeth. “I was never caught.”

That automatic impulse to invite him to the workshop rose to my tongue, but again it fell off. Instead I said, “How

come?”

“Too smart. Too smart to get caught.” He was still smiling. “So? What do you think?”

“If you wrote a book,” I said, “then it wouldn’t be a secret.”

He raised his eyebrows, nodded, and made his way to the door. From the door he called back, “Hey!” And smiling he said, “It’s a joke, man, it’s a joke.”

After the door closed Sandy and I looked at each other and nervously laughed. “I hope so,” I said. “I swear I nearly invited him.”

“We don’t have to invite absolutely everybody,” said Sandy. (I consider that statement Good Rule #1.)

We also had twins stop by our little table. Their front teeth were missing. And I didn’t notice, but Sandy did, that one was missing an arm. (It was winter. Everybody wore a lot of clothes, and many carried around all their belongings. I’m explaining how I could’ve not noticed his missing arm.) “You want to know our birthday?” asked one.

“Um, okay,” said Sandy. “What’s your birthday?”

“October third, nineteen fifty-six,” said the other.

They said they would come next week. I told them I hoped so.

Sandy went upstairs for the writing materials we handed out at each meeting, and while I was manning the table, a burly, bearded man in his forties, pushing a laden baby carriage, asked me if I was “Mr. Frazier.” He had read about the workshop in a community newspaper, and he and Linda, the woman who came over now and stood beside him (we intro-

duced ourselves), had come down from the Upper West Side for it. Linda was a little thing, her small pretty face peeping out of her magenta knit ski cap that also covered her neck. She looked about twenty. I told them Sandy would be right back. When he returned, I introduced him to them, and Bill made sure this was the Mr. Frazier he had read about. Sandy, noticing the baby carriage and the blanket thrown over the top, asked, "Is there a baby in here?"

"Oh, no!" said Linda and Bill.

"I didn't want it to suffocate if there was," said Sandy.

Bill said, ruefully, "I wish we did have one."

Linda didn't say anything about that wish, but she would later.

I hadn't realized the first two meetings had been a little modest and disappointing until that day, when the class took off like a rocket and did several orbits around the Earth. The first week we had had eight people, the next week six, and this day seven. There were two men who had come each week, and the third week there were three men from the previous week and four new people, including Bill and Linda. When it was one o'clock and the workshop started, Linda told us, as we introduced ourselves around the table, that she had been doubtful about us—"suspicious," she said (and she did a quick suspicious take at all of us, as if to dramatize that)—but she became a convert.

Roger, who would tell us later that day that he used to be a professional pianist, raised his finger: "I want to share something....I used to say to people on the street, 'What you doing here?' Now I know. I'm with them."

Michael, with a red towel around his neck as a scarf, tapped his head and said, nodding at Roger, "I've seen you doing tai-chi, right? Washington Square?"

"That may have been me, yes," said Roger.

Big Dave told the others about seeing the sign for the writing class three weeks before, and how he had decided to check us out.

Sandy and I had figured out the assignment for the day while we were at the promotional table. I had been thinking about Rousseau's *Confessions*, where he keeps telling the reader about "the turning point" of his life, of which, it seems, there must have been about 65. I suggested "A Turning Point." So that was our theme that day. We, Sandy and I, wrote as well.

In pauses during my writing, I watched and took notes. Even though I teach three writing classes a semester at my community college, I often forget how physical an activity writing is. We were shoulder to shoulder around the rectangular table, sniffing and snuffling as we wrote, reread, and continued writing. There was skinny Roger with his gray mustache and dark skin; tall, imposing, former bike messenger Dave; the dignified former job counselor Donald; Jay, a volunteer at the soup kitchen; gray-headed Michael with the actor's voice; and Linda and Bill.

Thirty-five minutes into the topic, everyone had continued writing except for Linda. Bill hadn't written much, but Michael, Roger, and Donald each had more than a page. Linda was sitting directly across from me, and I couldn't see what she had written, but I noticed there was tissue paper

sticking out from her cap.

We all read our pieces aloud.

Donald read a piece called "Caramel Corn."

I forget what Donald's was about, but I do know David remarked, "That's love."

Roger said, nodding at us all, "I'm in the right place!"

Linda had a half-page story about the Venus flytrap her brother bought her when she was four. She named it Gobbles, and she told how her mother accidentally knocked it off a fifth-floor windowsill. We laughed and uttered sympathetic moans. She sat there, peeping at us, seemingly pleased with herself and with our response. Bill wrote and read aloud some short poems he had brought in. After his proud introduction, he said warily, "They not copyright."

One of Bill's poems was called "The Intelligent Rabbit," the announcement of which made Linda glower. "She don't want me to read it," he said, "because she loves it. It's just for her." But when she shrugged and looked away, he said, "I can read it?" She shrugged again and he read it. Whatever personal meaning it had for them was hard for us to tell. The group let it pass without comment.

Michael, before reading in his low voice, told us: "I talk too much and I write too much also." We encouraged him to start reading.

Roger was next. He was wearing a black cap with the ear flaps pinned up, and a blue scarf and an army jacket, and Sandy, sitting next to him, admired his handwriting. Roger said, pleased, "Oh, no, not that! I'm like that with piano and painting....Let me shut up and just read." He did so.

Jay read his.

"Nice, neat, short," observed Michael.

David prefaced his writing by saying, "This is the second time I've been homeless. It's more painful this time."

Sandy wrote about the turning point that brought about his marriage. The workshop group and I were dazzled, it was so fine. (About another piece Sandy wrote in the workshop, another year, a participant remarked, shaking his head in awe, "That one should be in the writing hall of fame.") I wrote about how a girlfriend and I had got back together, were miserable but together, and then she left and got a new boyfriend. The crew was waiting for a happy ending, someone said, like Sandy's. "Sorry!" I said. "It's just sad." And then, because of that story, we talked about men and women for 15 minutes. Linda said that women were jealous of men's interest in anything else. "And, excuse me for saying so," she said, patting Bill's arm, "sometimes I hate your stupid poems."

Roger burst out, "You guys write about things that make me think you're just like me. I left my wife after nine years. My wife, she brought home for Christmas her father, her ex-boyfriend, her dog—her ex-boyfriend dumped her, stood her up at the altar, and...why was they there? And I left! I left! You see, sometimes men gotta be away from women!"

The conversation bounced all over the room.

Linda said, "She didn't want you to be wasting your time with the piano!"

I asked Bill if he wrote every day, and he said no. Linda said, "I don't let him."

Bill said, "Women are selfish and jealous."

Linda smiled and nodded; she wasn't offended. She explained, "You don't want no other distractions."

Michael quoted Bob Dylan on this subject.

Donald said, "Because everybody's talking about a relationship....In a welfare office, I saw a couple reading the same novel, softly to each other. One would read five pages, then the other."

Linda said she and Bill, who lived in Riverside Park, read under the blankets on cold nights.

Everyone seemed to have a good time. Big Dave, veteran of all three meetings, said, as we all got up to go, "Good chemistry today. I really felt it today. Lots of sharing."

As Bill and Linda started to leave with their carriage, Bill asked if I knew about poetry, and I said I did. He told me he had always wondered about the meaning of "The Red Wheelbarrow."

He said, "I think it's by Edgar Allan Poe or somebody."

"It's Williams—William Carlos Williams."

"Okay. I knew it was three names."

I told him what I thought it meant, and he said he'd think about it some more.

The next week, Linda, in her magenta cap, was back, but not Bill. As class started, she announced, "I tole you I'd come back! But I don't know about my partner. On Monday we had a pull-the-hair, drag-it-out, knock-down, want-to-kill-the-other-person fight. But I saw him this morning, and I know he'll be at the Barnes and Noble's sometime, but I don't know if he'll be here."

When it was time to begin writing, Sandy suggested the day's topic that he and I had discussed earlier: "First Love."

Dave let out a loud sigh, "Whew!"

Sandy countered, "Or first something, anything."

Linda said, "Both weeks, before I heard the assignment, that's what I was already working on. And, listen, I have something I want to share. As you know, Bill and I are no longer together."

As she started to tell her story, Sandy told her to write it down.

"Write it?"

"Yeah."

As she wrote, she erupted in little woeful exclamations.

At two o'clock, when it was time for us to stop writing and start reading, Linda, who had been done writing for 15 or 20 minutes, caught my eye, raised one finger, and whispered, almost silently, "I go first?" She smiled big and I nodded. She said, "When I thought about the babies, that made me cry...."

She wrote about her break-up and Bill, and then this as an addendum: "I was on the A train last night and this came to me: If you're good, you go to heaven. If you're bad, you go to hell. If you're healthy, you have babies. Well, I ain't bad, so I won't go to hell. I'm not good, so I won't go to heaven, and I am not healthy so I won't have a baby. Where do I belong?"

She looked at us as if we would or could tell her. I don't know what I or anyone else said. The end of that class was the last we saw of Linda in the workshop.

Over the next several months, though, I ran into Bill and Linda a few times on Broadway on the Upper West Side. They

had lost their living site in Riverside Park when the police literally plowed away their stuff. They had then moved further up the park, in a train tunnel. Their new spot was better, they said.

I tried sending them the workshop anthology, through general delivery, as they directed me to do, but it came back. They told me later they didn't check for mail except at the beginning of the month.

I sent the book again, but it came back.

It's been years, but I still look for them.

The annual anthology, photocopied and bound at a copy shop, paid for by one of the various grants that has kept the workshop afloat, is handed out for free at the annual public reading each spring. The anthologies have meant a lot to the participants and to me. Each year we include almost everything that was written in the workshop, and one or more of us teachers writes an introduction. The teachers and participants worry over those writers who have stopped coming around, and we all reminisce about those we knew and now miss. We hope for the best for those we no longer see. We hope, that is, they have found jobs, or housing, or help for mental illnesses or addictions. Sometimes, after a few years' absence, participants will return, and we greet them as long-lost friends and listen to their stories.

Susan Shapiro, one of the long-time teachers with Sandy and me, and the minister Elizabeth Maxwell have edited a book of selections from the various anthologies, published as *Food for the Soul: The Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen Writing Workshop Anthology* (New York: Seabury Press, 2004).

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## *How to Start a Free Writing Workshop*

Our workshop has been successful due to the support of the church staff and the luck of having been funded for the first three years by the Lila Wallace Foundation (Ian Frazier received an author's grant) and for the subsequent years by the New York State Council for the Arts. Teachers have worked for an honorarium or for free. Supplies and printing costs for the annual anthologies have been covered through the grants. We paid typists to input each week's writings. Each week we passed out copies of everybody's work from the previous week. The participants made corrections on the printed copies and resubmitted them. In the workshop we handed out notebooks, pens, and pencils.

The use of a space, with security personnel provided by the site, and a large population of potential participants seems to me important, if not necessary.

What is necessary? Only a teacher and a student.

What is useful? Funding. Even for a free workshop, you need a space. To get funding, it helps to have professional teachers and writers and to publish the writing produced by the workshop. For the good and glory of the participants, a public reading is a real plus.