



Don Graves Remembered

Author(s): Tom Romano

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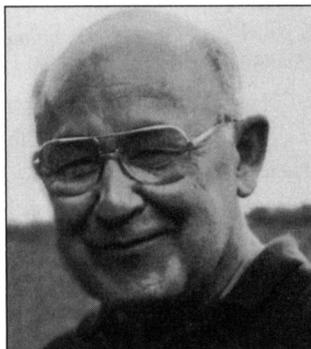
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Don Graves Remembered

Don Graves died Tuesday, September 28, 2010. In the early 1980s, Don blew open the door to teaching children to write. His qualitative research and subsequent 26 books transformed the teaching of writing in elementary schools. Don gave many of us our first cues about how to hold productive writing conferences with students. He showed us how much could be learned by the simple, powerful strategy of sitting beside children and asking them about their writing. He was a public lecturer who captivated audiences.¹



and 1989/1990. Since then, I saw Don once or twice a year, always at an NCTE conference. Don was critical to my professional life: No Don Graves, no *Clearing the Way* (1987). And that first book of mine opened so many doors.

“There’s someone in my office I want you to meet,” Don said to me in the spring of 1985.

I was 36 years old, part of the first cohort of four graduate students in the new doctoral program in reading and writing instruction at UNH.

“This is Philippa Stratton,” said Don, “my editor at Heinemann.”

Philippa was becoming an icon herself in the world of literacy education. The books Heinemann was publishing comprised a doctoral reading list for those seeking to know more about the teaching of writing. She got right to the point, “What we don’t have at Heinemann right now, Tom, is a book about teaching writing in high school. Don says you’re the man to do it. Would you like to write a book?”

Don did that for people. In addition to his perceptive research and his sensitive teaching, he was a catalyst. Interact with Don, talk with Don, listen to Don, and soon you were revising your teaching and making room in your life to write.

And now Don Graves is gone. Three days after I learned of his death from pneumonia, I worked in my garden, putting it to bed for the season. That sunny afternoon I tilled the soil in three different patterns, so I wouldn’t keep following the ruts I created with my first pass. Don would have liked my staying out of ruts, and he would have understood the foundational work I was doing to get the ground ready for next spring’s planting.

“The first time I saw Don in action was in Montreal,” said one of my colleagues at Miami University. “I was galvanized by his quiet power. There were several hundred in the room, but I felt as if we were sitting together having a conversation, as if he were speaking directly to me. Not lecturing, just saying, ‘Let me tell you what I’ve found out about teaching and children and writing.’”

Thomas Newkirk—a longtime colleague of Don’s at the University of New Hampshire—has described how audiences responded “enthusiastically to [Don’s] humor, his stories of children . . . his descriptions of their writing, and his ability to mimic conversations with these children. At times, these stories had the weight of parables. . . . He would alternate from humor to pathos to indignation without any notes, never losing his audience” (Newkirk, 2009, p. 125).

It has been a long time since I studied with Don at the University of New Hampshire: 1984/1985

¹To hear a conversation with Tom Romano and Penny Kittle about Don Graves, go to www.ncte.org/journals/la.

Don kept physically fit, even in his seventies, running half marathons, cross country skiing, and cycling, which included long biking trips in Europe with his wife, Betty. Don had just turned eighty on September 11. He would have understood why I spread manure on one raised bed and dug it in with a spade, the earth taking on a dark richness the longer I worked. I raked that raised bed smooth, then sat down beside it with the biggest garlic bulbs I'd harvested in July, which I broke into cloves and pressed into the soil.

Don understood the pleasure I take in planting, tending, and harvesting. He knew about growth and development, and not just in children. One of his books is titled *A Researcher Learns to Write* (1984). Over the years, he had developed as a writer. His

colleague and close friend was Donald M. Murray, the renowned writing teacher at UNH who unleashed the idea of "writing process" upon the educational landscape (Murray, 1969). Murray and Graves talked several times a day, at the very least by telephone. They traded manuscripts. They talked writing—Graves the literacy researcher, Murray the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. Don's writing became clear, engaging, and persuasive, unmuddled by educational jargon.

Don's work helped teachers teach children to write. One of his fundamental beliefs was the importance of writing "in a country whose founding fathers prized the expression of ideas in a free society" (Graves, 2002, p. 11). He lamented that most schools placed more emphasis on children

ACT ON IT . . .

Donald Graves encouraged us to teach writing by encouraging our students to write and writing ourselves. Do you write regularly as a teacher? Would you like to begin? Writer's notebooks or sketchbooks can be wonderful catalysts for noticing, collecting, and idea generating.

Buy a writer's notebook

In addition to being practical, your notebook should be an aesthetic pleasure. Some things to consider when choosing your writer's notebook:

- It should be convenient enough to carry around with you. It can even be an excuse to purchase that bigger purse or leather satchel you've been eyeing.
- You should like it; whether bright and busy with design or minimalist and calming, you should take pleasure in pulling it out.
- Find a great pen. Splurge or save, just make sure it flows as fluidly as the ideas in your head.

Where do I buy my notebook?

Etsy.com—a website focusing on handmade and vintage items

Local bookstore—simple to lavish designs

Make your own—find a cheap one from the grocery store and channel your inner scrapbooker

Borrow one of your children's—decide whether you prefer Jonas Brothers, kittens, or Spiderman (Free!)

I've got my notebook, now what?

Great! Now go make time in your life (as difficult as it may be). Take a few moments—during lunch, carpool, evening, or those boring TV commercials—and write. Jot down a few sentences, note ideas for your classroom, or thoughts to share with your family. Model yourself as a writer. Learn to respect your own craft, and pass this respect along to your students.

—Meghan Pendergast

Doctoral student, Early Childhood Education Department
Georgia State University

receiving information than sending it. It's crucial, he believed, that children participate in public conversations, that they voice their concerns and perceptions, that they sound their "barbaric yawp" (Whitman, 1855, p. 79), to quote another important American voice. (Don understood why Whitman was my intellectual ally. The first time I mentioned the poet in Don's presence, he exclaimed, "Whitman! The voice man!")

Don himself was a voice man. In his first book, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (1983), he wrote that "voice is the dynamo of the writing process" (p. 31). I read that book in April 1984, a week before Don visited Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. The book—so full of Don's wisdom and voice—imbued me with his spirit. I'd read books about teaching writing by Don Murray, Ken Macrorie, and Peter Elbow, had been instructed by them and valued the pleasure of their voices. But reading *Writing* was different. I had 13 years experience teaching writing in high school, and here was a book about teaching children to write that had me nodding my head, bending down page corners, and sparking ideas I could use with the teenagers I taught.

During the several days Don visited Miami, he met with faculty and students, gave a public lecture, and, most memorably to me, demonstrated

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to an audience how he taught writing. One afternoon, Don worked with eight 9-year-old children around a big table in the middle of a large room. On the perimeter of the room sat 60 observers—university and public school teachers and some parents, all curious to see just how Dr. Graves's idea of writing workshop actually looked. He was showing, not telling, and a videographer taped the event.

I wondered if the formal setting might intimidate the children. It didn't appear to—largely, I think, because of Don's steadying presence. The children sat in chairs too big for them; their heads

seemed to float above the table top. Don sat tall, eager to learn from them. His directness, clarity, and sense of humor put them at ease. The respect this man's voice and body language communicated made them alert. He didn't talk down to them. He wasn't phony. He wanted to hear from them, and they knew it. Despite the camera, lights, and onlookers, Don gave the children every bit of his focus. He got them talking about books they had read and then about topics they could write about. If Eve Bunting could write about celebrations and Jane Yolen could write about an owl moon, then they could write about a recent tornado, the beginning of little league season, a new puppy. When momentum to write had built, Don passed out paper and new pencils. Everyone at that table, including Don, leaned into the paper and wrote. That atmosphere was infectious, and many of us in the audience began to write, too.

I was still imbued with Don's voice, philosophy, and spirit from *Writing*. That and the remarkable scene unfolding before my eyes made language bubble up in me, which I scribbled on the folded program I held. The rush of words became a poem I developed over several drafts and sent to *Language Arts*:

Eight Children Teach Donald Graves

Nine pencils break the surface of awareness,
jutting into the air,
slanted back like
yellow, orange-tipped shark fins,
entering chartless white,
exploring hazy depths.

Nine voices search a scent,
suddenly lurch,
lose the line,
pause,
pick it up again,
and move from
cloudy, roiling waters
of new thought
through warm currents of reception,
straits of questioning,
and tidal imbalances
on to a clear
precise sea of meaning. (Romano, 1985, p.142)

Two months after Don's visit to Miami, I was accepted into the new doctoral program at UNH. I began graduate work in the fall of 1984. My assistantship had me working on the research team headed by Don and his colleague, Jane Hansen. I spent 2 1/2 hours four days a week in a third-grade classroom during the children's reading and writing block.

Through my observation and interaction with the children, I learned about the roots of literacy, about the intentionality of young writers, about the slow development of skills. Whenever skeptics said, "This writing process is all well and good, but what about skills?" Don replied, "What skills are you talking about?" He knew the skeptics were talking about spelling or handwriting or punctuation, but he wanted to draw them out. Then he told them of other critical skills writers needed that were often given short shrift in school: the skill of choosing topics well, the skill of asking good questions, the skill of focusing, the skill of elaborating, the skill of cutting excess words. . . . Don could go on at length about important skills and experiences writers needed before he got to where the commas go.

I learned what spurred children to write and what derailed them. I learned the importance of a community of writers who collaborated in both casual and formal ways, who offered critical response to each other and mutual support—all ideas I took back to my high school students then and use with my college students today. My daily work that year with the children and Don Graves's influence were irreplaceable to my development as a writing teacher.

One raw winter morning, the gray sky pressing down on Mast Way School, I pulled into the misty school yard and parked. Children milled about, their backpacks and coats colorful above the damp pavement. I retrieved my own backpack and trudged toward the school. Across the parking lot, Don skipped out of his car. He wore a blue turtle neck and a woolen sport coat. He carried a leather-covered notebook in which he'd write down the morning's surprises. He moved briskly, his large head unmistakable, bobbing above the children. His expression was expectant, his eyes intense, his jaw firm. I was immediately lifted. We were going to be with children. We were going to be surprised by what they wrote and said. We were going to learn. When Don caught sight of me, I raised my hand. He nodded, pumped his fist, and headed into the school.

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Tom Romano is a professor at Miami University and can be reached at romanots@muohio.edu.

CLA Silent Auction

The Children's Literature Assembly will again hold a silent auction of children's literature illustrations. Bidding will begin in September at www.childrensliteratureassembly.org and will continue through the CLA Breakfast on November 20 at the NCTE convention. Winners will be announced at the breakfast. Pieces for this year's auction include illustrations donated by Shadra Strickland, Doug Florian, and Robert Weinstock.
