Writing it down
is the way I make it real,
the way I make my way
into what it is I feel.

The words on paper or
computer screen
tell me more than
what I knew before
I wrote them,

help me remember
what I'm afraid
I'll forget,

let me keep
what I don't want
to lose,

say to me:
You
were
Looking in from the outside, people must think we are crazy to want to teach. “Kids these days.” Extreme, isolated testing. School violence. Budget cuts.

And to teach middle school? We’re straight up certifiable!

But we know that writing gives us a power to truly understand what it means to be human, to truly understand ourselves, to make meaning in a challenging world. So we are not crazy, no: we are brave, we are soldiers fighting for a cause that is as much a part of ourselves as our flesh and blood. We are writers, we are writing teachers, and we will continue to fight this intellectual war to ensure that our students have the opportunity to, in the words of Just Greg, “write life.”

The visionary Greg Corbin constantly tells anyone who will listen that his mission is to not only make better writers, but better people. As writing teachers, we know that writing can help our students take control of their lives, can help them find a voice and can help them to demand that others listen to their voice. It can help them see possibilities for their lives. This is the essential stuff of writing instruction. We must remember these things each day, each lesson, each moment during workshop. When administrative, parental, and financial pressures get to be too much, we should return to these essentials for nourishment, for the strength to soldier on, to keep writing life, to keep building writers, to continue with the powerful practice that we believe in.

from Addie on the Inside by James Howe, p. 49
In the end, I consider what are the most essential themes, tools, and concepts that I need my students to take away from my Writing Class. I have found those things to be:

- My students see themselves as writers (rather than students who do writing assignments because they are required)
- My students write about topics and concepts that matter to them.
- My students understand how important Writing Conventions, grammar, and spelling are in presenting their writing to the world
- My students build community by sharing their writing with each other, supporting each other, and finding common ground through their writing
- My students think like writers, engaging and being aware that they are engaging in writers’ activities

Ultimately, I bet that Aristotle is right, that we are what we consistently do. If this is true, and I believe it is, then my students and I are indeed writers.

From teaching writing and my own experience as a writer, I have learned a few critical concepts about my students that demand that I teach differently:

1. Each student engages in a unique writing process.*
2. There is an almost insurmountable range of abilities and skills; it is impossible and irresponsible to expect all students to be capable of demonstrating the same amount of growth in the same skills at the same time during the school year.
3. Students benefit greatly from choice in the genre and the topic of their writing, but they also benefit from learning about and being pushed to write in a variety of genres.
4. Students are motivated to write for a variety of reasons, and I must teach to these motivations: some write for their own private purposes, others write for publication, still others will write when their grade is dependent on it.

*This is not to say that teaching the Writing Process is ineffective; on the contrary, the Teachers’ College’s Research Base for the teaching of writing suggests “Using a writing process to teach the complex task of writing increases student achievement.” Rather, I am suggesting that we should not expect all of our students to be in the same place in the writing process at the same time, or for them to follow a “neat” cycle for everything they write.
The tremendously insightful writing of my students is evidence enough that consistent time for writing and thinking enables the production of thoughtful, unique writing. For example, look at the poem 6th grader Cheryl wrote about the limitations of her choice in regard to her dreams:

So little space

a million dreams but so little space, so let some out, but wait oh no! I can’t, I can’t, I love them all, a million dreams but so little space. I’m about to pop, but I can fit one more, oh no! I can’t, got to let some go, but they’re all nice, could I really do it? This one’s good but this one’s great, so should it go or should it stay? A million dreams but so little space. I love them all but they just can’t stay, so I get rid of them and now there’s space for more. Oh no! they filled up way to fast. a million dreams but so little space.

Cheryl spends a significant amount of her time in class thinking, and this time is absolutely essential to the meaningful writing that she consistently produces. Consistent time for writing for Cheryl has led to consistently brilliant writing. Watch how deeply and intelligently she looks at herself and what makes her who she is in “I beam”:

I beam

I hollered and screamed when I came into this world a little early but still I beam, I beamed with the fact that I was alive I beam with darkness from my mother’s skin I beam with the shine from my father’s face I beam with the lions attitude from my mother which I embrace I beam with the long eyelashes of those two put together I beam with the love that will stay forever

Weakness
Her weakness makes her stronger
So she must be the world’s strongest woman
She has her ups and downs, good and bad days
But moves on with her life, it’s not a good place to stay
Having breakdowns and struggles are hard
But it’s like a disease with a cure, it won’t stick or harden like tar.
A lot is on her mind I can see it, she wants to let it out
I think she needs to express it more but not with a loud shout
What is happening to her is it apart of a nerve
So that she’ll feel it all the time, something she don’t deserve
But again I will say her weaknesses make her stronger
So she must be the world’s strongest woman. -by Quatia Powell, 7th grade
My Model “I am From”

I’m from double vision and double trouble, our parents’ first children, me and my brother. I’m from my sister’s ravenous reading and brilliant piano playing, from my Dad’s jokes, sage advice and example to my Mom’s tough, persistent, unconditional love.

I am from the Great Northeast to Manayunk, Olney to Germantown. I’m from T.G.I.F. to sports all weekend, Saved by the Bell to Q102 and Y100. I’m from “Sike!” and “That's Decent,” To “It's did well, not did good.”

I’m from Catholic school through and through, rom a classroom observer to a classroom facilitator. I’m from Resso, Judge, and Scranton.

I’m from the Dave Matthews Band and The Roots, Talib Kweli and Mos Def, Robert Randolph and John Butler, Common and Eric Clapton. I am from 90’s music.

I am from David Foster Wallace and Kurt Vonnegut to reading and reading and reading to writing and writing and writing.

I’m from those dear to my heart, Including the ones that I’ve lost, my Grammy and my student Katina, my Grandmom and my friend Brendan. I’m from them and for them. I’m from living in the shape of a question, like “Where am I going?”

This poem that Cheryl wrote for her Mom who passed away three years prior almost brings me to tears every time I see it, not because I know Cheryl and her situation, but because of the incredible beauty that she was able to create out of her grief:

you are the seconds that turn to minutes
you are the sun that goes down and the stars that come out
you are the shadow that walks behind me
you are what keeps me from falling when I trip
you are the eyes I feel burning a hole in my back
you are the happiness I have and the dreams that I follow
you are my mom

“This business of really knowing people, deep down, including your own self, it is not something you can learn in school or from a book. It takes your whole being to do it—your eyes and your ears, your brain and your heart. Maybe your heart most of all. —Bobby Goodspeed” —James Howe, The Misfits

One of the students who has taught me a great deal through her writing is Diana, a Haitian-American student who experienced the fear and anxiety of having loved ones caught in the Earthquake last year. She wrote:

Earthquake...

the earth shakes.
Plop, plop, everything drops. Doesn’t stop when you yell, “Ahh”, Only listens when the plates stop. Most people die, The ones alive says, “oh God.” Plop, Plop, once more Oh no, aftershock People tumble, people cry, people yell, people die. When will nations rise? When will we join hands together and sing with God in the middle? When?
--Diana Stripllet, 6th grader at DePaul Catholic

My Place(s) It’s not a good place It not a bad place It’s not the perfect place It’s not the worst place Well, to me...it’s My Place Majority of my family was born there, but I was born here, so I can’t say “Haiti is my place.” I think...I guess I have two... Philadelphia and Haiti I may have more when I grow up and even when I die, but for now... God Bless America...and Haiti.

Diana Stripllet

Diana suffered the murder of her older brother this past summer. Her mother told me about the tragedy in the summer, and I wasn’t quite sure how to respond. I wanted to talk to her about it, but I know it wasn’t my place to bring it up. Perhaps the best thing I could have given Diana, however, was time to write. Diana wrote about her feelings in her writer’s notebook in a piece she called “Good Bye:”
The day I said good bye was an unbelievable day. The day I said good bye to my brother. It was a Saturday, exactly one week after he died. The house was crowded with family from New York and Philadelphia crying and laughing. We waited for the black limo. We finally got to my church. Everybody was crying and staring. When we finally got upstairs everybody was crying except me, as far as I know. My two older cousins, who were boys, were crying and asking why wasn’t I. My family and I walked down the blood color carpet. I was trying so, so, so hard not to cry. When I finally say down on the red cushion cubes. I cried and cried and cried. I cried so much I made two younger cousins cried and another one the same age. We cried and cried and cried. I didn’t see him at the pre-view and at the view. If I did I would collapse or faint and I’m not lying. I couldn’t stand it seeing my brother in a white suit, hands folded (on?) his chest, looking alive, but dead in his expensive (coffin). I imagined him on a dark night blood gushing out his mouth and stomach saying mom and the detectives saying who did this. In his mind he’s thinking about me and the rest. Good bye brother....

(At this point she drew a heart with the name “Jimmy” written inside)

Thinking about Christmas or my birthday, I won’t ever hear his voice saying, “what you want or if you’re in trouble call me.” I won’t ever receive a $20 from big brother again.