

Wyoming Tribune Eagle, March 31, 2016: “CSU professor aids writers.” Casper Star Tribune of April 1: “A gathering of like-minded souls”

Readers sometimes tell me about a story they'd like to capture on paper: a memory, an interesting event, or a trauma. “I wish I could write like you,” they often say.

I'm happy to report that writing is an acquired skill, not unlike learning to ride a bike. If I've learned to become proficient, so can others—and there's no better place to learn than at a gathering of like-minded souls as we congregate to glean from our peers. The upcoming Wyoming Writers Conference in Riverton is as good an opportunity as any to connect with writers in our neck of the woods.

To my great delight, the organization has secured John Calderazzo as workshop teacher and mentor for this early-June conference. I look forward to participating once again in John's entertaining and educational venues.

Lynn G. Carlson, Cheyenne writer and blogger, says she was thrilled to learn that John Calderazzo will be on the faculty of the 2016 conference. She has attended several of his workshops.

“Mr. Calderazzo has a knack for giving out the right information and feedback in just the right way . . . He knows his stuff, but even better, he knows how to teach it to other writers. He was awarded a Best Colorado State University Teacher Award.”

Another student of his, who went on to national fame, would agree with this assessment. Rebecca Skloot has penned one of the most important nonfiction books of recent years, which has appeared on lists such as “100 Books All Americans Should Read” and is a best-seller besides.

On her website, under “What is the Most Important Lesson You Learned from a Teacher?” we find that, while preparing for veterinary school, Rebecca took her first creative writing class—from none other than Professor Calderazzo.

“At the start of that class he gave us this writing prompt: ‘Write for 15 minutes about something someone forgot.’”

Of course, the someone forgetting something could be you, the writer, and the omission might be anything from forgetting your mother's birthday to leaving your wallet at home. But this Calderazzo student scribbled “Henrietta Lacks” on top of her page and began an essay about how the world seemed to have forgotten about Henrietta.

She reminisces that “the amazing John Calderazzo at Colorado State University pulled me aside and said, ‘Do you realize you're a writer? And do you know there's such a thing as a science writer?’”

Mr. Calderazzo advised Rebecca that the world needed people who understood science and could convey it to the public. The rest, as they say, is history. If you have read “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,” you will know that it is a non-fiction book pertaining to medical science. Its author first learned about Henrietta's amazing HeLa cells in a basic biology class.

Mr. Calderazzo says he is gratified by the aspect of his career that allows him to mentor writers. “I have worked at it hard and continually over the years, ever since coming to CSU from being a full-time freelance writer, back in 1986,” he told me.

“Just Because It's Nonfiction Doesn't Mean It Has to Be Long” (or boring, for that matter) is a Calderazzo mantra I seek to apply to my own writing.

“Sometimes nonfiction displays its best self by leaping to the heart of the matter in a fraction of a normal essay,” he says. “But how does it do this, and with what effect? And how do you get started? We’ll look at some great examples of nonfiction short shorts, including prose poems, and then we’ll try a few different writing approaches ourselves.”

In a later column you will hear about another non-fiction author, also a Calderazzo student once, whose book has touched many people. Its heart-wrenching opening chapter takes place in Cheyenne.

In addition to his duties at CSU, Mr. Calderazzo’s environmental activism focuses on teaching scientists around the country to communicate with the public via story-telling skills, including at USGS Antarctic Researcher gatherings. His essays, poems, and stories have appeared in hundreds of publications, and he has published books that include a poetry chapbook, a children’s science book and, most recently, a collection of linked travel essays, “Rising Fire: Volcanoes and Our Inner Lives.” He won a 2012 Traveler’s Tales travel-adventure gold medal. His work has been cited in Best American Short Stories and Best American Essays. If you google his name and “Teaching Aliens to Talk,” you will reach a High Country News essay he wrote about this interesting take on his teaching.

It is with joy and gratitude that I invite you to join me alongside fellow scribblers, June 3 through 5 in Riverton. Some scholarships are available to cover registration and membership; the application deadline is April 30. Please visit www.wyowriters.org for further information.