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### Teaching Gregg, Learning from Gregg

Infected with hepatitis C during his drug experiences and eventually unable to keep up with his work duties, Gregg quit working. Discouraged and sick in California, with help and insistence from members of his family, he moved to central Oregon, where I met him.

His move to Oregon, farther from chemicals sprayed on crops and closer to his brother, sister, and mother, brought about much-improved health and energy levels. He began using his creative force to make anything he thought of. One thing he thought of was a book, a legacy friends and relatives could read.

Gregg wrote essays about growing up, his experiences using drugs, then his experiences as an ex-drug user and a drug counselor helping others overcome drug dependence. He wrote about working his way up to the position of director of drug counseling and other administrative positions in prisons in Texas and California, and he wrote about many other experiences along his way.

He learned I had published essays, fiction, poetry, and books, and he asked to read my work. He liked what he read and asked me to help him with writing. He knew he was weak on grammar and punctuation, and he didn't want mistakes in his writing to impress readers so much they didn't clearly see what he had to say.

I read some of his writing and said, "These essays are good. You're writing about important stuff, drug use, overcoming addiction, working with addicted people, working in prisons and helping prisoners get free of what put them in prison. You get to a lot of it. It comes across as real. It would come across as even more real if you ask at each scene, each paragraph, each sentence what it is you're setting out to say and then see if you've said it clearly and completely."

I said, "You tell me here you saw beautiful scenery. I believe you, but I don't see anything. Show me a picture. Describe what you saw so I sense the scenery's colors, smells, activities, sounds, temperatures and your place in the scenery, until the scene becomes beautiful to me, and I'm there with you. I can help you learn to see when you need more detailed description. I

can help you learn to describe a scene in more detail. You're strong when you write about the people you've worked with, less strong when you describe or don't describe what's around you."

He looked at his manuscript a long moment and then said, "That's more than I had in mind. You said a lot. I'm gonna have to think about it."

I thought I'd said too much too soon. Gregg probably wondered how anyone could tell him how to write about his own experiences. He wanted me to correct his grammar and punctuation, where he knew he was weak, and right away, without invitation, I went beyond grammar and punctuation and stepped, clumsy-footed, into his writing, into his delicate inner reserve of treasured memories and self concepts.

Our conversation ended. It was clear to me I had to try to erase what I had said or go home. I decided to leave. We were still polite to each other, but Gregg had drawn back and obviously wanted me out of his closest environment.

I left him to whatever he had to work through and walked home. I might be willing to do what he wanted, limit my work to grammarian, but probably not. His writing, the story he had to tell, was worth the learning and reworking he would have to do to make it more effective and the work I would have to do to help him.

Two days later, he called me. He said, "I stomped my ego to death. It took a while. Egos're tough. I thought about everything you said, and I read my stories again. I need to learn more about writing. You still willing to teach me?"

"Yes."

We began.

Gregg made canes, wooden boxes to hold facial tissue, refrigerator magnets, jewelry trees, escrima sticks for use in martial arts, anything that occurred to him, and possibilities never stopped coming to him. He steadily expanded the materials he worked with. He bought bamboo, rattan, and milled wood for some of his projects. He built from natural forms of manzanita and pine, then juniper, all of which he found and cut.

He made many sizes and kinds of boxes. He made holders for pencils, glasses, guitar picks, anything that needed holding, closers for sacks, anything he thought might be useful or pretty. He used clear and colored plastic and glass and made stained-glass pictures. He gave away most of

what he made, no charge. Anybody Gregg knew who needed a cane, got a cane, handmade of natural wood, limbs as they grew, cut to fit individual needs. Gregg always had at least half a dozen canes, in various stages of completion, hanging in his house.

Friends who wanted a custom-made blanket or a pillow received a gift. Friends who suggested something else to make received Gregg's full attention and his respect for their ideas. Much of what he made came from ideas others mentioned to him.

He worked on his writing. He combined the essays he had written into a book, *A Coyote's Tale (You Can't Pull the Coyote's Tail without Getting the Whole Coyote...)*. Gregg said, "Little Big Woman named me "Coyote" when we worked together. She said I fit the description of the trickster. Coyote is the trickster to native Americans, always working his jelly, working everything for his own advantage. Coyote's one of the nicknames I carry, Buzz, Pigpen, Ezuh-huh, Amarnath, Churro, Snoop, CaneMaker and GR, different sides of the same coin."

I said, "Add 'Storyteller' to the list. One more side of the same coin."

Gregg moved 45 miles away, to a quieter place in a wild canyon. He ventured into the world less and less, mostly stayed home, where he could find more comfort and conserve his declining energy. We worked on his writing by email part of the time, and part of the time, I drove to his place, and we worked together.

He rapidly improved his ability to describe what he remembered. As he described more detail, he remembered more detail to describe. His writing came more alive.

I emailed him that he changed verb tense often in a paragraph, even in a sentence. I thought the rapid changes called attention to his style of writing and distracted the reader from existing in the story, almost unaware of the storyteller.

Two days later, I drove out to his place. We ate lunch and started talking about his book, Gregg said, "After I got your email about changing tense, I read the essay I wrote about the summer I lived in a tent across the lake, to see if that tent might be one of the tents you were talking about, or did you mean I was too tense in my writing, and I should relax more? But I couldn't make any sense out of it, so I dropped it and decided to wait til you came out to talk about it. What did you mean?"

I started to talk about verbs and tenses. I thought it might be a good time to talk about active voice and passive voice. He asked me, "What's a verb?" I started to define verbs, and he shut down all reception. He said, "It didn't make sense to me when I was in high school and college. Why would it make sense to me now?"

He told me about a math class he took in high school, "I got the right answers, but my math teacher wouldn't give me credit. He always said 'Show your work,' and I tried, but I didn't really understand how I got the answers. He said my way wasn't the right way to work the problem out. It wasn't correct procedure. I flunked the course. I still don't understand how I could get all the answers right and flunk the course."

I revised my idea of how we were going to work. Gregg wanted me to help him write a book. He didn't need to get ready to pass an English class. If I could communicate what I thought would improve his writing, he didn't need to understand structure of the language nor the terminology that defines structure.

Every time we worked on his book, I revised what I told him until he understood what I said. When he understood, he decided quickly if what I said about a section or a sentence was relevant and disregarded it if it wasn't, or he found a way to improve what I saw as incomplete or awkward or unclear writing. Sometimes, he decided he needed time to think about my comment and made notes about what I said, and we moved on to my next comment. I was careful about his feelings, but he really had stomped his ego to death and could receive and evaluate constructive criticism.

He learned to use more description and to make his writing more direct. By generalizing from the changes we made, he learned a little about correct punctuation, complete sentences and correct grammar, but not a lot, and that didn't matter. He was quite willing to pay me to "Clean everything up when it's finished," to correct punctuation, spelling, and grammar, because those parts of writing had nothing to do with what he wanted to achieve, as long as he had a way, me, to make sure his writing was "correct" and easy to read. That approach worked well for me, too, because I saw that avoiding getting slowed down by details I could handle later moved us rapidly toward completion of his book, and I knew we needed to complete the work while he had enough energy.

I said, "The more we work with it, the more real it becomes for me, the more reading it really works."

Greg said, "Yeah. We're getting where we're going. That's why we're doing all this work. No cigar, but we're getting to the prizes."

He said, "Will you do the legwork? If I get to the grocery store in Terrebonne enough to keep eating, that's about all the travel I can do. Keep track of your time, and we'll put that on the bill." When he decided *The Coyote's Tale* was finished, I took the manuscript to a shop in Bend and had copies printed for Gregg's friends and family. We converted his book into PDF files for those people who responded to his queries and said they would like electronic files rather than a book printed on paper.

Gregg started a second book. *Guardian Anglers*, about "... those sensational, exemplary humans who operate outside the norm to help you round off life's sharp edges....They might not be angels, but they're definitely angels in training." He wrote essays about many of the people who helped round off sharp corners in his life and joined them together as chapters in his book.

His mother hung their Christmas tree from the ceiling one year when Gregg was small. Gregg kept learning from his mother that there are many different ways to perform familiar tasks.

When Gregg, early in his adulthood, worked with his father to repair houses, an alcoholic "bum," over Gregg's resistance, showed Gregg an effective, simple way to mix plaster patch in a rubber-ball half, which resulted in a very easy-to-clean container after Gregg finished using the mix. Gregg moved forward at realizing that we shouldn't discount someone's intelligence and value because of their apparent, immediate circumstances.

A "juvenile delinquent" Gregg counseled pointed out that an unused pool table, with very little revision, would work well for ping pong and save most of the work Gregg planned to put into building a table. Gregg said he learned from that experience that obvious, simple solutions to problems we deal with often hide in plain sight, available to the open minds possible to all of us, regardless of our classifications or training.

Gregg's mother applied her clown make up and costume while children who were afraid of clowns watched. To help them overcome their fear of clowns, she showed them that normal people live under the make up and

costumes.

Gregg learned from his coworkers, who exchanged knowledge with him in the course of working and living. He learned from prisoners and from people he counseled. He commemorated some of his learning and some of the teachers around him in the book he built, *Guardian Anglers*.

I learned from Gregg as I talked with him and as I read his second book and made suggestions for improving it. He learned from me as he put his book together.

Gregg had more and more trouble working with his computer. I suggested ways to decrease his exhaustion, by dimming the screen, by lifting his chair so he looked down into the monitor, easing the strain on his neck, by interspersing sedentary work of creating his book with times of more physical action. Gregg implemented my suggestions, and the changes helped, but from the beginning of our time of working together, Gregg reached computer exhaustion rapidly and worked with the machine no more for a while, for the day, for several days. He wrote when he could. We worked together on his writing when we could.

Barbara came from California and moved in with him, fixed food he could eat, kept his house together, took over driving to buy food, drove him to the doctor, helped him make it through his days.

Gregg's brother wired Gregg's shop for electricity, and Gregg continued inventing and making many things besides his books. He bought a custom-made flute and made music. He read about eastern religions and stitched what he learned together with what he knew and learned about Christianity, about God. He kept expanding his thinking about the universe, about eternal existence, about his own future.

We found similarities in our spiritual beliefs. We found differences in our spiritual beliefs. We talked mostly about similarities. Both of us were interested in, learned from, and respected many perspectives different from our own. Neither of us needed to convert the other to his beliefs.

I never argued with Gregg's decisions about what to do about my suggestions for his writing. He generalized effectively from a few suggestions when I asked for more detailed description, when I asked for more active description, when I asked for "who" instead of "that" to refer to a person. He learned to avoid "would" and "that," and he understood why. Some learning, most noticeably about punctuation, he didn't

generalize from.

My motto became, “Style always trumps correct grammar,” because Gregg wrote better and better but always as himself. He wrote like he talked, easy to understand, interesting, but without particular concern for grammatically-correct or correctly-structured expression. I didn’t need to teach him anything about “voice,” because he already had effective voice; slightly acerbic, direct, witty, intelligent, often humorous. We laughed a lot as we worked together, about the process of writing and learning, about our own and each other’s ability to find humor in much of the universe, in our lives.

I threw out commas, put in commas and advised him to make sentences flow better. I kept up pressure to add sensory details to his narrative. I said, “The stories you’re telling are interesting to read and important to know about. Do the work to tell each story completely. Define some of the slang people speak to each other. It’s specialized slang, from prisons and from drug-users, and I don’t understand some of it. Some of it, context doesn’t define. Other readers might not understand it either.”

He understood when I said, “This is a good story, but in this sentence, you write like this happened in the past, and then you write like it’s happening now, and then back to the past. That’s confusing. It calls attention to your writing when we want the reader to be so absorbed in your story that she almost forgets she’s reading instead of existing in the story.

“Avoid anything that calls unnecessary attention to how you’re saying what you’re saying.

“In this sentence, you could take out most of the “was”s and “is”s and “would”s and make the sentence shorter and more direct, less noticeable, the action more active. You could put more direct punch in the actions.”

We didn’t talk anymore about verb tense, about active and passive voice, about verbs or subjects and predicates of sentences. Gregg learned to use more sensory description, hot, cold, yellow, bright, dark, tastes, smells, gritty, smooth, tactile sensations, visual details, sounds, in his writing. He wrote more effectively the first time he wrote about an experience. He used what he wrote to guide him toward what he saw in his mind and meant to write. He revised and expanded what he had written until he came closer and closer to what he meant to write, what he

remembered, what he saw in his mind.

Gregg liked his increasing ability to write well, and he expressed his appreciation verbally and through generous payment for my work. I expressed appreciation for payment, for the opportunity to work together, for the rapid learning and the friendship we both enjoyed when we worked together.

Gregg and I worked on his second book. We worked on his writing in between and along with everything else we did.

Gregg said his cousin tried to write her book years ago. "She took a class. She had a teacher, but he didn't teach her anything. He didn't know how to find something good about her book and talk about that. Only thing he knew how to do, find everything he thought she did wrong and attack her for doing it wrong. That shut her down. She quit going to class and quit writing. I talked about how I'm learning and she got really interested. I offered to work with her, and now she's trying again. I'm helping her on the phone and on email. I'm using everything you taught me, plus even more gentle. That thing you always say, 'This is really good. It might be even better if you work on this and if you work on that,' she eats that up. She's coming up fast, whipping her writing like a rented mule. She's started her second book, even before she finishes her first one."

He said "When we finish working on her first book, we'll send it your way to 'clean it up,' put in commas, take out commas, fix spelling, point out anything we missed to make her writing stronger."

I kept learning, "Be gentle." We easily crush creative force. If I learn about teaching effectively, I can teach a writer to express herself better. If I'm always aware my responsibility to any student includes sensitivity to her feelings about her art, I can respect and nourish her creative force.

Gregg and I both learned again and again that supporting creative effort counts as much as teaching to more effectively express creative force. When we teach, it becomes our job to encourage, to build confidence, to feed fuel to the flame of creativity in our students. It's easy to destroy creativity, self confidence, motivation. It's much harder to build.

All the processes we learn from and grow from happen at once. I taught Gregg to write better. He taught me.

Gregg and I agreed, we all teach each other by the way we live. Our lives are examples and express what we believe The subjects we deal with

every day are in the category, “Live more effectively. Love all life through all our lives.” We spread what we’re learning into the world around us.

Gregg and I tried to incorporate into our own lives what we talked about, to incorporate gentleness, to work toward humility, toward understanding Life and Love better, toward understanding infinite existence. We looked at beautiful creations from what we learned together and separately, beautiful canes, stained glass pictures, photographs, books, friendship.

We finished a book and then another, along with everything else working together became. Working together became an expansive process, for him, for me, for what we touched.

Gregg expressed confidence that our existence, his existence here in this material world is only part of the story, that life goes from here toward eternity. He finished his work in this material world and passed on, overcome by illness that came from his early existence as a drug user.

I keep my pencils and pens in a holder Gregg made from bamboo. I keep guitar picks in a branch-shaped box Gregg made for me from a juniper limb. Laura uses a pencil holder Gregg made from a piece of pine limb. When I play my guitar outside, holders Gregg made from wood, from a sand dollar, from pieces of bamboo, with small magnets embedded in these materials, keep my sheet music from blowing away. I have Gregg's two books in my shelves. I reread them or parts of them.

I think of Gregg often. What I learned from him is important in my existence. His presence in this material world was part of Gregg's life, a step toward eternal existence. The things he built, pencil holders, music holders, jewelry trees, essays, books, objects too numerous to list here, are still here. The intangibles, love, friendship, understanding, respect for creative force, respect for life, are still here. His personhood, his unique manifestation of life walks forward toward eternity.