Homage to my mentor

How a novice writer's relationship with an experienced writer blossomed into friendship

When I decided to become a writer, I said goodbye to a successful management position with regular paychecks and hello to editorial whimsy and shoe boxes filled with rejection letters. I had no idea how difficult a writing life could be; I simply knew I loved to write.

After I moved back to the neighborhood where I grew up, I discovered that another writer lived down the street from me: Bill Walsh. Not to be confused with the copy desk chief of *The Washington Post* who authored *Lapsing Into a Comma* and *The Elephants of Style,* nor the NFL coach who led the San Francisco 49ers to three Super Bowl victories, this Bill Walsh was a writer whose published articles appeared in such diverse publications as *Black Belt, Woman's World* and *GRIT*.

I'd only met Bill once before, and to say that meeting was less than auspicious would be like saying William Faulkner was a little wordy. It was late at night, and I was a 13-year-old kid making a ruckus outside his daughter's window. I didn't know Heidi's father was an ex-Marine with a tough-guy reputation, but I found out moments later when he grabbed me by the scruff and shook me around his front yard.

He forgave my teenage indiscretions, in part because I only visited Heidi through the front door from then on, but also because I served as a paratrooper in the Gulf War and the old jarhead had respect for that. So, when I showed up on his doorstep years later with the proclamation that I was going to be a writer, he warned me of the difficulties and asked if I was prepared. "Do you want to write," he said, "or do you just want to be a writer?" The difference, he went on to explain, was that many people want to be known as a writer, to be some famous name that people talk about, but few are willing to do the work that good writing requires.

Bill Glose (at left) says that while his ego suffered under Bill Walsh's early counsel, his writing became much improved.

I swore that I could do the work and proudly produced my work-in-progress. He took my story and, while I watched in horror, began marking it up. When he was done, the pages contained more red ink than type. I was flummoxed. I had expected praise. I had expected him to recognize my work for the masterpiece it was. I stewed for a couple of days before rereading the ink-scarred pages, intending to ridicule his suggestions. But the story was improved with his changes. Much improved.

I did the edits and slunk down the street. When Bill saw me, he smirked and said, "Wasn't sure if I'd see you again." Inside his house, he gave me the first of many lessons. "Good writing requires rewriting, lots and lots of rewriting." Much of Bill's advice was of the big-picture variety, but his editing comments were always specific: show, don't tell; have a reason for every scene; avoid clichés.

My ego suffered on those early trips to Bill's house, where counsel was frequently delivered with the force of a shotgun blast. Once, he stopped reading one of my stories after the first two pages and told me it was *not worthy of this reader.* Bill is a pedant with no patience for sloppy work. If something I'd written used a secondary variant of a word or—gasp!—a cliché, I could expect a scathing rebuke supported by excerpts from a procession of reference books.

And if I hadn't brought anything with me, he would bemoan the general state of grammar and how it was being butchered by common usage. Many times he has lectured me on the misuse of such words as "minuscule" ("The universally considered incorrect variant 'miniscule,' though common, is always incorrect"), "enormity" (" 'Enormity' defines something as being monstrously offensive; it is not a synonym for 'enormous' ") and "podium" ("A podium is what you stand on; a lectern is what you stand behind").

Bill never went to college, but he reads voraciously and is better educated than many college graduates. Better yet, he is worldly-wise and practical, giving him a better grasp on how to share his knowledge with others. For every roadblock I encountered, he showed me a path around. And every path included examples, using classic literature or modern masters to guide me.

Before I met Bill, my reading list consisted of thrillers, sci-fi books and an occasional cozy. Everything I knew about classic literature dated back to high school, where lessons were so dull

that I never dared to pick up a literary work again. Until I met Bill. He showed me that good literature was not something to be feared, and he guided my reading selections. I went from a diet of James Patterson and Stephen King to John Steinbeck, Ernest J. Gaines and Charles Frazier. He introduced me to great novels. I read, I learned, and I fell in love with the written word.

We often discussed what I'd recently read. Sometimes we'd chat about plot, but usually we'd talk about the writing techniques employed. What makes David Schickler's characters so powerful? How had Ronald Wright so skillfully alternated voice in *Henderson's Spear*? Was Jonathan Franzen showing mastery or just showing off with his page-long sentences? Sometimes we talked about literature in general. Bill would tell stories about various writers' lives, their notable books, their triumphs and flops, their peccadilloes and literary sins. It seems he had an anecdote about everyone and everything.

Once my work started getting published and I began promoting it, Bill's advice turned to effective readings. "Even if there's only one person in the audience," Bill said, "he gave his time to come listen to you. Make it worth his while." At many of my outings, readers actually did outnumber listeners. However, well-constructed presentations and word of mouth soon had me reading at venues where the assembled crowd outnumbered available chairs, and patrons had to line up against walls or sit cross-legged on the floor.

He shepherded me through the finer points of a literary presentation—practice beforehand, use dramatic pauses, arrive early and ensure the reading area is set up properly—and he accompanied me to early outings. Once, he read an essay about his father that made the hairs on my arm stand on end. Another time, he acted out a humorous scene that had a bookstore crowd laughing so hard that everyone else in the store bunched into our little section.

Now Bill tells me that I've outgrown what he can teach me, but after every visit I leave his house stronger and smarter than when I entered. Sometimes his mere presence affects my work. Before I share with him anything I've written, I labor over word choice and shave off all the fat I can find. And even when I don't share something with Bill before sending it out to an editor, I still hear his voice in my head as I edit.

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The lessons I've learned at Bill's house are with me every time I face a blank screen or scratch a typed page with a red pen. But just as important as anything he's taught me is the friendship I've gained along the way. I did not always go to Bill for advice. Whenever one of my stories was published, I'd bring the magazine or journal to his house, and we'd marvel at the layout or the other names on nearby pages. His joy over my successes often inspired me to write something else. And, when the mail brought nothing but rejection letters, he'd share a beer with me as we criticized the editorial decisions and discussed methods of retribution.

Bill is sick now. Congestive heart failure keeps him bedridden for most of the time. Occasionally, he'll have a good day, and I'll visit. We still talk about books and writing, what's going on in the world of publishing, and arcana of the English language. He still rants with vigor, but that tires him out so the length of our discussions is limited.

Bill has been more than a mentor to me; he's part teacher, part confidant, part friend. In the years since I first asked for his help, I have become a professional writer, with all of my income generated by the words I produce. Bill made this possible. He taught me hard lessons and gave me comfort when I faltered. While I will always strive to be a better writer and a better editor, I know I am a better person for knowing him.

Bill Glose

Bill Glose is a contributing editor with *Virginia Living*, author of *The Human Touch*, and winner of the 2001 F. Scott Fitzgerald Short Story Contest. Hundreds of his articles and stories have appeared in numerous publications.

A story steeped in its time and place

DURING THE Great Depression, my father was a legendary figure in the mountains of western North Carolina. Whether they wrestled plows, labored in mills, or hauled whiskey by the dark of the moon, the bone-tough hillbillies of his generation were bound each summer Sunday by a common bond, a cultural phenomenon of the rural South that lifted their spirits even higher than fire-and-brimstone preaching: semi-pro baseball. Every village, institution, or enterprise that could round up a dozen men not crippled by war, flu epidemics, or the quotidian brutality of mountain life fielded a team. Baseball was the defining sport of many Appalachian communities. ... This was the era of file-sharpened cleats and emery ball pitchers, when red-clay playing fields the color and substance of brick exacted a payment in flesh for every diving catch or slide into home. These were hard times, this was a hard place, and garments worn to work or to play were as often stained with blood as with dirt.

—*Bill Walsh*

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