What can I say about teaching writing workshops that hasn’t already been said about—scuba diving? It’s dangerous, always an adventure, and the deeper you go, the more rewarding it can be. When working with young writers, you’re never short of a few challenges, but when you unlock a young person’s ability to articulate him- or herself, you do more than just get them to turn something in on time, you revolutionize the way they’ll interact with the world for the rest of their lives. The gift of language is truly priceless. It can pull even the worst cases out of the dark, by giving them the ability to communicate their frustrations and challenges during a time in life (like high school) where your learning conditions and needs are so vital.

She was in the back of the room of 15 students talking, laughing, playing, flirting, arguing, and text messaging, all waiting for the workshop to begin. Buried in her journal, reading something that could have been a death threat by how intensely she was scanning its contents. She couldn’t have been a day over 16, Latina, dressed a bit overly sophisticated for her age. One eyebrow firmly raised as if her journal told her something about herself she disagreed with. In front of her, a girl and her boyfriend argued about their inability to communicate, which seemed to be getting nowhere. I interrupted the social carnival in my normal way:

“Ooooooooooo kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk!”

People finished up their last fragments of conversations with whispers as everyone took their seats and grabbed for something to write with. The girl in the back didn’t break a moment of concentration from her journal, as if she wasn’t even here for my workshop.

It’s 4:00 pm, one hour after school’s out, and she is still on campus. She is definitely here for my workshop.

I asked everyone to take five minutes and do a freewrite exercise, starting with the first line, “How could you do this to me/us/them.” Everyone but her began to write frantically, trying to come up with something FRESH to share within the five minutes given. I heard a slight sucking of the teeth from her corner of the room, and looked up to find that her pen wasn’t moving.

I decided to wait until the prompt was over to see if her story unfolded during the quick sharing rotation before the full workshop began. She stared into the screen of her phone for the full five minutes until I called everyone’s attention back to me.

“Ok, that’s five minutes, finish your last thoughts and put it to bed. Anyone have anything they want to share before we begin?”

Another teeth-sucking sound from her corner of the room.
A few people raise their hands, a few beginner poems are shared, and I get a good sense of what the room’s writing experience is. A great tool for me, but clearly not the prompt to get Ms. Phone-a-lot in the back’s intellectual mind racing.

We proceeded with an hour workshop dissecting the idea of freedom of speech, based on a story I told about a colleague of mine who performed a very “anti-American poem” as some would call it, on an HBO television program that was based on the very idea of free speech. Following his performance he was investigated and dissected by the FBI for quite some time, for his radical opinions and ambitious method of expressing them on such a public forum. The workshop consists of hearing the poem, telling the story, and getting the room to a place of understanding between what is promised, and what often becomes the reality of our freedom of speech policy. Much of the conversation is referenced back to other American icons that were terrorized by our government for expressing an opinion that countered the existing narrative: The radio station that opposed McCarthy, John Lennon, MLK, the Black Panther Party, etc. etc.

We review the idea of the ripple effect. Many students question whether or not his actions did anything but get him inconvenienced by the government. We talk a bit about drawing a line in the sand.

It may seem pointless, something anyone can come along and kick over, brush away, make disappear, but if there is always someone there to draw it again, persistence will prevail. This colleague of mine was an inspiration for other people to draw lines where they witnessed injustice. A man/woman willing to sacrifice a bit of him- or herself for the betterment of his or her community and country. Anti-American? In many ways the epitome of American to me.

What I’d like everyone to do is to think of a time where you saw a line that needed to be drawn, and draw it for me now. Draw me your line in the sand. Somewhere you feel an injustice that must stop where you draw this line of yours. Write for...the next 30 minutes. Don’t let your pencil leave the paper. If you can’t think of anything...tell me why, but once you begin, don’t stop.

Pencils touch bottom lips. Eyes look toward the sky. People stare at pages. For a minute nothing happens. At this point it is very important for me to be as silent as possible. My mood sets the tone for the atmosphere of the next 30 minutes. One by one pens begin to shake on their desks. Some slow at first, then enthusiastic at moments. Some ignore my instruction to keep writing at all costs and pause for long periods of time to think of the next line. My perfectionists.

Ms. Phone-a-lot is bored. She writes not a word for the entire period. She opens a book and reads instead.

Can’t complain.

When I ask for people to wrap up their thoughts, deep sighs of relief are mixed in with requests for more time. Either way, it’s over. I give all of the eager participants a chance to showcase anything clever they may have discovered in the last half an hour. The quiet ones share last. My rappers and slam veterans’ hands are up first. They are both wonderful. The slammers’ writing is both well pieced together and ready for performance, but usually there are many filler words placed in for style purposes that we will filter out over time. The rappers can’t do anything but rhyme in bar form, although as a “rapper” myself I can somewhat peer through the constraints of the style they’ve chosen and hear the clever undertone they have yet to fully unleash. This is such a gift to receive. A model I have to help put together but I can see what it could be like the cover of the box is buried in the moments in their freewrites where they truly let go. They stopped judging
themselves. They ignored who they had told their peers who they were for a moment and allowed themselves to be bigger than high school.

Ms. Phone-a-lot in the back raises her hand.

“Yes?”

What is it about people and poetry and needing to fuckin’ complain about everything all the time? Like what’s the deal with raggin’ on the government all the time and all this fight the power bullshit? Its crap. People write all these things just to get some applause or whatever but it’s so empty. If you’re gonna draw in the sand with a line or whatever then go do it don’t write about going to do it, that’s bullshit.

I can’t help but smile enthusiastically. I think I might have said that very same thing the day before to a friend.

“Are you asking me personally?”

“Well, YEAH.”

Tupac said something that really stayed with me. “I won’t be the one to change the world, but will definitely spark the brain that WILL change the world.” Do you think the phrase “I have a dream” is any less powerful than the LA riots? One of physical action and one speech of action? I feel them both to be equally as important. And those with the gift to inspire with language must practice such inspiration, not ONLY to write what you feel but live it in practice. This is not to have us in this room breeding supercitizens by any means, I sure as hell know I’m no freedom fighter, but I definitely view my writing as a way to speak up for people who have yet to speak up for themselves. Giving voice to the voiceless. That is every writer’s....power.

I don’t think I satisfied her with that at all.

The workshop sharing continues, and before I know it is 6 pm and time to close up shop. I mingle for a bit with different students before the room is just this young woman and I. On her way out the door I ask her if we will ever hear some of that writing in the book she clutches to her chest as she walks out.

“Oh no. I’m no good.”

“Somehow I doubt that”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

She doesn’t come back to my workshop the following week.

A month or so later I get a myspace message from her out of the blue. I recognize the face and open curiously. She writes something to the extent of:

So…. I saw you on TV the other day at my aunt’s house. You did this poem...about women’s body image...anyway I just thought I’d tell you that I really loved what you said and it was…very refreshing to hear. It.... I needed it. Anyway I’m still writing a lot sorry I haven’t been at your workshop. Are you still doing them?—Candace

“Hey Candace, I’m glad you enjoyed the poem. Just...drawing a line in the sand. You never know who they help. Workshops are starting back next Monday, 4 to 6 like last time. Maybe I’ll see you there and finally hear a bit of that writing of yours. Rafael Casal”

She came back. Shared.

Her writing was amazing.