



NUTURING WRITERS:

An Interview with
Author **Valley Haggard**

By Amanda S. Creasey

My first introduction to Valley Haggard took place when I was a participant in her Master Class, “LIFE IN 10 MINUTES: Writing the personal essay” at the 2015 James River Writers Annual Conference in Richmond, Virginia. I was struck by her deeply metaphorical writing style, as well as her generous, forgiving, encouraging, and inclusive view of writing—not to mention her beautifully thick, dark hair, and her eclectic fashion sense.

All of this intrigued me so much so that when, a few months later in February of 2016, a friend of mine gifted me with Valley’s book, *The Halfway House for Writers*, and invited me to join her in one of Valley’s Life

in 10 Minutes Writing Workshops, I was quick to accept.

In the book Valley writes about learning to “transform my self-talk...into gentle, soft, loving words, the same words I would give to anyone else”. This statement is so telling of the kind of person and writing teacher Valley Haggard is. She is an ally of the “writing scared”, an advocate for the writer who doesn’t yet know they are one, and a champion of all who are willing to risk themselves through the written word.

Q: You are the founder of Richmond Young Writers. Tell us a little bit about this organization. Where did the idea come from? What is its mission? What are some of its programs? How can people get involved?

VH: Our mission at Richmond Young Writers is to share the joy and craft of creative writing with young people. We started out with a few kids and a few classes in the summer of 2009 in the art gallery of Chop Suey Books and now we are a year-round program in our own space—The Writing Room. All of our teachers are also writers and our classes are lively, interactive, crazy-fun, and out of the box. We do everything we can to bring storytelling, poetry, fiction, movie-making, surrealism, and all types writing to life for kids outside of deadlines, grades, and all the pressure of perfectionism. We are always trying to spread the word about the awesome things we do and raise money for our scholarship program so every kid

in this city who wants to participate can.

Q: The Halfway House for Writers

is dedicated to your students, in particular, “wounded writers.” What do you mean by that? What particular wounds are writers susceptible to?

VH: I have found that 99.9% of the writers who come to my classes have some sort of hang-up around writing. And by hang-up I mean everything from crushing insecurity, neurosis, and paralysis, to simply questioning whether or not we are actually real writers. Somewhere along the way someone

told us we weren’t good enough or that to be a real writer you have to look and act and talk and think a certain way. We think our lives are too boring, our words aren’t big enough, no one wants to hear what we have to say. These are our writing wounds. I think writers are sensitive people who feel things with a certain intensity. We crave a safe place to experiment, to play, to share our words without being shot down. The Halfway House encourages people to find or create that safe place, a place to cultivate confidence, to take creative risks and to heal.

Q: In your book, you thank the writers who helped build “a writing world you actually want to live in.” What does that world look like?

VH: Ah, yes! The writing world I want to live in is a world where we can be honest about who we really are without being shamed, ridiculed, or stared at like we have three heads. Where we can find points of connection and overlap through our words and stories. Where we can break the isolation of hiding our true thoughts and feelings and experiences and put them down on paper



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in our own words from our unique points of view. I have found the connection, the safety and the freedom of expression I always craved in my classes. As a group this is what we create together. And for me, this is truly writing heaven, writing nirvana.

Q: There are seven “Rules of the Halfway House”. How did you come up with them, and do you have one that you believe is your favorite, or the most important?

VH: I came up with the seven Rules of the Halfway House by making a list of all the things I found myself saying most frequently at the beginning of each new

class. Surrender your weapons, seek shelter, free write, hand-write, skip the small talk, listen, and don’t apologize. Having put these rules to the test for some time now, I have found them solid, sound, and truly effective. The writing that pours out of students in my class when they have this structure in place has been mind-blowing, deeply beautiful, and profound. Loose structure gives us the freedom to run wild, experiment, be honest, and create. It’s hard to suss out one favorite over all the others, but perhaps I’ll choose the first because it’s also the hardest: Surrender your weapons. This is where we stop following the dictate of

the voice in our head that tells us we suck, we should stop writing, that we’re wasting our time. Without this I don’t think we really have a chance at the rest.

Q: You have written ad copy and product descriptions in the past. How did you make the move from that type of work, to writing your own magazine column and teaching writing classes?

VH: This was an overlapping, intertwined, and long transition without clear demarcation lines! Young and hungry for absolutely any kind of paid writing that came my way, I was still writing ad copy and product

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descriptions for the first few years that I had my own column. And then, when I had my column and was still writing ad copy, I started teaching first kids and eventually adults. My plate got so full something had to go and luckily that something was the tedious, laborious work of ad copy. Not that I regret doing that for a minute...it taught me so much! But writing a first-person column and helping people access their own story and voice and find themselves staring back from the page has been so exciting and so gratifying, I feel insanely lucky that I was eventually able to let everything else go.

Q: In “Publication,” you write in part about a generous editor who, having accepted a story you wrote for publication,

essentially rewrote it, but who was also willing to, as you put it, walk “me through the most egregious of my errors”, giving you the chance to write a second article. What were these errors? I’m sure other writers could learn from your experience and avoid the same errors at the outset.

VH: My basic errors were ignorance and hubris. I had not made myself familiar enough with the format of the essays and articles this publication already published. I thought I could invent a whole new style of writing and storytelling for an established magazine that already had a very particular style. Inventing new styles and voices and formats is great for creative writing, but when you are trying to submit to a publication that

already knows who it is, you have to get to know them rather than expect them to get to know you. After the editor rewrote my article, I studied the changes she made, the format and style she wanted, and then imitated her basic structure after that. Each publication is different, so my best advice is to make yourself intimately familiar with what they have already done in the past so you can fall in line with what they want to do in the future. 



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