Neurosis Spasmodica & the Myth of the Well-Composed Man

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Thank you to the LaFollette family for sponsoring a lecture series celebrating the Humanities that has brought us here together year after year. I'm deeply honored to be standing on the stage this afternoon, a stage that has been graced by so many talented colleagues. Thank you, in absentia, to Derek Nelson, for his generous introduction. Thank you to Jeremy Hartnett for directing the LaFollette series. Thank you to Julia Phipps for her lovely poster and all her work bringing the event together. And thank you to all of you for your time and attention. I endeavor to deserve it.

Today I want to talk about the intersection of three fields that have structured my academic career: literary studies, disability studies, and the teaching of composition. I invite you to explore with me the ideas we've inherited about what good writing is and what proper bodies are. To get at that, I'll begin by telling you two stories about nineteenth-century poets doing stunts:

One story is heroic and victorious. In 1810, at the impulsive age of 22, about-to-be-famous poet Lord Byron decided swim across the treacherous stretch of water that separates Asia and Europe, then called the Hellespont. The straight is only about 3 miles across, but as you can see from these artist's renditions, it was a busy and often unpredictable place. Byron was emulating Leander, a hero of Greek mythology who supposedly swam the Hellespont every night to reach his languishing lover Hero on the other side—until one fateful night when Leander drowned, and, in the way of tales of great love, Hero dashed herself on the rocks out of grief.

Byron fared better. He made it across the Hellespont without difficulty, a feat that became part of Byron's own mythology as a manly and amorous Romantic figure. Indeed, he included versions of this story in many of his epic poems and, at the height of his considerable poetic fame, he would still describe his display of aquatic prowess as his greatest accomplishment. Here is a painting of Byron being served by a doting fan on the other side of the Hellespont—no watery doom here, only the feminine admiration due to the victor.

The other story is less resounding—it concerns a poet who is out of print today and an act that no one is in a rush to emulate. About fifty years after Byron got in the water, the Scottish poet Sydney Dobell also undertook a pilgrimage in honor of his hero—in this case, the Christian apostle St. Paul. Dobell wanted to see what St. Paul must have seen when he arrived in Italy around the year 60, on his storied journey to Rome. Dobell planned to alight on the coast of the seaside town, called Pozzuoli, where St. Paul first set foot. However, when Dobell tried to literally follow in Saint Paul's footsteps, the apparently firm ground crumbled under his feet: he fell several meters into a hidden cavern, gravely injuring himself.

These jarringly different stories—one of heroism, one of failure, one of fitness, one of injury—have a long afterlife in literary criticism. Here is a literary critic from 1950, comparing Byron's swim and Dobell's attempted homage to Paul.

"Both gestures were no doubt dramatic; but Byron's desire was propelled by a physical prowess which assured its fulfillment, whereas Dobell's saintlier ambition was frustrated in the hostility of the earth itself—by the collapse of the earth beneath his feet and a sorry fall into a subterranean cavern" (Jerome Buckley, *The Victorian Temper*)

In this telling, Byron's fitness makes Dobell look pathetic. Here's Byron, motivated, after all, by the erotic lure of mythic consummation, a fulfillment that is "assured" by "physical prowess." And there's Dobell, who's "saintlier ambition" seems pale and bloodless by comparison. Indeed, the earth itself dissolves under Dobell—Byron can cleave the waters, but Dobell can barely stand on the ground.

At their heart, though, both stories have to do with poets and bodies—the poetry of bodies and the bodies of poetry. And yet, they both leave out an important part—in fact, a body part. Despite how thoroughly Dobell is unmanned by Byron here, only one of these men had an actual disability: Byron was born with a club foot. This is an illustration from Victorian medical science. People born with a club foot have a shortened Achilles tendon that turns the bottom of the foot outward, so that you'd be walking on the side of your foot. Byron would have limped; he wore a corrective shoe since childhood. Being in the water must have been a balm to him; there he could be the athletic star that he could never be on firm ground. This fact is not included in the Byron mythology. Nor is it generally know that a professional diver swam with him as a guide—and, in fact, got to the other side first. Moreover, a ship accompanied them in case of emergency. Sensible, no doubt, but excised from the final draft of Byron's heroic story: he wasn't the independent male conqueror of nature—he needed help.

In this light, the insistence on Byron's fit masculinity hits differently. The repetitive characterization of him as a hero--whose body—and not just body of verse—is superior to other men's begins to seem as if it is meant to conceal something, to replace the disabled body with a fitter, more perfectly controlled version.

And I think that we like to do that. We, as writers, as students, as teachers, we at this liberal arts college that puts such a high value on writing, we who devote so much of our time to writing, we all like to do this. The finished essay, the final draft turned in to the professor or the articles professors send out for peer review, we like for them to portray us, even if implicitly, as more whole, more cohesive, braver, than we are. Indeed, why not? Isn't that how you maintain a good GPA or get published? Isn't that what I'm trying to do here, on this stage? We might not have a century of cheerleaders congratulating us on our Byronic prowess when we write something good, but we do feel good when people describe our writing as "strong" or "powerful" or "masterful."

I want all of us to be able to write in ways that garner such accolades. I've been teaching some version or other of first-year college writing since 1998. I believe in this mission, and I think of it as a matter of access to the language of power. But I do want us to remember that getting there means "papering over"—and here I am thinking, really, of those reams of paper our printers spit out—papering over some earlier, less formed, even deformed version of ourselves, of our ideas.

This is what American essayist Ann Lamott calls "the shitty first draft." She describes it as overlong, self-indulgent, disorganized. In one of her essays—one that many of you students have

been assigned to read by your English professors—she worries that she will write a shitty first draft and die in a freak accident before she can fix it and that people will see her terrible writing and rate her accordingly. Note—she's not worried about dying so much as people judging her writing. Or, as the maternal cliché goes, you better wear your good underwear in case of a car crash. We've all undoubtedly felt that shame that is associated with showing our writing, the act of courage it is to give to someone else to read. The red-faced rereading of something we thought we'd done well and finding it silly, self-important, a typo in the first line.

What I want to do today is try to get at that associative link between writing and shame. I want to pull apart those stories about Byron and Dobell to figure out why they seem to serve as elaborate smokescreens for Byron's disability. That is, I want to think about how sound bodies got linked to sound texts and how shame fringes our efforts to conceal our flawed selves with unflawed writing.

To do that, I want to turn again to the 19th century and describe the school of poetry to which Dobell belonged: The Spasmodics. The most notable Spasmodics were Sydney Dobell, about whom I've spoken, Alexander Smith, and Phillip Bailey. Even such luminaries as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote poems many considered "Spasmodic." They were a group of loosely associated poets who rose to considerable fame in the 1850s. A nineteenth century literary magazine claimed that Spasmodic poets "received a more universal and flattering welcome than was ever before awarded to an English poet." Spasmodic poetry evoked intense emotional states using unusual, dazzling images and irregular meters. Their book-length poems often dwelt in detail—something like seven thousand lines of detail-- on a lonely, tormented speaker's plight.

Now, it's important to note that these poets never called themselves "Spasmodic". This literary nickname name was a taunt lobbed at them by hostile critics, who began to worry that gorgeous verse about wrestling with personal demons was out of tune with a high Victorian aesthetic of work, duty, and restraint. As taunts go, "Spamosidc" was remarkably effective; by the end of the century, Dobell and Smith were no longer leading poets, and today they are all but forgotten, long out of print.

You can see why "Spasmodic" was such a poisonous barb—who wants to be a "spaz"? You can still hear that insult on playgrounds today, although, interestingly, it's recently gotten pushback as an ableist slur. In England especially "spaz" is considered as offensive as we might consider a word like "retarded" here. It generally means losing control or going wild, but it also has been used as an insult to describe people with disorders like cerebral palsy, which affect balance and movement. In the past few years, both Lizzo and Beyonce changed song lyrics containing "spaz" after fans pointed out that it's problematic to mock disabled people. For example—and here I might be the first person, but hopefully not the last, to do a close reading of Beyonce lyrics in a LaFollette talk, Beyonce changed a line from her sung "Heated" from "spazzin' on that ass, spaz on that ass" to "blastin' on that ass, blast on that ass." One is undoubtedly less ableist, but I'll leave it to you which is racier. Sadly for the Spasmodics, disabled people had fewer allies in the nineteenth century. Rendered absurd and childish by this insult, they dissolved like the Italian earth under Dobell's feet.

It's interesting that one of the most damming literary critiques of the nineteenth century relied not on negative analysis of Spasmodic writing, but on a physical insult: the body of work is most

effectively shut down by mocking the body of the poet. It's a bit of bullying: can't you even control your own limbs/lines? Implicit in all of this is the assumption that disability is shameful, infantilizing, and best kept out of sight.

What gets lost in this literary exorcism? I've said that the Spasmodics focused on the plight of a tormented speaker. In particular, much Spasmodic poetry is about tormented *writers*. Many Spasmodic poems tell a similar story: a poet is trying—and largely failing—to write a great poem. Spasmodic poems dwell in detail on the pleasure and pain of *trying* to write: composition itself is the plot, and it is not going well. Spasmodic poems dramatize the drafting process, both on the meta-level of plot and on the textual level, as their poems are most well known for their digressions-within-digressions, incohesive stacks of gorgeous images upon images, and general lack of forward momentum. I'd argue that almost anyone who has ever tried to write anything is familiar with their drafts getting way out of control. Most published writing disappears those off-topic rambles or bursts of cool phrases that don't really get us anywhere, but for the Spasmodics, that's the whole point. That is, they saw writing not as a fantasy of gaining control, but an experiment in losing it.

Here is an example from Alexander Smith's *A Life-Drama*. The speaker, an aspiring writer, faces a bad case of writer's block:

> Bare, bald and tawdry, as a fingered moth,
> Is my poor life
> When hearts beat to this tune [the writer's tune], and hands are weak.
> We find our aspirations quenched in tears.
> The tears of impotence, and self-contempt.
> That loathsome weed, up-springing in the heart,
> Like nightshade 'mong the ruins of a shrine ;
> I am so cursed, . . .
> O, let me rend this breathing tent of flesh ;
> Uncoop the soul . . .

Smith inscribes the pain of trying to write something good in physical terms: the living blood, the weak hands, the wasted tears, the breathing tent of flesh that limits the divine efforts of the soul. They are poetics of the body weak, lingering in masochistic pleasure on feverish corporeal despair. It's an extreme example, but isn't this feeling common? Doesn't this capture the anxiety of anyone trying to write? Perhaps this explains their initial popularity: haven't we all felt the anguish of being incompetent when we mean to be decisive?

Here's Dobell on a similar theme of frustrated desire:

> That the head should write,
> And, with a gush of living blood, the heart
> Should blot it . . .
> Ah! ah! ah!
> Ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! [10 ahs]
> By Satan! This is well. What! am I judged?

Dobell is right—he IS judged by what he writes. The speakers of Spasmodic poems, as we see in both these passages from Smith and Dobell, worry not just about their own ability to create, but how their writing and their selves will be perceived by others. This, after all, is the most fraught and difficult part of creating: what will people say about us? How will we be judged?

History had a bleak answer for the Spasmodics. Their contemporary critics expressed the kind of hostility that suggests fear or even repulsion. Here are some examples of what critics were saying:

"[Spasmodic verse is] the offspring of an effeminate Nature-worship, without self respect, without true manhood, because it exhibits the poet as the puppet of his own momentary sensations and not as a man superior to nature . . ." ("Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope,")

"[Smith lacks] a root idea, and intelligible theme which shall command the sympathies of other minds . . . . These obtained, he will shake his faults like dew-drops from his mane; he will find his tropes thus disciplined, will not only obtain double force from their fitness, but will be intrinsically finer than the random growths of accident." (William-Edmonstoune Aytoun "Alexander Smith's Poems," 1854)

(So, basically, they need a thesis statement)

"The 'poetry of doubt,' however pretty, would stand us in little stead if we were threatened with a second Armada. It will conduce little to the valour, 'virtues,' manhood of any English man to be informed by any poet, even in the most melodious verse, illustrated by the most startling and pancosmic metaphors, 'See what a highly organized and peculiar stomach-ache I have had!' . . . What gospel can there be in such a message to any honest man who has either to till the earth, plan a railroad, colonize Australia, or fight the despots, is hard to discover." (Charles Kingsley, "Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope")

Real men are off on tasks of Empire, containing, controlling, and taming natural and national enemies rather than dwelling on the self. These critics are informing us that Poetry needs to look like Victory. Writing ought to look like winning. Poetic tropes better be as disciplined as dutiful troops. The writer must embody Valor, not self-doubt. He (and it is a he) must be a Conqueror not only of himself and his pen, but of colonial land, non-British peoples, and even nature itself. You can see that the stakes here were high: a well-composed poem implied a healthy self and a robust national project. On the other hand, diffuse or incoherent texts signified ill-composed bodies and minds: a feminizing moral rot at the center of civic life.

But poetry doesn't have to be like this, writing doesn't have to be like this. Most people's experience of writing is closer to the creative and personal and even sometimes tormenting practice of the Spasmodics and further from the bravado and machismo of the military general. We already know the toll it can take on mental health to be told that one must be in control at all times. And aren't there more productive metaphors for the creative task than to subdue and dominate? What about exploring, questioning, proposing, striving? The creative endeavor seems to me so far removed from the clamped-down rigor of the dutiful warrior.

My goal here isn't to defend the Spasmodics, although I do think they're worth a read, but to draw attention to the ways that Spasmoidc shaming is quietly encoded in how think and talk about writing today, especially how we teach writing in schools and colleges. I'll approach that question the long way, by taking us to the Victorian medical laboratory.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw unprecedented discoveries in the workings of the nervous system. Before this, it was possible to imagine that the brain and the heart ruled the body hierarchy. The discovery of a dispersed nervous system with semi-autonomous electrical pulses threatened this idea of order.

In his study of nineteenth century science and literature, *Nerves and Narrations*, Peter Logan points out that one of the main effects of the switch from a centralized to a dispersed internal system is that "with the diffusion of its structure of meaning, the body ceases to function as a centralized reservoir of knowable truth" (170). This is the nervous system extracted from the body of Harriet Cole, a Black woman who died of tuberculosis in her thirties. It made the scientist who performed the operation, Rufus Weaver, famous in the early twentieth century.
Victorian science was marked by similarly grisly experiments in which headless animals dance, paralyzed accident victims are given surreptitious erections, and a mare with a cleaver dividing her brain is probed into clenching and relaxing her sphincter. Alarmingly, scientists violently forced dead and dying bodies to display what all living bodies were found to have: a nervous function divorced from the brain, the mind, the soul, and God.

During this period, researchers described a "class of Spasmodic Diseases," characterized by painful convulsions, including epilepsy, inappropriate male arousal and ejaculation, vomiting, various twitching and tics, lockjaw, and varieties of whooping cough and cholera. The body is disrupted from within, as spasms attack base-level body functions: the ability to swallow, breathe, enunciate, and control bowel movements or sexual organs. Effecting the most explicit, even shameful, of bodily failures, spasms expose the functions of the body that regulate its systems of ingress and egress, its boundaries. Spasms figured as sudden failures of the body's own cohesion. So, in other words, at the same time that literary critics were labeling poems "spasmodic," medical researchers were diagnosing bodies using the same language. Both emerge as deeply disabled.

It wasn't only bodies that could go Spasmodic, either. In the 1860s, medical researcher Henry Maudsley describes a type of mental illness he calls "Neurosis spasmodica,"a condition in which a person is "liable to whimsical caprices of thought and feeling; and, although he may act calmly and rationally for the most part, yet now and then his unconscious nature, overpowering him and surprising him, instigates eccentric or extravagant actions . . ." (224).

Critical discourse about Spasmodic poems and medical discourse about spasmodic bodies are both marked by panic about losing control. In the Victorian medical imagination, spasms marked the difference between a knowable body and a radically disconnected one; a body that was almost outside the realm of meaning. When literary critics employed the term "Spasmodic" to refer to poetry, then, they were impugning more than style. They were facing the painful and always unanswered question of whether or not people can control or know their own bodies or minds. The implications were as threatening to notions of physical and mental fitness as they were to notions of masculinity and purposeful writing.

The national character at issue here—both sturdy enough to defend the Empire and vulnerable enough to be undermined by a few lines of excitable pentameter—is the gentleman. According to the nineteenth-century ideal, the gentleman was marked by his composure. The word "composure" resonates with physical and textual meanings: human bodies and bodies of written work are enmeshed in the same etymological web. The verb "to compose" is used as early as the late fifteenth century to mean "to put together, make up," and from that time it applied equally to persons and to written or creative work. Like an essay that asserts its conclusions gracefully and authoritatively, a gentleman always seemed naturally, even effortlessly, composed.

We here in this room may know more intimately than most how gentlemanliness, as a concept, is often illusive, that living up to it takes time and effort. You don't become a gentleman just through the desire to be one, any more than a clear cogent thesis is the first thing to appear in a writer's mind. We work at these things. It's important to remind ourselves that gentlemanliness, like clear writing, is always an evolving process. Progress is a result of failure; drafts are never finished. We also know that a restrictive definition of gentlemanliness—this old-fashioned Victorian one, with its insistence on fierce domination—is an impossible standard of masculinity with no room for empathy, retrospection, vulnerability, rest, or human connection. This version of the gentlemen has sent so many men to their graves.

But we don't have to accept that as our collective definition of what gentlemanliness means today. We can shed the gendered straitjacket it implies, remove both the idea of the writer and the idea of the gentleman from their roots in an exclusive system of gender, race, and class privilege. We only invite more voices in when we recognize that efforts to develop, as people and as writers, are more important, in and of themselves, than the seamless finished product. What would this free up in us? What kinds of approaches to self and creativity would it allow?

One way to ponder these questions is to look to history. Just as we can historicize the idea of the gentleman, we can historicize how writing has been taught. The Spasmodics were writing at a time when nineteenth-century debates over the qualities of good poetry were translated into lasting rules for composition students. I'm talking here about the codification of the "advice for writers" genre or the primers for aspiring students. While today's curricula tend to separate poetry and prose, composition manuals of the nineteenth century often relied on versification to teach the classroom essay. In 1848, a famed Cambridge professor advised students "that the study, and still more the practice of versification" will help them "discover many of the great primary laws of [prose] composition."

Today the relationship between what poetry can teach and what composition students need to learn is often occluded by the sense that poetry is emotive and subjective while prose (especially college writing) is thoroughly logical. We can see the seeds of this attitude in the 19th century. Just as many composition handbooks today emphasize correctness over emotive power, the typical Victorian writer's guide would begin with the grammatical ordering of words in a sentence, proceeds through sentence structure, the ordering of sentences in a paragraph, and the ordering of paragraphs in a whole paper.

This desire to keep order is exacerbated by the chaos it was intended to banish, a chaos that was rooted deeply in the nervous system and which shared a name with a strain of evocative poetry:

Spasmsodicism. That frightening slip from control. Writing has long been associated with the projection of strength. In her book *Writing: Gender, Rhetoric, and the Rise of Composition*, writing theorist Miriam Brody argues that throughout the history of composition, from antiquity to today, "good" writing has been equated with traditionally masculine values of mastery, force, restraint, and simplicity. She describes "selves that are productive, coherent, virtuous, and heroic; writing that is plain, forceful, and true." She continues that "Composition, the school essay, was made for man in his image, or as he would like to imagine himself . . . a picture in which all the constituent parts were assembled in a coherent and ordered design" (158). Or, more bluntly, she writes that we've inherited a version of writing advice that amounts to "the relentless naming of parts."

I suggest that looking at the intersection of Spasmodic literature and nascent composition studies can help us see that traditional beliefs about "good" college writing—thesis-centered, overtly structured, economical—are inherited, not natural; historical, not inevitable. The reminder is important because it allows us to consider the implicit associations between writing and health that may block or haunt us as writers. The blank page is scary because it's really a mirror that can reveal more of our complicated selves than we want it to.

All of this depends, though, on the assumption that the quality of the writing measures the quality of the man—but that's too simplistic an equation. Writers don't pin their already-digested ideas down on paper; they create those ideas through a restless, endlessly fecund engagement with words that hone thinking and thinking that hones ideas. The writerly self isn't a projection of mastery or of anything else, it isn't an a priori moral avatar, it's a always-developing production of the dance among thinking, writing, rewriting, rethinking.

We can emphasize writing as an iterative act of self-and-world creation, but we are working within powerful cultural forces that reward seamless mastery and self-control. Think of Byron bolstering his poetic worth by physically parting the waves. That is, it's OK—even noble—to struggle through the writing process as long as you win in the end, make it to the other side of the Hellespont and wait for your praise. It may be that the only way to create an essay that looks and sounds clear, cohesive and controlled is through uncertainty and grappling, but when we cast this journey as a quest for mastery, we imply that the anxiety and unpredictability of writing are necessary demons to be conquered along the way rather than evidence of the hard thinking writers do.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting that we all start writing like Spasmodics. I don't want us to toss out thesis statements and organizing principles and cohesive writerly personas. I want instead to see those as something hard-won, so that when we experience confusion or anxiety, we don't see ourselves as failing, but as engaged in some of the deepest work we do at colleges—writing. It's a deeply human task—perhaps because it takes a long time and it is difficult. I think Spasmodic poets alarmed their hostile critics because they acknowledged and even celebrated that difficulty, rather than pretending that composure ever comes easily. They didn't want to hide the inelegant parts of creativity—and nor do I. We can help students write better—and write better ourselves—when we acknowledge that cohesive, graceful prose is nobody's first language.

With this in mind, one of the things that keeps me up at night is how very easy and how very tempting it is to side-step all of that hard work and let ChatGPT or other artificial intelligence do

our thinking for us. It makes a certain amount of sense: if the goal is to be perfectly composed, why not order that to spec? What better way to project mastery than to refuse to engage with anything complicated? There are no spasms, no rough edges, no surprises in a manufactured essay. Artifical Intelligence has no nervous system, no thrills at all. It's a perfect, lifeless form. How damning that centuries of our advice to writers has made such a thing appealing. I read the Spasmodics as trying to negate the pressure to conformity and control: I'd like to re-evaluate their emphasis on what it feels like to be passionately engaged in the creative act.

In addition to embracing the difficulty of writerly tasks, it's also helpful to remember that no one writes in a vacuum. It's easy to pull up an image of the genius writer in his lonely attic, taking dictation from God, but most of us write in elaborate communities, such as the one represented here, on this campus. We read, write, listen, edit, make and receive suggestions, and write again. We are students, teachers, tutors, mentors, sharers of ideas.

My studies of the Spasmodics has led me to a field of inquiry that emphasizes these lived relationships: that is, disability theory. When critics used the pathologized medical language of "spasms" to describe a school of poetry, they were in effect rendering it disabled. Calling something "disabled" is an effective way to render it invisible, but the link between Spasmodics and disability also provides a critical lense through which to see them and to probe the ideas about writing we've inherited from the controversy over them.

Eva Feder Kittay is a philosopher working today, who, while she was still a graduate student, gave birth to a daughter with profound cognitive and developmental disabilities. Kittay realized that according to some philosophical definitions, her daughter didn't count as a person because she can't reason in the way most can. In response, she posited a refocusing of personhood that privileged not the independent reasoner, but the "inextricable interdependence of humans on one another." If we think of independence as the signpost of success, people who require help with daily functions will only ever be failures. Kittay shifts the focus to interdepence instead of independence. She argues that not only disabled people, but all of us, are profoundly interdependent. Get a job and an apartment? Sounds like striking out on your own, but it really entails entering an elaborate system of interdependence on co-workers, bosses, neighbors, partners, families, alumni and so one. It's true that this is a system in which power accrues unequally (bosses v workers, for example), but it is also a fantasy to imagine that anyone within it is actually independent.

Kittay concludes, "By centering a theory of justice on the inevitability of human dependency and the inextricable nature of our interdependence, we can then look at the fact of human dependency anew. We see it not as an impediment to living well, but as a source of value: a source of connection; an occasion for developing our capacities for thought, empathy, sensitivity, trust, ingenuity, and creativity; in short, as providing for us the conditions of our distinctive human freedom and dignity."

If we apply this to the work of writing and teaching writing, it is clear that writing happens in systems of interdependence with others—tutors, classmates, teachers. What writer hasn't honed their ideas over conversation in bars or coffeeshops, classrooms and libraries? What student hasn't felt reassured by a meeting in their professor's office, a tet a tet with a classmate or a writing tutor? The composed self is not a self at all, but the interaction of many minds and

conversations. This is one of the founding principles behind peer-led Writing Centers. It's why the Wabash Liberal Arts Immersion Program, one of the college's premier attempts at creating belongingness and retention, features a peer-led daily three-hour writing lab to support communities of student writers. It's wishful thinking at best and folly at worst to "go it alone," whether "it" refers to writing or living, as Kittay says with, "distinctive human freedom and dignity." Even Byron knew not to get in the Hellespont by himself.

I want to conclude this point with something closer to home. Here is a picture of my mother, Adrienne Benedicks, with Elanor Roosevelt. She was a March of Dimes poster girl. She had polio at five years old during the epidemic in New York; she became ill only months before the vaccine came out. There were so many children sick then that she lived for months in a hastily re-opened condemned hospital. For a while, there was an iron lung waiting outside her door. The polio virus attacks nerve cells that control movement. My mother's brain could tell her legs to move, but the signal never arrived. When she finally came home, it was clear she wouldn't walk again.

Panicked, about their daughter's future, her parents turned to faith healers. When the snake oil failed, they took her to "specialists" who told them that all she needed to get back on her feet was to *believe* she could walk. And then they bought her a doll—Wanda the Walking Wonder—put their daughter on the floor, and told her that she could have the toy if she walked to get it.

This sounds border-line abusive, but her parents meant it as protective. In the 1950s, disabled people were shameful, to be hidden away. At that time, most women depended on husbands rather than careers to find a place in the world—and who, my grandparents worried, was going to "marry a cripple"?

Back then, in New York City in the 1950s, the world was small for a disabled person. There were no curb cuts, no mandated ramps, no accessible buses or subways. My mother couldn't physically get into a school building until she was a teenager and an accessible high school opened in Brooklyn. On the few occasions she was able to attend a school before that, she and other wheelchair users were sorted into a basement class with other students who were referred to back then as "retarded." There were no lessons of substance. She eventually earned a college degree—graduating with a Bachelor's on the same day I did. Despite her delayed access to education, she's the most well-published person in Benedicks family history: in the early days of the internet, she formed an association for romance story writers, out of which came several anthologies and eventually a lucrative buy-out. In the end, she wrote about bodies with pleasure and joy. If this was a refutation of the shame of disability, it was a fraught one. Almost no one online knew she was disabled. She kept that secret.

I wrote about the Spasmodics for years before I figured out I was thinking about my mother. This is me "helping" her prepare dinner. I can see now that I transposed into literary studies the issues of shame, disability, writing, and even pleasure that were central to her real life. I suppose I wanted to sanitize and distance myself from those things—maybe as a way to give me room to grapple with them, maybe because I was scared at the enormity of what it all meant for her. Maybe all writing has some element of the repressed, the personal, the child's longing to understand.

My mother was strong-willed and purposeful. That was not in conflict with the fact that she needed help all the time. When I was little, when voting meant going into a curtained booth and physically pulling levers, my mother couldn't reach them from her wheelchair. Some of my earliest memories are of standing on her lap to pull the levers for her—participatory democracy. Her disability created profound physical intimacy—at times, all of us in my family were extensions of her body, executing the commands her broken nervous system could not. It's my hope that in supporting one another in tasks physical and academic, as mundane as pulling a lever or as significant as helping direct the leadership of the nation, as simple as making an appointment at the writing center and as profound as allowing ourselves the space to make a creative mess, we can become freer and better writers and citizens, with an appetite for risk and a dedication to the working out of our ideas, just as we become more able to value the ways our lives are essentially and powerfully entwined. We can see that calls for mastery and domination of self and of our productions are rooted in shame and fear. And we can choose instead the radical honesty of owning how consuming our work is and honoring the points of human connection that enable it. Thank you.