The new movie "Freedom Writers" isn't entirely about the themes the trailers suggest. It isn't only about gang warfare and racial tensions and tolerance. It isn't only about the difference one good teacher can make in the life of one messed-up kid. "Freedom Writers" is about the power of writing in the lives of ordinary people. That's a lesson everyone needs. The movie, and the book from which it was taken, track the education of a young teacher named Erin Gruwell, who shows up shiny-new to face a class of what are called, in pedagogical jargon, "at risk" students. It's a mixed bag of Latino, Asian and black teenagers with one feckless white kid thrown in. They ignore, belittle and dismiss her as she proffers lesson plans and reading materials seriously out of step with the homelessness, drug use and violence that are the stuff of their precarious existences.

And then one day, she gives them all marbled composition books and the assignment to write their lives, ungraded, unjudged, and the world breaks open.

ADVERTISING

"My probation officer thinks he's slick; he swears he's an expert on gangs."

"Sorry, diary, I was going to try not to do it tonight, but the little baggy of white powder is calling my name."

"If you pull up my shirtsleeves and look at my arms, you will see black and blue marks."

"The words 'Eviction Notice' stopped me dead in my tracks."

"When I was younger, they would lock me up in the closet because they wanted to get high and beat up on each other."

Ms. G, as the kids called her, embraced a concept that has been lost in modern life: writing can make pain tolerable, confusion clearer and the self stronger.

How is it, at a time when clarity and strength go begging, that we have moved so far from everyday prose? Social critics might trace this back to the demise of letter writing. The details of housekeeping and child rearing, the rigors of war and work, advice to friends and family: none was slated for publication. They were communications that gave shape to life by describing it for others.

But as the letter fell out of favor and education became professionalized, with its goal less the expansion of the mind than the acquisition of a job, writing began to be seen largely as the purview of writers. Writing at work also became so stylistically removed from the story of our lives that the two seemed to have nothing in common. Corporate prose conformed to an equation: information x polysyllabic words + tortured syntax = aren't you impressed?

And in the age of the telephone most communication became evanescent, gone into thin air no matter how important or heartfelt. Think of all those people inside the World Trade Center saying goodbye by phone. If only, in the blizzard of paper that followed the collapse of the buildings, a letter had fallen from the sky for every family member and friend, something to hold on to, something to read and reread. Something real. Words on paper confer a kind of immortality. Wouldn't all of us love to have a journal, a memoir, a letter, from those we have loved and lost? Shouldn't all of us leave a bit of that behind?

The age of technology has both revived the use of writing and provided ever more reasons for its spiritual solace. E-mails are letters, after all, more lasting than phone calls, even if many of them r 2 cursory 4 u. And the physical isolation they and other arms-length cyber-advances create makes talking to yourself more important than ever. That's also what writing is: not just a legacy, but therapy. As the novelist Don DeLillo once said, "Writing is a form of personal freedom. It frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us. In the end, writers will write not to be outlaw heroes of some underculture but mainly to save themselves, to survive as individuals."

That's exactly what Gruwell was after when she got the kids in her class writing, in a program
that's since been duplicated at other schools. Salvation and survival for teenagers whose chances of either seemed negligible. "Growing up, I always assumed I would either drop out of school or get pregnant," one student wrote. "So when Ms. G started talking about college, it was like a foreign language to me." Maybe that's the moment when that Latina girl began to speak that foreign language, when she wrote those words down. Today she has a college degree.

One of the texts Erin Gruwell assigned was "The Diary of a Young Girl" by Anne Frank. A student who balked at reading a book about someone so different, so remote, went on to write: "At the end of the book, I was so mad that Anne died, because as she was dying, a part of me was dying with her." Of course Anne never dreamed her diary would be published, much less read by millions of people after her death at the hands of the Nazis. She wrote it for the same reason the kids who called themselves Freedom Writers wrote in those composition books: to make sense of themselves. That's not just for writers. That's for people.
Multitasking Can Make You Lose...Um...Focus

Alina Tugend

As you are reading this article, are you listening to music or the radio? Yelling at your children? If you are looking at it online, are you e-mailing or instant-messaging at the same time? Checking stocks?

Since the 1990s, we’ve accepted multitasking without question. Virtually all of us spend part or most of our day either rapidly switching from one task to another or juggling two or more things at the same time.

While multitasking may seem to be saving time, psychologists, neuroscientists and others are finding that it can put us under a great deal of stress and actually make us less efficient.

Although doing many things at the same time — reading an article while listening to music, switching to check e-mail messages and talking on the phone — can be a way of making tasks more fun and energizing, “you have to keep in mind that you sacrifice focus when you do this,” said Edward M. Hallowell, a psychiatrist and author of “CrazyBusy: Overstretched, Overbooked, and About to Snap!” (Ballantine, 2006).

“Multitasking is shifting focus from one task to another in rapid succession. It gives the illusion that we’re simultaneously tasking, but we’re really not. It’s like playing tennis with three balls.”

Of course, it depends what you’re doing. For some people, listening to music while working actually makes them more creative because they are using different cognitive functions.

But despite what many of us think, you cannot simultaneously e-mail and talk on the phone. I think we’re all familiar with what Dr. Hallowell calls “e-mail voice,” when someone you’re talking to on the phone suddenly sounds, well, disengaged.

“You cannot divide your attention like that,” he said. “It’s a big illusion. You can shift back and forth.”

We all know that computers and their spawn, the smartphone and cellphone, have created a very different world from several decades ago, when a desk worker had a typewriter, a phone and an occasional colleague who dropped into the office.

Think even of the days before the cordless phone. Those old enough can remember when talking on the telephone, which was stationary, meant sitting down, putting your feet up and chatting — not doing laundry, cooking dinner, sweeping the floor and answering the door.

That is so far in the past. As we are required, or feel required, to do more and more things in a shorter period of time, researchers are trying to figure out how the brain changes attention from one subject to another.

Earl Miller, the Picower professor of neuroscience at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, explained it this way: human brains have a very large prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that contains the “executive control” process. This helps us switch and prioritize tasks.

In humans, he said, the prefrontal cortex is about one-third of the entire cortex, while in dogs and cats, it is 4 or 5 percent and in monkeys about 15 percent.
“With the growth of the prefrontal cortex, animals become more and more flexible in their behavior,” Professor Miller said.

We can do a couple of things at the same time if they are routine, but once they demand more cognitive process, the brain has “a severe bottleneck,” he said.

Professor Miller conducted studies where electrodes were attached to the head to monitor participants performing different tasks.

He found that “when there’s a bunch of visual stimulants out there in front of you, only one or two things tend to activate your neurons, indicating that we’re really only focusing on one or two items at a time.”

David E. Meyer, a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, and his colleagues looked at young adults as they performed tasks that involved solving math problems or classifying geometric objects.

Their 2001 study, published in The Journal of Experimental Psychology, found that for all types of tasks, the participants lost time when they had to move back and forth from one undertaking to another, and that it took significantly longer to switch between the more complicated tasks.

Although the time it takes for our brains to switch tasks may be only a few seconds or less, it adds up. If we’re talking about doing two jobs that can require real concentration, like text-messaging and driving, it can be fatal.

The RAC Foundation, a British nonprofit organization that focuses on driving issues, asked 17 drivers, age 17 to 24, to use a driving simulator to see how texting affected driving.

The reaction time was around 35 percent slower when writing a text message — slower than driving drunk or stoned.

All right, there are definitely times we should not try to multitask. But, we may think, it’s nice to say that we should focus on one thing at a time, but the real world doesn’t work that way. We are constantly interrupted.

A 2005 study, “No Task Left Behind? Examining the Nature of Fragmented Work,” found that people were interrupted and moved from one project to another about every 11 minutes. And each time, it took about 25 minutes to circle back to that same project.

Interestingly, a study published last April, “The Cost of Interrupted Work: More Speed and Stress,” found that “people actually worked faster in conditions where they were interrupted, but they produced less,” said Gloria Mark, a professor of informatics at the University of California at Irvine and a co-author of both studies. And she also found that people were as likely to self-interrupt as to be interrupted by someone else.

“As observers, we’ll watch, and then after every 12 minutes or so, for no apparent reasons, someone working on a document will turn and call someone or e-mail,” she said. As I read that, I realized how often I was switching between writing this article and checking my e-mail.

Professor Mark said further research needed to be done to know why people work in these patterns, but our increasingly shorter attention spans probably have something to do with it.

Her study found that after only 20 minutes of interrupted performance, people reported
significantly higher stress, frustration, workload, effort and pressure.

“I also argue that it’s bad for innovation,” she said. “Ten and a half minutes on one project is not enough time to think in-depth about anything.”

Dr. Hallowell has termed this effort to multitask “attention deficit trait.” Unlike attention deficit disorder, which he has studied for years and has a neurological basis, attention deficit trait “springs entirely from the environment,” he wrote in a 2005 Harvard Business Review article, “Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform.”

“As our minds fill with noise — feckless synaptic events signifying nothing — the brain gradually loses its capacity to attend fully and gradually to anything,” he wrote. Desperately trying to keep up with a multitude of jobs, we “feel a constant low level of panic and guilt.”

But Dr. Hallowell says that despite our belief that we cannot control how much we’re overloaded, we can.

“We need to recreate boundaries,” he said. That means training yourself not to look at your BlackBerry every 20 seconds, or turning off your cellphone. It means trying to change your work culture so such devices are banned at meetings. Sleeping less to do more is a bad strategy, he says. We are efficient only when we sleep enough, eat right and exercise.

So the next time the phone rings and a good friend is on the line, try this trick: Sit on the couch. Focus on the conversation. Don’t jump up, no matter how much you feel the need to clean the kitchen. It seems weird, but stick with it. You, too, can learn the art of single-tasking.
A Spirit Reborn
William Safire

Abraham Lincoln's words at the dedication of the Gettysburg cemetery will be the speech repeated at the commemoration of Sept. 11 by the governor of New York and by countless other speakers across the nation.

The lips of many listeners will silently form many of the famous phrases. "Four score and seven years ago" -- a sonorous way of recalling the founding of the nation 87 years before he spoke -- is a phrase many now recite by rote, as is "the last full measure of devotion."

But the selection of this poetic political sermon as the oratorical centerpiece of our observance need not be only an exercise in historical evocation, nonpolitical correctness and patriotic solemnity. What makes this particular speech so relevant for repetition on this first anniversary of the worst bloodbath on our territory since Antietam Creek's waters ran red is this: Now, as then, a national spirit rose from the ashes of destruction.

Here is how to listen to Lincoln's all-too-familiar speech with new ears.

In those 266 words, you will hear the word dedicate five times. The first two times refer to the nation's dedication to two ideals mentioned in the Declaration of Independence, the original ideal of "liberty" and the ideal that became central to the Civil War: "that all men are created equal."

The third, or middle, dedication is directed to the specific consecration of the site of the battle of Gettysburg: "to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place." The fourth and fifth times Lincoln repeated dedicate reaffirmed those dual ideals for which the dead being honored fought: "to the unfinished work" and then "to the great tasks remaining before us" of securing freedom and equality.

Those five pillars of dedication rested on a fundament of religious metaphor. From a president not known for his piety -- indeed, often criticized for his supposed lack of faith -- came a speech rooted in the theme of national resurrection. The speech is grounded in conception, birth, death and rebirth.

Consider the barrage of images of birth in the opening sentence. The nation was "conceived in liberty," and "brought forth" -- that is, delivered into life -- by "our fathers" with all "created" equal. (In the 19th century, both "men" and "fathers" were taken to embrace women and mothers. ) The nation was born.

Then, in the middle dedication to those who sacrificed themselves, come images of death: "final resting place" and "brave men, living and dead."
Finally, the nation's spirit rises from this scene of death: "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom." Conception, birth, death, rebirth. The nation, purified in this fiery trial of war, is resurrected. Through the sacrifice of its sons, the sundered nation would be reborn as one.

An irreverent aside: All speechwriters stand on the shoulders of orators past. Lincoln's memorable conclusion was taken from a fine oration by the Rev. Theodore Parker at an 1850 Boston antislavery convention. That social reformer defined the transcendental "idea of freedom" to be "a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people."

Lincoln, 13 years later, dropped the "alls" and made the phrase his own. (A little judicious borrowing by presidents from previous orators shall not perish from the earth.) In delivering that final note, the Union's defender is said to have thrice stressed the noun "people" rather than the prepositions "of," "by" and "for." What is to be emphasized is not rhetorical rhythm but the reminder that our government's legitimacy springs from America's citizens; the people, not the rulers, are sovereign. Not all nations have yet grasped that.

Do not listen on Sept. 11 only to Lincoln's famous words and comforting cadences. Think about how Lincoln's message encompasses but goes beyond paying "fitting and proper" respect to the dead and the bereaved. His sermon at Gettysburg reminds "us the living" of our "unfinished work" and "the great task remaining before us" -- to resolve that this generation's response to the deaths of thousands of our people leads to "a new birth of freedom."
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