



Letter from Tal

In Pursuit of the Weird: Free Speech and Free Thought and the Astonishing Life of the Child

In a recent exchange about self expression, and about my own squeamishness at seeing or hearing my own work, my fellow interlocutor wrote:

“Wincing at the sound of your own voice, whether it’s in written form, recorded, or otherwise archived seems to be the nightmare side-effect felt by anyone who dares use that internal voice. It’s the price of betting on it in the first place. In simplest childhood terms, it’s probably that wave of fear that comes when you try drawing a self-portrait and see something hideous appearing on the paper, or try singing aloud and coming in out of tune. A lot of people don’t get past that first hurdle, probably. Eric Weinstein, a mathematician and physicist, once rambled in an interview about how “most people die without having heard their own voice,” that people go their whole lives never breaking out of the topical head-voice that serves the functional requirements of communication, employment, or the basic translation of ideas. They never get into the voice that renders a substance, a body, something that was previously nothing.”

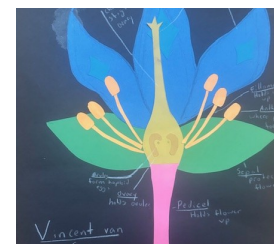
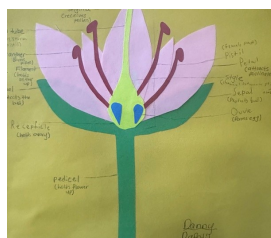
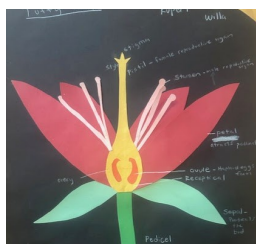
We struggle—adults and kids—with saying what is found more deeply inside us. We’re good at getting along—shop talk, weather talk, current events talk. We can talk about things we are mad about, or excited about, or what we like to eat, or connect about a movie we saw, or say, “It’s so cold” when coming inside from zero-degree weather. But it’s much harder to speak or write expressively, to venture into expressing confusion, unresolved or new ideas, rawness, strangeness, weirdness, or pain. It can be scary to do this, safer maybe in writing, since writing can be kept or hidden. Our minds swim with thoughts we don’t say, questions we don’t ask. To speak these into the public space is harder

than writing them, because there is an entire live audience, ready to judge, evaluate, understand, or not, listening or not. But in the cases where one decides to “go for it,” one’s “weirdness”—one’s inner song or voice—can come out. When one’s rawest deepest feelings can appear with shape and sound and be received, one is more fully liberated into the world.

One of the chief aims of all we do at the NBS is to cultivate a place where new or weird thought can be said or written; and to encourage those ventures. We say again and again, *Weird? What’s wrong with being weird. Weird is interesting. The truth is interesting, even if it is strange or awkward. Sameness is stultifying. Average is deadening. Common is boring.*

I think of Odin’s recent lit response about *Huck Finn*, in which he wrote, “it’s just me thinking on paper.” (see sidebar for full response). “This is just me thinking on paper.” I would like to think that schools are places where one really can “just be me thinking on paper.” And it begs the question: are schools even set up now to allow free-ranging thought, philosophical inquiry, awkward or unofficially sanctioned self-expression, experiments and metacognition about emotion. Strangely, tragically even, schools tend fail to consistently encourage self-expression, or are even averse to it.

Everything about Odin’s Finn Project is good and reflects essential teachings from the original text. When we read his response in class, everyone was buoyed. Everyone could see the way the story was influencing him, and intersecting with his own feelings and life experience. Had Mark Twain been in class when we read Odin’s response, he would have been overjoyed.



imaginary flowers made in science with accurate labelling

I think of the poems the seventh graders have been writing in response to poems by the Polish poet Wieslawa Szymborska, who won the Nobel Prize for literature. Each of their poems is a stab in the dark, an attempt to speak more freely than they might in daily practice. How do you make your written speech sound “poetic,” and not like everyday speech? It seems almost impossible, but they try, mostly nobly.

For instance, in one of Greta’s poems based on Szymborska, we find language that has never been written in the history of human-kind.

*I am afraid of the air outside.
It’s thick and heavy,
too heavy for my paper lungs.*

Or Ella’s words, from a poem based on Szymborska’s “Landscape,” which reminds us, almost as an afterthought, that these 12-14 year old lives are in fact full, rich, and complex.

*all the emotions
of the astonishing life
of a child*

Maddie wrote about clocks, these necessary, annoying machines that mark our lives, regiment our days, and which constantly track the finiteness of existence.

*Why do clocks exist, I thought?
They only tell you how long you’ve been waiting.
They don’t tell you when you’re supposed to live
or when you have to die.*

Esme took on current events, basing her poem on “The Century’s Decline.”

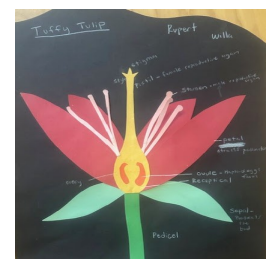
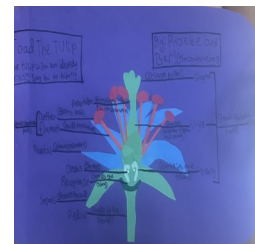
*We were told that we were going to be great again.
But now we are not so sure,
We count world wars.
1,2,__3?*

Esme wrote about the “landscape” in a painting by Frieda Kahlo, after Szymborska’s poem.

*In the dream thick green paint is piled high,
And the leaves the paint makes
are only ones you’d think about in books.
Up high in the corner a part of the sky is grayed out
And dark clouds spell out a name.*

Gil, after reading Szymborska’s poem, “Seen From Above.”

*Snow crushed in the footprints of boots
A single, delicate flake landing on a hat brim
Its delicate spines of ice crushed in the impact
Its beauty marred by the incompleteness of its grandeur.*



In Nora's poem based on Szymborska's poem
"Discovery" she wrote:

*I believe in the difference
I believe in the change of one
And of multiple.*

*I believe there is a difference to be made
I believe in the struggle to see it,
And above all, act on it.*

*I believe in the fret of difference,
I believe in the distance-to-the-bridge of difference,
I believe that now there is a gaping hole
Where land should be.*

*I believe in the fearful twitching of the lip
And the sweat above the brow.
I believe in pushing harder than ever before.
I believe in going full force,*



I have frequently said, "The goal at NBS in three years is for them to all write one beautiful true line, and to know that that line was the truth." This is what we are after, always, so that each of the kids here can sing.

Huckleberry Finn Lit #44.

By Odin

(sorry this is weird, its just me thinking on paper)

What would my life be if I wanted to be like Huckleberry Finn? What if I wanted to be separate from society, following only my own rules, maybe with a pal or maybe not, and knowing that, if I did have a pal, he/she would have my back and wouldn't betray me, and I could say the same? In this lit response, I set the grounds for what I call, "Project Finn", which I am planning on performing this summer at some point.

Because Ripton is such a nature-dense town, with my property nearing 400,000 acres of National Forest, I have had an idea in the back of my mind for 2 years, about someday venturing out into the woods, and not coming back home for a few days. I would have my own food, my own water, and no human contact, sure, I wouldn't be on a raft, but I would be floating freely in my own way; I would have no human interaction for those days. It may be lonely, it may be painful mentally, but it may cause me to have deeper thoughts than I've had before, almost like a Buddhist silent retreat, for I will have no reason to make noise for a few days.

What I think would happen in this experiment, after extensive thought is:

Day 1. I would be excited to go out into the wilderness. Everything is a first, making my own fire, being completely alone except for the birds and the other noises of the night. Everything would be new, and exciting, I would pitch my hammock, ready, and would of course be nervous, always expecting some human to come along down a trail and ruin the whole experience.

Day 2. I would, for the first little bit, be excited, but after that, I would go into a deeper state of thinking. Of course, my equivalent to Jim would be a notebook, something I can get my thoughts out to, so I could actually contemplate things. I would collect firewood, do necessary things, and then sit at my camp for a while, contemplating.

Day 3. By the end of day 3, I would probably start to be sick of myself, and plan to come home later the next day.

Day 4. I would have stayed in the same camp location the whole time, building it to make it better, and that would be because my brain was all tired out from thinking. I don't think I would ever go crazy, or get so sick of my voice in my brain that I can't take it anymore, but I would get annoyed with it, and that is why day 4, I would leave and go home.

Why am I thinking so much about this now? Because Huck triggered it, his adventure, his floating between civilization and the wild, his want to be wild but his restraint to do so, that triggered my mind on an idea I've had for several years now, and this is where I'm getting my thoughts out about it. I was thinking about the example in XVIII where all the humans are suspicious of him prowling around at night, sometimes it feels like if I want a bit of change, everyone looks at me like I'm crazy, if I want something to be a little bit different, always at least one person thinks I'm crazy and I can tell by the look on their face.

Any time I propose a new idea, something that I think is revolutionary, people will look at me, and I can tell that they are hiding a conscious thought of, "He's crazy," or, "That's weird." Why humans can't accept change unless forced is beyond me. I want something to change, for the better, maybe, or maybe it has no impact whatsoever, and people think I'm crazy. Huck just wants to live with his buddy Jim in the northern states, but they missed Cairo in the fog of humanity, which judges them for wanting to change.

End-of-the-Year-Ninth-Grad-Glass-Onion-Blues

By Georgia Gong

During study, I worked on my Glass Onion—my final story of NBS.. I kicked back my chair and groaned, hitting a roadblock in the middle of writing about the winter of seventh grade.

“Tal, what’s the word goal for Wednesday?” I asked.

“I don’t know, how many words do you have?” He asked, continuing to sort lit papers. I told him my word count and due date.

“That’s the easiest thing in the world!” Tal said. “All you’ve got to do is write 200 words a day! That’s a paragraph!”

“I don’t even know what I’m writing about...” I complained. Tal walked up to the whiteboard and made three columns. He wrote “7” “8” and “9” in each one. He began to write in the seventh-grade column, things that he remembered and I hadn’t written about. “shy,” “awkward,” “new friends?,” “writing a poem,” “crying in meeting,” “excluded,” “loser,” etc.

“Were you scared in seventh grade?” Tal asked.

“Um...sure, yes.” I said. Tal wrote “fear” on the board.

“About what?” “I don’t know...um...” I racked my peanut-sized brain for my seventh-grade fears and insecurities.

Tal wrote “not a good friend” next to “fear.”

“Oh yeah! I forgot about that...” I said. In seventh grade, one of my fears was that I wasn’t a good friend and I didn’t deserve the friends I made. I had forgotten about it, though.

“Yes, but *I remembered*,” Tal shouted, “*My mind is a goddamn steel trap!*”

“Erm, sure...” I said. I could definitely remember times when Tal had been a bit forgetful, but I decided not to say anything.

“I remember everything about myself, and everything about you dorks. Like I said, my brain’s a goddamn steel trap.” Tal said proudly. I looked up at the board, which now held a list of things under the “7” column, mostly having to do with things I did, was, and felt in seventh grade.

“Great,” I grumbled. “Now everyone who comes in here will see a big list of all my fears, feelings, and insecurities.”

“They won’t be able to see what it means,” Tal said.

“They’ll say ‘oh! What’s that?’ and then they’ll jump off to some other thing like a bunch of hyper squirrels jacked up on Skittles.



High atop Mt. Cocoyo, the Yetis confront the town-folk who are trying to save the mountain from destruction

Reflecting on the All-School Play and the Journey to the Top

After the play, everyone wrote about important moments and milestones in the production of the play.

Here are several excerpts from some of the responses:

I feel like one of the biggest things that we do together as a whole school is Bows. I feel like it is a time when we all are proud of what we have done. I feel like it is when people are coming out and everyone is clapping for them. It is like “OMG, we actually did it! This is so cool! Everyone else did so well! Yay!” I think that it is amazing when everyone is giving and getting hugs. I feel like it is the way that everyone says I love you, I’m proud of you, and more. I am a big hugger, so this always helps. —**Genevieve**

I felt the whole school feeling important, on the last night of the play when we all bowed together, and did the Up, down! Celebration. It felt so nice, and important, because we just finished up this amazing play we had been working hard at. And as a 90 with my last play it felt extra weird, but also sentimental, but also a feeling a i could miss. —**Simon**

Something important that happened for me was the feeling of connecting with everyone during breaks outside. It felt like I was connecting with people that I don’t really talk to as much, so it felt good to talk with everyone. It felt especially good to talk to the nineties and connect with them. On their step up day Ben had said that he didn’t want to be the person that said at the end of the year “I didn’t get to know you that well” and I don’t want to be that person either. I want to be able to walk up to any of the nineties and be able to have a meaningful conversation with, so I think that doing that, helped me. —**Phoebe.**

Both nights Gil came up to me and gave me a big hug, and seemed so excited to have finished the night. I thought he did a great job, and even if it may have been hard with stage directions, and remembering lines in the beginning, I was so proud of him for really getting into his character, and still having the energy to come up behind me at the end of the play, and give me a big hug, and also seem so confident about himself.

I think one of my favorite moments each year, is not during bows, but right before them, when we are all backstage, it’s not over, but all we have to do is bow, and it’s when the realization comes that we’ve done it, and all the stress is over, and we’re all proud of how we did. This year, on our side of the stage, Jane, Yaz, Willa, and I, congratulating each other, and I was thinking about how if Mak was there, he would have been so happy, and he would have high fived all of us, so I was picturing that, and picturing his voice, and also just really happy with the class that I still have, and really proud of them. —**Rupert**

The most important thing that happened for me was that I got to help Nora through this play. She was feeling down and when she would mess up she would only say that she didn’t know, but I knew she believed she did. I made her practice her lines over and over even through knowing them she needed the confidence and I felt for the first time this year that I was needed and that I helped. And I have been feeling like I haven’t been helping and like I’m not a point person for anyone at the school this year. —**Willa**

On the second night, I forgot a line and I had to improvise my line to fill it in. Afterwards, I was feeling really shaky and scared, and there were so many people who were so supportive. Molly, Jane, Scout, Taylor, Georgia, and more. It made me feel more secure and loved and safe and it gave me the piece of mind that it was all going to be okay. They gave me hugs and told me that people were out to see me, and that they wouldn’t care if I missed a line and that really helped.

I really felt a connected vibe and a loving vibe from everyone. Everyone was so supportive, pumping each other up and showing love and support. When someone was struggling, they helped. I felt really lucky because in a lot of schools, that is not the vibe that is brought. It felt like everyone belonged and everyone was safe in our NBS environment, and I was so appreciative and thankful for that. —**Scout L.**

Something important I felt as a whole school was when we were all watching rehearsals and Sammy came up to do one of his lines and in his old man voice, shouted “Yeah, even I decided I have to join. I’m not a protester anymore, I’m a bystander!” We all burst out laughing, and it felt really nice, because everyone was involved, and we and we were all laughing about the same thing. It felt like we weren’t as separated as we usually are, and we all came together with this one event.

Something important you felt as a WHOLE school was just in general performing the play to everyone especially on Friday night. Like a lot of people have been saying it just felt really positive and I felt an overwhelming sense of togetherness and happiness as a whole school, which was definitely different from last year in a couple ways but just in general everyone last year seemed in their own groups a lot and I felt like it was really nice because everyone was hugging each other and pumping each other up and everything it seemed we were doing it as a whole school, together. —**Molly**

continued on page 6

I was also very sad this week because I realized that all of the 90s and Alex would not be at North branch much longer. I spent a lot of time talking to the 70s about all of the people that we were going to miss and how it wouldn't be the same without Alex or any of the 90s at the beginning of the year. I hadn't understood why everyone was talking about the 90s leaving the previous year but now I've come to realize exactly how much of an impact they have on the school and me at the beginning of the year and never thought that I would miss him as much as I am going to and I'm finding it difficult to perceive that they will be leaving.

—Maddie

Last week, I felt like I was able to feel closer to everyone in the school. Part of that was probably being together in the same building for a week without any divides between the classes. I really enjoyed swinging with everyone during lunch, playing spit and gin rummy with Ella, Molly, Yaz, and Esme during rehearsal, and drawing fake tattoos on Genevieve before opening night. I started to think about people in other schools, big schools, who never get to have the experience we get during play week. We work so hard to create something no one has ever created before us. I remember running around outside wearing our costumes, and imagining that I was an out-of-stater driving through Ripton to somewhere else.

Looking at the rivers and trees, and suddenly seeing a bunch of kids in crazy hats and thinking, "this must be what ZVermonterers are like." And although that probably would've been an embarrassing prospect to me in sixth grade, I am proud of it now. I am proud of how we are as a school, even our crazy, messy, and weird parts. So maybe the kids at MUMS think we are a "hippie cult" but we don't need their pride. We have our own pride.

Something that made me proud to be here was something that happened on Thursday. Scout was playing Rupert in the Rainbow Daffodil Festival scene, and Willa and I were reading along with the script. I was confused for a second because when the bulldozers were supposed to come in, Scout wasn't with them. I looked over and saw that Scout had dropped her bulldozer and was comforting someone who was upset and sitting in the corner behind the folding chairs. Immediately, Willa jumped over and ran onstage to be Rupert instead. For lack of better words, it was a very "North Branch" moment. Scout hadn't hesitated to go and be kind to someone who needed it, and Willa hadn't hesitated to do what needed to be done. It was like instinct. Both of them helping each other and the rest of us in a beautiful and complicated dance. It solidified the feeling that we weren't just a bunch of separate people, we are all a part of a bigger thing, like a human body or a hive of bees. Everyone plays a part and if someone else needs help, they help them, and if there is a spot that needs to be filled, they don't hesitate to fill it.

—Georgia



One of the Karens explains why she needs this part of the mountain to do her grounding ritual

The Play Ending; Climbing to the Summit, Looking for a Resolution

Often the play ends in a celebratory way, with a wedding or a party or a giant uplifting moment. This year the school tried to create a more ambivalent and authentic ending that reflected how our year has been.

These are the last lines of the play, standing on the top of a mountain, in the dark.

Georgia- But why? Why should we rejoin the world?

Up here it's quiet. How do we know that anything will be different this time?

Alex- Maybe it is time to come back, even if it feels like the world has rejected us.

Jane- (To audience, breaking the fourth wall)

We know that this isn't the ending you expected, but here we are.

Yaz- Maybe you thought that things would be happy in the end

Genevieve- that we would all feel happy and fine, but that's not how the world is, really.

Scout H - Sometimes everything is hard. People we love die.

Rupert- Sometimes life is not fine

Taylor- We aren't always perfect, and we aren't always happy

Willa- We're just people, like the rest of you,

Alex- who're in the darkness, trying to get somewhere good

Gil- Standing at the top of a mountain,

Ella- Away from what we used to love

Simon- Or with someone we loved. My friend died. Our friend died.

Taylor- This mountain is our memory of him. (pause)

Yaz- And we miss him.

Rupert- And our love for him is not something we can let be destroyed.

Molly- Trying to decide what's right or next is never easy.

Sammy- We trip and fall

Innis- Others do terrible things. We think we have no power.

Georgia- We rage at the ways of the world

Scout L- We want to do good, and sometimes it's not much that we can do

Nora- Maybe it will all be okay, in the end,

Odin- Or maybe it won't. But that doesn't matter.

Phoebe- We lose what we love, over and over.

Greta- But we should never stop loving.

Maddie- No matter what or how many times our love is lost

Esme- The only thing that we can do...

Ber..... is pick up our lanterns, and keep on walking.



The Yetis show the snowy regions to the two daughters. Georgia, (center) explains why the mountain would be better without humans.



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Now that Spring is finally here, the snowy days seem so long ago.