Writing, Vision and Dimension

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I was attending a poetry reading once and the poet talked about the act or process of writing by telling a little story about Sinclair Lewis. It may have been someone other than Lewis but it doesn't matter. Lewis was giving a reading to a group of students and faculty at an Eastern school. After the reading he asked if anyone in the audience aspired to become a writer. Several people raised their hands. Lewis responded, "Well, goddammit, go home and write." Simple advice but terribly impractical and certainly not all there is to say about writing and the process. Even the most prolific and able of writers ponders the process of writing and sits at times in awe of the magic it seems to possess. After teaching writing for so many years I need to put forth the belief that the writing process emerges from vision, journey, and dimension.

First, we must take Lewis' short course to writing success and pitch it. Not everyone (indeed, hardly any of my students!) is a natural-born writer. For most of us it is a difficult task at best and for the numerous students I have taught, writing a paper produces the same anxiety and dread that having major surgery has to offer. But thanks to Jimmy Britton and other teachers and analysts of the writing process, we have ways to bring all students into writing. It has something to do with what Britton observes as "not our ability to speak per se, but our habit of representing experience to ourselves by one means or another" (Pradl,89).

Writing, in other words, is a visual process at the outset. Do we think in pictures or do we think words that create pictures? Who knows and furthermore who cares? The important entry point for teacher and student is the ability to see, first, what is there and then to write it down in language that represents the self. In short, it is the effort simply to get students to write. In the backs of their minds there usually resides the "is this what he wants?" Bugaboo! So, getting them to write what they see produces two positive effects; attaches significance to their vision and acknowledges that the experiences they have in the world are unique and worthy.

Furthermore, vision is an ever-enhancing experience for the student writer. As the ability to represent one's world increases so does the complexity of vision into the unseen, i.e. symbols. The abstract, though tightly connected to the concrete, is to the human need as water is to fish. We are drawn to the unclear, the remote. My father used to say (***all*** the time) "Montaigne said the purpose of education is to be able to relate seemingly unrelated things." I have no idea if Montaigne really said that, but the point was taken, and I see young writers working like the dickens, especially in poetry, to write that way. After years of observing students I didn't think could write a coherent grocery list produce amazing pieces of poetry, I am convinced that once the visual is connected to written expression, the writer thirsts to enter the complex world of symbols and layers of meaning. In short, the writer begins to see the world (and the ownership of experience) *as* metaphor.

Writing is so deeply rooted in the mythological tradition of journey that to avoid the use of literature in working with writers is to deny them the opportunity of inner-travel. But rather than launch directly in major pieces of literature with many layers of meaning (much like life!), I find it simpler and far more productive to begin with the journey of words. A good example of this in a learning setting occurs in Matthew Lipman's

Suki, where the teacher, Mr. Newberry, is challenging the students to make "connections." The exchange illustrates the initial journey into words students take with hedging and hesitation, like testing the water's warmth by first sticking in the tips of toes:

> *"Here's a riddle for you," Mr. Newberry mused aloud to the class.*
>
> *"How's language like electricity?" There were no takers. Mr.Newberry shrugged at the silence that followed his question, then asked, "Okay, who'll tell me how that electric light up there works?"*
>
> *Tony's hand shot up. "I can tell you. The electric cord contains two wires that convey the electricity to the bulb. Then inside the bulb, there are wires that are called filaments. But they're made of some kind of stuff so when the current hits them, they glow."*
>
> *Mr. Newberry nodded. "The wires in the cord are made of copper and copper's a good conductor of electricity?"*
>
> *Tony nodded, "That's right."*
>
> *"And the wires or filaments inside the bulb are made of tungsten, and tungsten resists the electric current. It's a poor conductor, right?"*
>
> *"I guess so."*
>
> *"Well then," said Mr. Newberry, couldn't we say that the wires in the electric cord convey or communicate electricity?"*
>
> *"Sure," Tony agreed.*
>
> *"So the filaments in the bulb turn the electricity into — what?"*
>
> *"Into a flash of light."*
>
> *Lisa grinned. "Aha! And language illuminates when it produces a flash of understanding!"*
>
> *"Good," said Mr. Newberry. "Now, what about communication?"*
>
> *"Electric wires communicate energy," said Tony.*
>
> *"And language communicates meaning," Mark put in* (Lipman, 53-54).

Mr. Newberry keenly takes the students on a journey of connecting seemingly unrelated things. The high point of this exchange is that the students make the connections about electricity giving light and language illuminating meaning. With successful connections like that the students will find the waters inviting and throw their entire bodies in after testing with their toes. Suddenly, the horizon appears friendly on the metaphorical landscape and the roads to meaning through language and literature encourage commencement.

The truly remarkable aspect about writing and journey for Mr. Newberry's students as well as mine is that it is there for all students at all levels. With some the journey goes inward rather quickly and astounding connections are readily made while less talented students can be encouraged with additional connections and examples. The point, certainly, is the reality for good writing comes originally out of the wanderings we do in our own experience.

I often use Dante's great poem, the *Divine Comedy* to illustrate the idea of journey and literature. It is pointed out that "if you wanna get to heaven (light!) you've got to go through a little hell (darkness and confusion)." The students see how the poet begins bewildered and confused, his thoughts sludge-like. With the aid of his guide, Virgil, he begins the journey through hell toward enlightenment. In other words, Dante uses his experiences to gain insight. He employs writing to connect those insights and produce a story. Richard Rohr in his article "Psychology and Spirituality: Why Does Psychology Always Win?" quotes James Hillman, a Jungian psychologist:

> *Biography is an act of imagination; we tell stories we need to tell to explain what we want to say now. Personal history is also fiction.* (p.14)

In short, if students can see their lives as good stories, worthwhile experiences, they will begin to look outward and find themselves in pieces of great literature. They will journey toward it in their writing. Lipman again seizes on a theme so often confronting earnest teachers (Mr. Newberry):

> *A week went by. Harry had made no progress on Mr.Newberry's assignment. "It's like I've got this thing about it," he told Suki a few minutes before Mrs. Goldhammer's social studies class was to begin. "I've got no ideas. Zilch."*
>
> *"How come?"*
>
> *"I just don't have anything to write about. Nothing ever happens to me"* (Lipman, 62).

This paralyzing feeling confronts nearly every student and every teacher at sometime. The subtext is, "I'm boring, my life's boring, blah, blah, blah." Engaging the student to view life as the metaphor of journey will produce amazing results in writing. In the tradition of Dante, Odysseus, Julian of Norwich, and others, the student will understand that life is active rather than passive, and first looks at individual experience will be seen in a new light. I taught junior and senior high school writing in a rural area for ten years. The students invariably echoed Harry's assessment of his life. "I live on a farm. Nothing ever happens to me, etc." When we began to examine the picturesque bluffs along the Mississippi River and living among them as an experience most people don't appreciate, writing about hunting, fishing, trapping, and spelunking became active and energetic. Students frequently attached their lives to Huck Finn's personna and journey.

Brian Freisinger, *brush and ink*, 1992

The dimension aspect of writing fits appropriately into the writer's experience at this point when words become active and vision is broader and keen. What I mean by dimension is the way writers see experience and time. Margaret Atwood expresses it beautifully at the beginning of her novel, *Cat's Eye*:

...and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backward in time and exist in two places at once...You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away (Atwood, 3).

In other words, the writer, whether writing technically or creatively, in fact, does exist in two places at one time — as the poet/writer/narrator and as the pilgrim/adventurer, the one who is on the journey. Time, indeed, ceases to exist in its traditional mode and becomes pure experience. The writer collects moments from a personal past and discovers insight and expression by looking down through layers of experiences.

As Jimmy Britton echoes Atwood, "we bring the past to bear on the present" (Pradl, 141), the mind certainly splits in its travel the moment a thought or experience is cast out on to paper. The writer is narrating from experience but also becomes the pilgrim, the one on a journey, in that what will be arrived at will be a connection or discovery. The obvious reason that the event being written is discovery is simple. The collections of experiences are seldom understood at the moment they occur but lie in the psyche ("nothing goes away") unordered, not understood.

Something may have happened to us at one point in actual time and we merely endured or savored the event but were forced to move on because new experiences were moving toward us like meteors and we had to be prepared to contend. But that other experience remained. It lived again and again. For example, one student was on a football team in his junior year of high school that played for the state championship. His team lost. In his college freshman composition class the students were assigned to write a personal experience paper. He wrote about that state championship game. In his writing he was the narrator but on the paper he was the pilgrim moving through the experience in an attempt, I would suspect, to figure out why his team lost and probably secretly hoping to change the outcome. Yet, the event never stopped happening, never went away. He was looking down through time.

At the heart of every piece of writing is the desire to understand and to bring closure or resolution. The writing gets very frightening but it is less frightening perhaps than other avenues which might bring explosions along with closure. I assigned my high school senior writing students to write autobiographies as a final project. One student recalled an experience when she and her sister were working with their tyrannical father in the barn. The father, in a rage, scooped up cow manure and rubbed it in the sister's face. You don't think for a moment that this event merely happened and passed on into oblivion, do you? Of course not. It reappeared on the paper and the writer brought it forth as narrator and pilgrim. In her putting it on paper she moved one step closer to resolution and of course increased her world view by understanding that humans are indeed mysterious. But the mind seeks order and she simultaneously attempted to understand her father while also putting the event to rest in her other self.

There are not limits to dimension and the writer has a wealth of experience from which to launch writing. Dimension is the expansive doorway to further wanderings and desires to understand and bring order to the narrating logical self.

So, in final thought, the sum of these ideas about writing seems to exist in a three way network that involves seeing, expansion of dimensions of time and vision to be inclusive and connected. Toss in the metaphor of journey and the student writes actively from experiences, always seeking to expand meaning by touching larger and enduring themes. Certainly, one should go home and write, but the compulsion to examine or simply sit in awe and ponder the phenomenon should be encouraged.

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