

Feeling OK, even when you're sure you're doing it wrong

BY MELISSA FAVARA
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST



Melissa Favara

Melissa Favara teaches English in Vancouver and lives and writes in North Portland, where she parents Ramona, age 6, hosts a bi-monthly reading series, and counts her husband and her city as the two great loves of her life.

I love teaching 20th Century American Literature in the Pacific Northwest in the spring. Spring term generally is great because it starts off gray and murky, and the students seem kind of draggy, and everyone gets more cheery and ebullient as the weather improves. But the best part is watching the students quail in terror when they find out what we're reading because all that 1914-1950 modernist stuff seems so bizarre and incomprehensible before they try it, then watching them all warm up to William Faulkner and T.S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein and all those people and feel pretty clever by the end.

We just started reading Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying" — definitely a weird one — a book in which each chapter is told from the mind of a different character, stream of consciousness style. Today a young woman named Jane got a good chunk of what modernism in general is about — "So, we're confused because we're just hearing what they're actually thinking, and people think in messy ways, right? That's why we're confused?"

Indeed. No friendly omniscient narrator to connect all the dots and tell you what everything means in that novel—more a record of life the way we experience it, which is as a messy mash of sensory input, wants, memories, associations, interruptions.

"Mama, what are you doing?"

"I'm working on my Street Roots column, Ramona. I'm writing about teaching."

"You've been lazy about Street Roots! You haven't written it in a long time! You should write about how I went on the submarine at OMSI."

"Okay. Maybe in a little while."

The other thing about teaching in spring is that the turn to the season of new growth tends to inspire me to make more resolutions than New Year's does; usually my resolutions are sweeping and unrealistic vows to be a better and more productive and more punctual and more complete person in

every imaginable way, or to at least really, finally, fully weed the front yard so that it doesn't look like the Munsters live here. Typically, whether in lawn care or more cerebral pursuits, I get overwhelmed contemplating how weedy/disorganized/overbooked/stacked with ungraded essays, etc., life has been up to this moment: freeze staring backward like Lot's wife, open a bottle of wine, and toss up my hands. This year, I'm keeping it simple and forward-focused: keep my journal again. Notice more, make a record of noticing.

"Mama, did you know that the men in the submarine could only take one shower one time a week for like about only two minutes in cold water? And they couldn't open the windows? Did you know it's still stinky in there and plus also you have to hunch down if you're bigger than like about five feet tall and the teacher had to hunch down and it smelled like sweaty men?"

"No, I really didn't know any of that at all."

I started by digging up my old journals from the last time I kept one regularly, before having young Ramona 6.75 years ago, and having a look. It's interesting how the entries, sometimes lengthy and lyrical, sometimes fragments of conversations I wanted to remember, interspersed with grocery and to-do lists and phone numbers for people erased from memory now, add up to a sense of the times they covered. I stopped keeping a regular journal partly out of being in the kind of triage-based space a new and then not-so-new parent is in, but it was also partly philosophical — so much time keeping a record of every moment was taking up the time that I should be spending having new moments, I said, with Life and Experience and my New Kid. Maybe that was healthy at the time. But as I've kind of gotten on top of raising a kid and teaching full time, that record's been missing completely, not counting Facebook and the pictures on my phone, and I expect that it might be pretty neat for Ramona, at some point, to read my journal and connect the dots of my life that is now our life and get a

sense of what all the moving parts were.

"Ramona, I'm almost done. Be careful with that paint! Don't get it on the tablecloth."

"I'm not. Look. I'm not. Did you put in there that also they still have actual real torpedoes on the submarine? There's not like actual bombs in them anymore. But the torpedoes are there for real."

"That is awesome. Thank you. I'll mention it."

I've been meaning to start the journal again for a while — about as long as I've been meaning to do many, many things (see resolutions). It's hard to prioritize what to do with my time; when I make time to write, it's hard to know what bears writing down. But I do know that when I think too hard or to critically of myself and my plans, I'm paralyzed. And with 39 coming in about 10 minutes, I'm statistically halfway through my life. Getting the stream of consciousness written down, whether it initially makes sense or seems valuable or not, is maybe its own worthwhile experience, especially if it gives Ramona a breadcrumb trail back through her ever-accelerating childhood.

"Are you doing bath or is Dad doing bath? I want you to do bath and Dad to do bed. Dad's reading me Prince Caspian and he knows how to do the voices."

"I'll do bath. Stop biting your nails."

"I'm not — I'm biting the skin, see?"

"Gross. Stop."

Tomorrow my class will dig back into "As I Lay Dying." My main angle with them will be that it's completely OK if they don't get it yet, or if their expectations of what a novel is supposed to be like are frustrated, that it's important that they assure themselves they're OK even if they feel like they're doing it wrong. If they just let the experience of reading it wash over them, they'll get the hang of it. The text will actually teach them how it wants to be read, how to put it all together and get a sense of the story. They just have to show up. Take notes. Make a record of noticing.

Safer streets: Provide short-term licenses for undocumented drivers

BY ROB SADOWSKI
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

There is a proposed bill in the Oregon Legislature that is working its way through that will "direct the Department of Transportation to issue a driver card to an applicant who does not provide proof of legal presence in United States but otherwise has complied with all requirements for license or permit and has resided in Oregon for more than one year." This bill is a great step forward for traffic safety in Oregon. Some might see the bill as a strategy toward immigrant rights (which it is), but the bill has the potential to help uninsured people who walk and bicycle.

Here is how I see it. People who live in the state who do not have proof of legal residency still drive. They do so to get to work, to school and to shop. Without a drivers license, they are unable to obtain automobile insurance. When such a person is in a crash, they are unable to rely on insurance to pay expenses for damages but for any injuries to others. This can not only place people hurt in crashes by uninsured motorists in a horrible financial situation, but it also can put that burden right on the state's already stretched obligations.

The bill simply recognizes a simple reality: a quarter of a million undocumented drivers are driving to work, dropping their kids off at school and contributing to our economy. The Oregon bill will ensure that



Healthy Streetbeat is a monthly column for Street Roots written by the Bicycle Transportation Alliance (BTA). Our contributors are Rob Sadowski, executive director, and Margaux Mennesson, communications director.

this population has the opportunity to become trained, tested, licensed and insured drivers. Also, the state could see additional revenue from resulting motor vehicle fees and new revenue for insurance companies from immigrant drivers. That seems like a win-win for all of us.

Keep in mind that in order to get licenses, an applicant would have to pass a motor vehicle test, both written and on the road, to prove they can drive safely and understand the laws. Let's help get this bill passed. Senate Bill 833 and is still in the committee process. Please contact your state senator and representative to let them know you support the bill to make our streets safer.

Rob Sadowski is the executive director of the Bicycle Transportation Alliance.

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