

The Power of Human Connection

By Rebecca Andersen

As a child, I learned to read, and I gained the power of words. I realized that words could come together to form phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. That process is simple. The difficulty, however, comes in putting those words together to make something that will be meaningful, whether to myself or to others who read what I've written.

Through the written word, I have the power to influence people I never have or ever will meet. But will my words really even mean anything to them? In writing, I am tempted to say lofty things about philosophy or make general statements about human nature so I can feel like my words are important and meaningful. However, E.B. White reminds, "Don't write about Man, write about *a man*" (qtd. in Murray 144). Writing to a large or universal audience does not require writing large and universal ideas. Real, personal voice speaks the loudest; it is human connection we hear most readily.

I had a hard time believing that I was really there, standing in front of the Louvre museum. Only four days earlier, my husband, Kent, had surprised me with our honeymoon to Paris. A flight halfway around the world and



then there I was, waiting in line to have my bag checked so I could

enter the famed glass pyramid.

Once inside, one level beneath the ground, the dim winter sunlight sifted through the glass triangles overhead and lit a foyer full of bustling visitors headed in every direction, taking escalators to the various wings of this massive museum. The murmurs of soft-spoken French touched our ears and we stood still for a moment, trying to take it all in.

"Should we go to *The Mona Lisa* first?" Kent asked, pointing to the most populated escalator. After climbing back up to the first floor, passing through grand hallways hung thick with Renaissance paintings, and rounding a marble-framed doorway, we found ourselves there, in front of the famed *Portrait of Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giocondo*, better known as *The Mona Lisa*, by Leonardo Da Vinci.

"That's it?" I asked as I looked at Kent to see if he was feeling the same surprised disappointment that I was. The arguably most famous painting in the world was so much smaller than I had imagined. The painting was only 21 x 30", and it sat behind double layers of bulletproof and humidity-controlled glass. And with the crowd of people surrounding it, I knew there was little chance we would get close enough to really examine it.



But when I turned away from *The Mona Lisa*, I was immediately awestruck by the painting hung on the opposing wall. *The Wedding at Cana* by Paolo Veronese. This painting is a massive 262 x 390". And there wasn't a single person looking at it, for the entire room was crowded around *The Mona Lisa*. *The Wedding at Cana* was just a few yards behind their backs, yet they did not turn. The dichotomy was stunning. The 2 1/2' tall painting garnered more attention than the painting that would be three stories tall if turned on its side.

Although it was surprisingly small, *The Mona Lisa* was undeniably the most popular exhibit in the entire museum. It seemed to me that the directors of the Louvre, being artistically minded people, understood that there was something so powerful about *The Mona Lisa* that only a painting so large and beautiful as *The Wedding at Cana* could attempt to balance it.

We continued through the museum, but I couldn't stop thinking about these two paintings. *The Wedding at Cana* was commissioned for a monastery in Venice. It depicts one of the miracles of Christ, when he turned water into wine. The scene is filled with life-sized people bustling about at the wedding feast. Only one of those figures is actually looking out at you, and he is buried in the back of the painting. Pillars frame the scene, and the center is filled with open sky. It is beautiful, detailed, and impressive.

But still *The Mona Lisa* draws the crowds. I wish I would have taken the time to get up close, tune out the bustle of the crowds, and take a moment to peer into her eyes. Lisa is a real

human, and she connects to you, with a secret in her eyes that you are dying to know. It's as if you and she are alone, and she is just about to tell you all about herself, but then you are interrupted forever and the secret remains. Who is she? What did she do every day? Was she rich? Or poor? Was she pregnant? Was she a mother? Or was she a young girl herself? There is a personal connection in this painting that creates questions so timeless and universal that



it still overshadows something so mammoth as *The Wedding at Cana*.

In writing, *The Wedding at Cana* may be compared to the author who focuses intently on style, structure, and formula in order to create something impressive. Impressiveness can be achieved in this manner. We can examine a work of literature and see that each word was chosen with exactness; we can observe that each paragraph fits cleanly into the predetermined structure. And yet, even after all of this, *The Mona Lisa* still draws the larger crowds. Impressiveness and formula will never be able to draw a reader in as much as intimate, personal voice and connection. That is

something that I, as a writer, have learned about making meaning.

It may be frightening or difficult to write with true personal voice and place a piece of myself as a human in my writing, but that is where the power in language is. Peter Elbow explains, "To use real voice feels like bringing yourself into contact with the reader. It's the same kind of phenomenon that happens when there is real eye contact and each person experiences the presence of the other; or when two or more people stop talking and wait in silence while something in the air gets itself clear" (65). Unless writing can be about a real person, and about real things, the personal connection that *The Mona Lisa* illustrates will never be accomplished.

Writing also must make up for what is lost when words are placed, sterile and lifeless, on a page. James Moffett agrees that "Written discourse must replace or compensate for the loss of vocal characteristics and all physical expressiveness of gesture, tone, and manner" (243). Because writing is not spoken from physical voice, it can lose true meaning and connection. When the writer gets caught in formulas, rules, and structure, the connection and possibly even the message is lost. The writing that creates that personal connection will be the writing that draws the crowds, and the formulaic writing will be the painting hung on the opposite wall of the *Mona Lisa*. Beautiful, but rarely closely examined because it cannot draw the reader in and force them to ask questions.

A work of literature that forces the reader to ask questions can change the course of

history. In the years that led up to the Civil War, many people wrote anti-slavery discourses. The most effective and memorable of these was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Beecher's novel spoke about humanity, relationships, and love. The year this novel was published, it sold three hundred thousand copies (Baym 1700). Because the story of Tom, the honest, Christian slave, is told with such emotion and empathy, it had a greater effect on the starting of the Civil War than those who wrote philosophical essays about the evils of slavery. It would seem their elaborate language styles and passionate pleas fell on deaf ears compared to how America reacted to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. All of this because of the human connection in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Beecher wrote to make sense of what was happening and to then show the world what she saw.

James Britton, in his essay "Shaping at the Point of Utterance," explains that effective writing, what he calls "Spontaneous shaping", is "the moment by moment interpretative process by which we make sense of what is happening around us" (63). Writers should be "subsidiarily aware of the words and structures they are employing and focally aware of an emergent meaning" (Britton 65). I need to be able to focus on what I'm saying, not necessarily how I'm saying it. If I cannot do this, if the structures and formulas muddle up my writing, I will not be able to speak in my true voice and create something that allows for personal connection with my readers.

We look at *The Mona Lisa* and we feel an intimate, personal connection to Lisa

Gherardini. We can see her, and we want to know her. This connection has changed a work of oil on wood into something timeless and universally recognized. Even young children are often able to recognize Leonardo's hand and can correctly identify this painting. No matter

how large and impressive *The Wedding at Cana* may be, it will never be able to draw the observer in like *The Mona Lisa*. Human connection speaks louder than size and style ever will.

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