

# When the Story Won't Write Itself

*This article describes some of the "necessary complexities" in writing teaching stories and suggests a strategy for writers when they struggle to give shape and structure to experience. Using embodied images of the self—before and after the experience—the storyteller can better hone details of the situation so that they inform and support the thematic meanings of the story.*

by  
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In the midst of reading and editing articles for this journal, I traveled to New Orleans to give a workshop. Gemma, my twelve-year-old daughter, accompanied me to do some sightseeing. One of our adventures was an early morning swamp tour. In an open-sided boat, we floated through the ever-opening waterways of the bayou. The green algae growing on the top of the muddy water licked the boat as our tour guide spun stories about the wildlife living beneath the algae and in the dense foliage on land. We could reach out and touch Spanish moss that hung down lace-like from the trees or yellow widow spiders dangling in their webs. Our tour guide had trained alligators to come out of their dens for marshmallows, and as we were waiting for a stubborn one to swim out, a large turtle poked up its head. The guide turned to us and said, "You know why turtles have no predators, don't you? Why they live to be 400-500 years old? If an animal swallows them, they don't die. They just eat their way out of their predators."

Many of the authors in this journal described their stories in just this way—as if the stories had eaten their way out of them. Elizabeth Young, for example, described her experi-

ence when she tells personal stories to her classes: "It was as if another force resided in me, one that was determined to bring forth these personal stories in spite of my best efforts to contain them." Our stories have a life force of their own, even though they are ours in a very intimate way. This sense of a story as embedded in, yet distinct from, the self creates tension in the telling.

The tension between a story's intimacy and its separateness is no doubt the result of the tension in experience itself. John Dewey (1980) described "the having of experience" as holistic, a seamless engagement in the world. Yet one also reflects back on previous experiences for explanations about why things happened the way that they did. Donald Polkinghorne (1988) stated, "Narrative explanation comprehends patterns in actions and events that could not have been predicted in advance, and it does this by looking back over what has happened" (p. 116). This recognition of the unexpected in experience gives rise to our wanting to tell others.

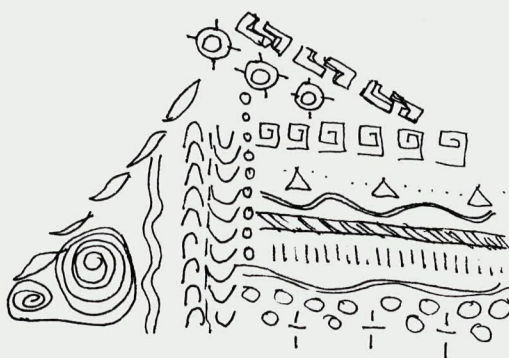
Writing, even more than telling, requires one to reach back into lived experience and consciously pull it forward as if it were fully given again in all



its original sensory and bodily form. And, as one brings back the past, one does so for a purpose—and then the story becomes a separate entity, open for understanding by others. A well-written story nourishes the tension in the story as deeply personal and as independent as a three dimensional object that one studies as one turns it around. Even as one reaches back for details, one creates the interpretive frame—by establishing the beginning. The writer of a story thus represents and reconstructs the past to explain “how change from ‘beginning’ to ‘end’ takes place” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 117). Wanting to tell, telling, and telling again are interpretative and purposeful acts. Yet, even as the interpretive frame emerges, it cannot take the place of the original experience, or the story becomes lifeless, disconnected from experience and the self.

When writing stories, one often does not know the interpretive frame or even the motivation for telling about it in advance. This is especially true with teaching stories which are complicated by the multiple dimensions of time and place, number and kinds of students, and subject matter. In memory, the classroom feels more like thicket than well-pruned garden. In drawing out details from this underbrush of experience, the teacher confronts her motives and purposes for telling

the story—both for herself and her audience. Because teachers often tell or write stories for the purposes of reflective practice (as opposed to, say, writing fiction), the “understandings” one derives from experience are similar to those of scholars doing qualitative research. (For



helpful strategies in composing narrative in the qualitative research tradition, see Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1997; Hertz, 1997; Riessman, 1993; Richardson, 1990.)

Although the process of writing the story may be fraught with confusion and uncertainty, the publicly printed story must be coherent, the events significant. Polkinghorne (1988) defined narrative as:

The gathering together of events into a plot in which signification is given to the events as they relate to the theme of the story. The plot configures the events into a whole, and the events are

transformed from merely serial, independent happenings into meaningful happenings that contribute to the whole theme. (p. 142-143)

One often starts serially, only to discover surprise twists and turns thematically.

In the remainder of this essay, I describe a technique that I have used in the process of writing teaching narratives (Gillespie, 1992; Gillespie, 1996) when they won't easily write themselves. Rather than working from plot and theme, which an English teacher might suggest, I work from embodied images—one before “the experience” and one after. These images need to be dramatic, contextual, and thoughtful. They capture a way of being, with stu-

dents and subject matter in interaction. Having these two images helps me delineate the set of actions that were meaningful in the event.

### The First Image: “Before the Experience”

Poet Richard Hugo (1979) stated that real or imagined things from experience “act as a set of stable knowns that sit outside the poem. They . . . serve as a base of operations for the poem. Sometimes they serve as stage setting” (p. 6). Like the poet, the story teller needs to make explicit the features or existential details of the situation. I use an image to get the “stable



knowns" out on the table—"here's what it was like and what I was like—*then*." This image helps me bring a fuzzy picture into focus.

Also in the first image, it is important to set up the situation so that the social agreements about classroom life that lie beneath the surface can be articulated. And often, the first image is of a situation that the story teller did not create. Take, for example, Judith Levin's story, "Telling Rape." Her "before" image is of herself as "a teacher who would not tell rape." Multiple social agreements, layered over time, inform this image—that the personal is not the academic, that knowledge is objective, not subjective, and so forth. Similarly, we learn in Barbara DiBernard's story that as a lesbian teacher, she was viscerally aware of the heterosexist frame of reference of university classrooms; but she was unaware of the ways her lesbian studies class had unwittingly preserved a bifurcated view of gender. Like Judith who could not tell rape, Barbara could not hear transgender.

Stylistically, one can start out with a clear "before" image of the teaching self and her context and explore the subtleties of the "after" image. And/or one can explore the subtleties of the self before the experience. Richard Holody's paper, for example, shows the continual push and pull of the "before" teacher who unwittingly demonstrates his class and gendered privilege by projecting "responses" onto his students with the "after" teacher who goes

back to democratize his classroom by determining "where his students are." And what makes his second image trustworthy is that he has found the logic of his students' intellectual commitments and builds from those. The "before" image must be real and clear to readers who can identify and imagine with the protagonist the dynamics of the problematized situation. (Would I tell a rape story? What do I know about transgender issues? What am I doing with my privileges?)

### **The Second Image: "After the Experience"**

What kind of image of the teacher emerges after experience and reflection on that experience? If the story teller looks at the "after" image of herself as teacher, she can see how experience made her different—in action. Without an embodied image here, the story teller lapses into meaningless generalizations. So the author must demonstrate new action in an old context. In Judith Levin's article, the telling of the rape story does not cause the most profound transformation; the learning when and how to tell it does. Thus we see by the end, ironically, that she now chooses not to tell rape in a particular class. Similarly, in Laila Aaen's story, the before image of the teacher was of one who could not make room for students to take charge of their own learning. The second image is of a teacher who has made room for students to confront personal and social truths without taking unneces-

sary public risks.

Writing narratives is complex and tricky, and when the story is like the turtle, determined to gnaw its way out, getting stuck with the writing can be even more frustrating. I've found it useful in these moments to construct embodied images that capture what I was like before the transformative event and what I'm like after. The story itself is about the actions that caused change—a disturbance in the taken-for-granted, new perspectives on socially shared assumptions, an action that caught me off guard. When I have the images, I can then connect the actions that link them, bringing them together in a coherent way for a reader. It's not that I want stories to be neatly sewn up. To the contrary, a good story opens up my experience to others who may interpret it differently. As Robert Coles (1989) reminded us in *The Call of Stories*, "The beauty of a good story is its openness—the way you or I or anyone reading it can take it in, and use it for ourselves" (p. 47).

The gift that the stories in this issue give us is not the before and after images—although they are embedded in each—but the acts of transformation themselves, undertaken against deadening assumptions about teaching and learning and toward a vision of inclusive and democratic education that empowers both student and teacher. With stories of transformative teaching, we move collectively from survival toward liberation. □

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