Utterly Defeated, or Maybe Not

It is midnight on Tuesday. I’ve just gotten back from my girlfriend’s dorm, where I went for a hug because I felt so totally inadequate. This is at least the third, if not the fourth attempt I’ve made at starting this paper. Maybe this time I will finish it. I am so frustrated with myself and my honors composition course that I almost want to give up on the whole thing. I am fighting the urge to cry myself to sleep and try again tomorrow.

I feel utterly defeated. Wait—that’s an overstatement. But at the beginning of this term, I would not have been able to tell you it was an overstatement. I wouldn’t have been thinking that carefully about my word choices. This is why it’s an overstatement: I do not feel utterly defeated. I don’t even really feel defeated. Beaten down . . . no. Threatened? Perhaps. Challenged, certainly. However, if I felt defeated, it would mean that I felt I had already lost. But there are still two weeks left in the semester, which means I still have a chance. Furthermore, “utterly” is an intensifier, and even if I did feel I had already lost, I wouldn’t feel utterly defeated. I still see a glimmer of hope.

Oh, wait. No. That won’t do at all. “Glimmer of hope” is so terribly cliché. It’s trite and overused, and I don’t need it to make my point. I could even argue that using the phrase “glimmer of hope” detracts from my paper, because my audience doesn’t want to read something they’ve read a thousand times before. My audience is comprised of discerning (quick, check to make sure I’ve used that word correctly—okay) readers who hold me to high standards. Word choices must be precise. Sentence structures must be not only grammatically correct, but also rhythmically pleasing. I can’t go on (like this) with foot by foot of metric accents, causing boredom, putting them to sleep. I need to use rhythms that match my meaning: Quick. A point. Or sometimes, a longer, more flowing piece of prose, perhaps employing alliteration, to suggest
... (Hm. What does that suggest? It’s probably—definitely—not the best example to use if I can’t even finish it.) Furthermore, out of these perfectly constructed lines, a Point must emerge, well-developed by specific examples and engaging imagery. My professor doesn’t seem to have liked anything I’ve turned in all semester, but I still hope that I’ll manage to write something in the next two weeks that will gain—win? Yes, it does feel almost like a game in some ways, a complicated and undefined mixture of skill and chance—win her approval. My classmates tear apart each piece of work set in front of them, and I am perpetually afraid that my writing will appear on the table and I will be deemed inadequate.

Suppose this assignment were set before my classmates. How would they react? Someone would find one word to pick on. She would say that the connotation isn’t appropriate, or that it doesn’t sound like I really know what that word means. Someone else would choose a single sentence, and he would criticize the structure, word order, or punctuation. (Someone would surely point out that word order and punctuation are what create sentence structure, so that part of the previous sentence is redundant.) We have a policy of anonymity to protect the writers of these unfortunate essays, but everyone figures out who crafted the failed piece of would-be literature. Even if they don’t know who I am, I will know that my writing, the only thing most of these people know of me, has been found lacking. Surely, since I poured my heart and soul into it, I myself am not good enough.

The problem is that I still can’t seem to pick out those flaws in most of my own writing. However, I know I’m working to develop that skill. I think more now than I did at the beginning of the semester, and I’m still learning. With each class discussion, I pay more attention to the details of the pieces I read. (What does that mean? “Details” is so vague. Word choice, rhythm, paragraph and sentence lengths? Word choice, mostly—maybe I should change that, or at least...
come back and look at it again later, sometime in the next thirty-four-and-a-half hours before this essay is due.) The viewpoints of other readers are slowly helping me to improve my writing by learning what others consider “good” as opposed to merely “adequate.” I am still working on internalizing everything I’ve heard so that better writing becomes second nature to me. During this process, my writing remains far from the level I hope it will reach. (Someone will say it sounds like I’m making excuses. That’s not my intention, so I should think about the choices I’m making that could create such a tone. I decide that acknowledging my distance from my goal may be the best way to get my point across. While that option appears in our discussions, it never seems to be agreed upon as the most likely explanation—the presumably inexperienced author can’t possibly know what is best for his or her own writing.)

While my writing may not be improving quickly enough, I can already see that I have grown as a reader because of this course. I pay more attention to individual words in the context of a piece than I used to. I still have some work to do, but there are still two weeks left! And after class ends, I have the rest of my life to practice close reading, and this course has given me a solid foundation on which to build.

Once I’ve read a piece closely, I know exactly how I feel about it—no, maybe not exactly—and the point I want to get across. For me, the hardest thing about this course is managing to get it down. Sometimes, my feeling will manifest itself as a visceral sensation, refusing to offer me the words I need to express it. It is so frustrating to know what I want to say and not know how to say it.

Here, I stop and stare at the screen for immeasurable minutes.

I finally realize that the most rewarding aspect of my UHC Seminar is also its biggest challenge: facing my limitations as a writer. The reason I’ve cried tonight is that I feel I cannot
express myself effectively, but I persevere because I know I can grow beyond my perceived limitations. I have already learned so much this term about the craft of writing, but I realize I will never learn more—and I will never succeed as a writer—if I do not keep trying. Nobody said it would be easy. In fact, I had no doubts when I registered for this class that it would be difficult, but that was why I was so excited to take it. I have not been disappointed by this challenge. At this moment, I make the choice to push farther than I know how, even in the face of exhaustion.

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Judges Commentary on “Utterly Defeated, or Maybe Not”