

INTRODUCTION TO THE JOURNAL: MY JOURNEY WITH REFLECTIONS

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In the first special issue of *Reflections* devoted to “Doing Research on the Ground,” Bill Meezan wrote an introduction documenting his personal journey with this journal (Meezan, 2005). In many ways my own relationship with *Reflections* could not be more different than Bill’s. Nonetheless, this journal shares an equally important place in my heart. I feel indebted to it. So, like Bill, I would like to take this opportunity to pay grateful tribute to those who created it, not only because their doing so provided a unique and welcome space for all of us to share personal experiences, but also because—on a personal level—it helped shape my scholarship and has influenced my career in the academy.

In the 1980s I worked at Under 21/New York, a shelter for runaway and homeless street youth in New York City, better known by its corporate name Covenant House. I first discovered the shelter as a recently divorced, second-year law student. At that time in my life I was craving personal freedom; having come from a nurturing, supportive, middle-class family in upstate New York I had never ventured far from security before and it was time to do so. Like Bill’s experience in Lithuania, Covenant House altered my life in profound and seemingly inexplicable ways.

Covenant House was located on a desolate and lonely street. To get there from the “civilized” part of the city, you had to exit the seedy rear-entrance of the Port Authority Bus terminal, cross 9th Avenue, pass the spot where the Lincoln Tunnel deposits New Jersey commuter-traffic into New York City, and keep going until you reached the isolated edge of 10th Avenue. From this new and unfamiliar home base I was introduced to

some of the youth subcultures that flourish in the city, but that most respectable folks merely pass by without notice. They included the young denizens who lived in the Port Authority Bus Terminal and Grand Central and Penn Stations; the kids who slept on the piles of road salt stored off the west side piers; the gay youth who hustled on the East Side “loop,” and the transvestite kids who negotiated deals in the pre-dawn hours on the cobblestone streets of the meat packing district. During this period, I was tutored by a remarkable group of mostly resilient teenagers who had managed to survive (many with no family support whatsoever), moving in and out of the various private and public institutions that were supposed to care for them. Their finely honed survival skills stood in stark contrast with my own fledgling steps toward independence.

At some point, during these years, and for reasons that baffled me at the time, my parents gave me a Mac “classic,” my very first computer. Unlike today’s sleek and trendy models, this early version was a small, clunky, gray box with a pint-sized screen. I spent several months staring at the ugly little thing that cluttered up my studio apartment wondering what in the world I was supposed to do with it. I eventually turned it on.

Late one evening, basking in the computer screen’s blue glow and the fluorescent light of my 55-gallon fish tank, with its comforting gurgling as background noise, I began to write. In the beginning, I believed I was writing the tales of kids who had particularly moved or inspired me. But as the stories accumulated I discovered that these writings were not so much about the kids as they were about me. I grew to relish the “ping” of my little Mac

classic coming to life, which signaled each evening's solitary excursion into my reflections. With each new entry, I found myself facing the puzzle of why a particular youth had so captivated me. I was driven to re-visit our exchanges until the cadence of the child's voice I heard echoing in my head matched the rhythm of the words captured on the screen. So while Bill found a welcome place to process his provocative lived experiences in a conversation at Paul and Sonia Abels' dinner table, I retreated into this internal space and the process of writing to make sense of my mind.

Mostly the youth's stories, and my reactions to them, stayed private, although I occasionally shared them with a few friends. One of those was Stuart Kirk, an academic mentor and friend at the Columbia University School of Social Work where I had become a doctoral student. Like great mentors everywhere, Stuart is a cheerleader who nurtures creativity – no matter how quirky – whenever he sees it. One day Stuart said (as best as I can recall), “Hey I just got a call for papers for this brand new journal called *Reflections* – you really should send some of your Covenant House stories there.” It was all the encouragement this doctoral student needed.

I sent off a cluster of three stories. Although it seemed miraculous that anyone would see fit to publish these personal essays, I got a “revise and resubmit” letter from *Reflections*' editor Sonia Abels (of whom Bill wrote in the last issue). So my very first published work appeared on the pages of this journal in its fledgling years submitted at a time when I was still very much in my own formative years (Staller, 1997).

In hindsight what is most remarkable is that it was this experience with *Reflections* that set me firmly on a scholarly path from which I have rarely strayed. I find myself using narrative and democratic approaches in *all* of my scholarly writing, and I argue

passionately (and I hope persuasively) for their validity. I have experimented, like other post-modern researchers, with voice and style, but have permanently substituted first person for the “scientific” third person. I honor individual stories and occurrences that help unite us because they invariably speak to shared human experiences. I seek out the unique and worry little about “generalizing” despite my original research training. I don't know if this is a path I would have even known was available had I not found a successful home for my very early narratives in *Reflections*.

I am ever so grateful to Bill Meezan for his invitation to join him in co-editing these two wonderful special issues of *Reflections*. It was a gift, and has been a unique treat from beginning to end. Yet I can't help feeling that some greater force of destiny played a part in weaving our paths together on this project at this time, and afforded us the opportunity to discuss the rich and provocative narratives submitted for these special issues. We are both sitting at important new career junctures; Bill as a recently appointed dean and me just a stone's throw away from submitting tenure documents. Bill's first narrative appears on the following pages, my first one started me down a scholarly road. Bill admitted that it took a small act of courage for him to write in narrative style, I find it takes an act of courage to stay committed to it and not to submit to the dominant, quantitative, multivariate culture that is currently the altar being worshiped by most knowledge-builders in our profession. Nonetheless, for the moment, Bill and I have met at a crossroad while working on this project and I have learned a great deal as a result of it.

In 1997 I opened my *Reflections* essays by repeating the instructions I had received from a Covenant House staffer who provided directions to the shelter before my job interview. At the time he had told me that if it *felt* like I was heading in the wrong direction

that I should not worry because it probably meant that I was heading the right way (Staller, 1997). Who knew that would be such a useful metaphor to resurrect again today?

A number of researchers who tell their stories on the following pages have stayed very committed to their work even when others might have advised them they were heading in the “wrong direction.” It is heartening to read their tales and learn from their determination. The fact that we have this forum to do so is tribute to *Reflection's* creators, who saw the rich possibilities of providing a permanent space for this kind of voice.

References

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