# Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

## A practice-based dialogical inquiry into the influence of Postmodernism and Social constructionism on the understanding and practice of nine writers of personal narrative.

**Proefschrift**

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan Tilburg University
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door

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# ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

The writing of personal narrative might seem to epitomize individual endeavor; yet constructionist ontology problematizes this view and raises the question: How are we to understand the practice of personal narrative writing in context of postmodern constructionist objections to individualism and all it implies? Within this question lie others:

- What are the differences between modern humanist and postmodern constructionist notions of persons and authors and persons-as-authors?
- In responding to a series of dialogical questions about their writing process, what do these nine practitioners of personal narrative writing say about *who authors personal narrative*?

This inquiry is exploratory and formative. The research method is roughly ethnographic and dialogical, resting on philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's view that "understanding" is recognized by the ability of participants to navigate a conversation profitably enough to "go on" or "move on" or "go forward" together (Wittgenstein, Anacombe & Anacombe, 2001, §§143-201) and on Mikhail Bakhtin's sense that language is inescapably ideological (Klages, M., 2003) and dialog is the source of working knowledge.

> The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it

> cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276).

Bakhtin (2001, p. 1215) argues, "A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another" and its meaning is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. A word is the product of the relationship between a speaker and a listener and what they each bring to the conversation.

Featuring my "writer voice" and the voices of nine other writers of personal narrative, this dissertation presents a record of written dialogs ensuing from "an invitation to play" accompanied by a series of "starter" questions asking writers how they go about their work and how they view the nature of it. I co-generate "data" by bringing up rival explanations. The dialogs are center staged, unadulterated and unedited, although I do organize the back-and-forth elements to read more like "natural" conversation and label them to make this transparent.

I eschew any pretense that objectivity is attainable in participant research reporting and instead opt to make my subjectivity available to the reader. I join John Law in holding the ideal of

> "escaping singularity, and responding creatively to a world … that appears as it does when it does not because that is its nature but because of the hinterland we construct for it—the way we position ourselves to it, the way we approach it, and the way we study it" (Law, 2004, p. 9).

Preferring richness and complexity to singularity, I do not chunk “the data” into categories or variables and plot them on graphs or transform them into discrete entities amenable to statistical analysis. Instead, I present the conversational archive in its multi-voiced glory.

In the discussion chapter, I reflect on the conversations separately and as a whole in terms of folk ontology (Goldman, 1992, p. 35). I find many “social constructivists” of a sort: writers influenced by “the social turn” accompanying the ascendency of the social sciences who accept as true that much of what we “know” is learned through social interaction but embrace a “deeper” or “truer” self that knows in a deeper, more revelatory sense. It is this self and this knowing they seek to tap when engaging an issue through one of the subgenres of personal narrative. A constructivist view ‘focuses on meaning making and the constructing of the social and psychological worlds *through individual, cognitive processes”* while a social constructionist starts from the supposition that “social and psychological worlds are made real (constructed) through social processes and interaction” (Young & Collin, 2004, p. 375). (Italics added.)

# ABOUT THE COVER

The cover of this book celebrates a remarkable experience that unfolded over a few months along the Fort-to-Sea Trail in the Fort Clatsop national park where I run. The park service dumped a large pile of rock beside the trail and users of the park spontaneously reorganized the rocks into artful patterns. At first, a few isolated "structures" slowly evolve but a momentum sets in and the process accelerates. Within a few months, tons of heaped stone become art, architectural design and feats of engineering. Without a word uttered, we feel invited into a little game and accept the invitation. Yes, I too pause from 10-mile runs and, with a smile, add a stone or two … or three. I find this "happening" remarkable and a perfect metaphor for personal writing—for our desire to personify the world, to bring it into our social world and remake it in our own image.

Realizing that the park service or a passer-by with a destructive bent could demolish this, our own Stonehenge, in minutes, I bring my camera one afternoon and do a shoot. Seeing them, sister-in-law Karen insists these photos are too "inside the box"; so, fine, I crawl back up the trail and do a bigger and more "outside the box" shoot.

Good job, that. A few days later, the park service returns our artisanry to its former lumpish state and within a fortnight converts that into masonry park benches.

I am often asked: Why spend time on the cover so early in the project? Simple, really. I am awe-inspired and adrenaline-riddled by my "fellows" being "driven" to

transform entropic rubble into art. I have a way to capture it and, therefore, I must! As well, my friend Grant Anderson promises to work on the cover graphics and I want to give him plenty of time to patiently talk me out my more insufferable ideas and come up with something awesome.

Then Kate and I visit Margaret and Colin Cribb in Wales. Over tea and biscuits, I talk about my experience with the transformation of rocks, that I think it is in our nature to create something from rubble; it is "something people do." After some shifting in her chair, Margaret politely and gingerly squeezes the life from my fancy, saying that Brits probably would not have done.

"That's more a Yank thing, isn't it?" she asks Colin, "To assume permission if a thing is not explicitly prohibited." Assuring that she does not mean to offend, Margaret suggests it is characteristically American to assume the freedom to act. "*We* would assume we're *not allowed* unless permission is explicitly granted, wouldn't we?" Colin agrees. Their own park service, he is convinced, would find the pile of rock exactly as they left it. Disheartened and disappointed, I toss out the cover idea forever.

Forever is apparently about a week. While running through the woods in the same park, the cover metaphor flips on its head. Why not recast the story and let the cover represent people responding in a "socially ecological" way; that is, consistent with meanings negotiated through face-to-face social interaction or through self-talk. Let it symbolize the way language in action creates a social reality, which, in turn, creates a phenomenological reality that compels us to transform rubble into sculpture … *or not*, as such reality might dictate?

It's all good!

# DEDICATION

To my dearly loved Kate:

Thanks to your financial and moral support, this 35-year-old dream has come true!

**Graphic 1: Kate Merrill positioned as Wonder Woman**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**Graphic 2: My Relational Web of Possibility (Left to right and back to front)**
**Back row: Susan Swim, Bonnie Milne, Susan Bono, Sheila Bender**
**Fourth: Frank Kashner, Janice DeFehr, Brian Doyle, Mridu Khullar, Sue William Silverman,**
**Third: Harlene Anderson, Sheila McNamee, Diane Leon-Ferdico,**
**Second: Jack Swenson, Rodney (diploma), Charles Markee**
**Front: Kenneth Gergen, Don Edgers**

# GUIDING LIGHTS

## Who Authors Personal Narrative?

### A Dialogical Inquiry into the Influence of Postmodern Notions of Person and Authorship on the Process and Practice of Nine Writers of Personal Narrative

This inquiry gathers around a set of bewilderments which might be framed in the following questions:

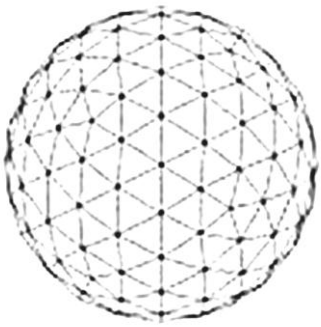
1. "If we examined more closely the writing process and what writers say about it, might it give us an evidential basis for theories more appropriate to CW [Creative Writing] pedagogy?" (Mike Harris, 2009, Abstract)
2. What are the differences between modern humanist and postmodern constructionist notions of persons and authors and persons-as-authors?
3. What do the responses of these nine writers of personal narrative to a series of questions about their writing process and practices suggest about their views on persons and authors and persons-as-authors?
4. Specifically, how much has postmodern and constructionist considerations affected the process and practices of writers of personal narrative?

# HEARKENING A CALL FOR "A MORE RECOGNIZABLY HUMAN PERSONA"

In this work, I hearken to a call by Kenneth Gergen (2000), social psychologist, philosopher and a prominent voice of social constructionism:

> I have been fascinated by the brave efforts of many others to open the door to new modes of expression in the social sciences—and thus to new forms of relationship. Especially relevant to my present concerns are writers who have tried to foster a more richly laminated relationship with the reader. Rather than positioning themselves as fully rational agents, bounded, and superior, the effect of these writings is to generate a more recognizably human persona, one to whom the reader may sense a shift from the division of me vs. you to "the two of us" (Gergen, K., 2000, p. 5).

My "scholar" voice tends toward the convoluted, sometimes torturously so. Sadder still, the "real me" voice I use in everyday conversation leans toward compound-complex sentences replete with subordinate clauses and parenthetical digressions. I am aware that this can give the impression of someone, as Gergen describes it, "positioning themselves as fully rational agents, bounded, and superior." Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, this way of speaking and writing may simply reflect my subjective experience (see Graphic 3): rhizomatous, web-like, compound and complex; that there is always a great deal more to say by way of



**Graphic 3: A Web of Multi-being**

althoughs, ands, buts and furthermores before a thing is fully said; that, as essayist David Shields (2010) writes, “everything is connected to everything else” (p. 82) and severable only in a manner of speaking; that the more fully-encompassing, less destructive “right words” are forever just out of reach and the next best choice leaves a good deal wanting.

I only hope that such a voice, addled though it may seem at one time or pontifical at another, nevertheless might “generate a more recognizably human persona” (Gergen, K., 2000, p. 5) even while managing to add some small but worthwhile measure of grist to the mill of human science.

To this end, I make an effort to be “present” from beginning to end—even, in spite of admonishments to the contrary, in the literature review. A literature review without an authorial voice—the affectation of a disembodied “voice of knowledge”—is officious and dogmatic and denies by omission the unavoidable selectivity, point-of-view and intentionality that goes into a literature review. The “I-voice” present throughout this work serves as a reminder that as a relational, language-using organism I am a nexus and a conduit of communal discourse but also a gatekeeper. Were this not so, the literature review would run into millions of pages. Blending chameleon-like into the weave of these pages perpetuates the lie that the pages merely display corralled facts.

On the other hand, Gergen (2009) notes, a single coherent voice reinforces the illusion of bounded originary authorship (Gergen, K., 2009, p. xxv). As such, he is on the lookout “for means of breaking the confines of tradition” and ways to explore a more relational, more dialogical form of social science writing. So am I. I have achieved this to

some small degree by integrating the “voices” of other writers and, of course, by quoting and attributing to authoritative others.

In response to this “problem” of autonomous authorship and owing to the influence of Janice DeFehr (2008), the voices of the writers who participated in this inquiry are not merely included but positioned front and center in this book. They are not replaced by charts or numerical representations as per usual practice. Although DeFehr and I interact with “our” participant texts differently, I have no doubt that her dazzling 2008 dissertation for Tilburg University inspired the approach before you. Any deficiency in carrying out the vision should be attributed to me alone.

Yet, even while including others generates a more dialogical text, it really does not dispel this stubborn impression of insular, originary authorship, e.g. this is *my* dissertation, *my* idea, and the like. I have no way around the predicament of reified pronouns. Switching person (from “I” to “Rodney”) might be useful as a “consciousness-raising” device but leaves unscathed the deep-seated notion of creative insularity. Presently, all I can offer up is this caveat: while “I” herein points to a particular human *organism*, the human *being* is a state of (direct or indirect) relational interaction with other humans *being*; that, other words, *I-being* is ever a social activity.

Although “there is professional risk attached” (Gergen, K., 2000, p. 5) to *any* effort to reflexively embody writing, especially a doctoral dissertation where it may be dismissed out-of-hand as wooly and lacking in rigor, the peril is amplified when working—as I do here—in an quick eddy where humanities, social studies and creative writing commingle and blend, opening up a space of possibility unavailable to each

discipline alone. Mikhail Bakhtin stood in such a space when he wrote ostensibly on literature but transformed philosophy, literary criticism, sociology, linguistics, and cultural studies in the single undertaking.

I pretend to no such ambition or ability. I offer this baby step toward a “means of breaking the confines of tradition” by undertaking a “more relational, more dialogical form of social science writing” (Gergen, K., 2000, p. 5). May you suffer it well.

# WRITING CONVENTIONS

This dissertation uses a variation on APA citation. Page numbers are provided along with citation *both for direct quotes and for paraphrasing that approximates quotation.* In cases where a more general debt is owed, the work is cited without page numbers.

I have been asked repeatedly about my use of the spelling "dialog" when many writers use "dialogue" instead. The motive is uncomplicated. I have always spelled it this way. It is an accepted form in United States ("American") English. As well, I use the streamlined form of monolog, analog, catalog, and epilog.

The other spellings strike me as British, in the same vein as colo*u*r vs. color, encylopaedia vs. encyclopedia, man*o*euv*re* vs. maneuver, or program*me* vs. program. In every case, the "American English" spelling streamlines the British.

The minimalism, I think, appeals to me. On the other hand, it may be a simpler matter of pigheaded ethnocentrism parading as style.

# CONTEXTUALIZING QUOTATIONS

What is not surrounded by uncertainty cannot be the truth.
~ Richard Feynman

Say you, say me; say it for always.

That's the way it should be.

Say you, say me; say it together. Naturally.

~ Lionel Ritchie, *Say You, Say Me* (song lyrics)

You have your way. I have my way.

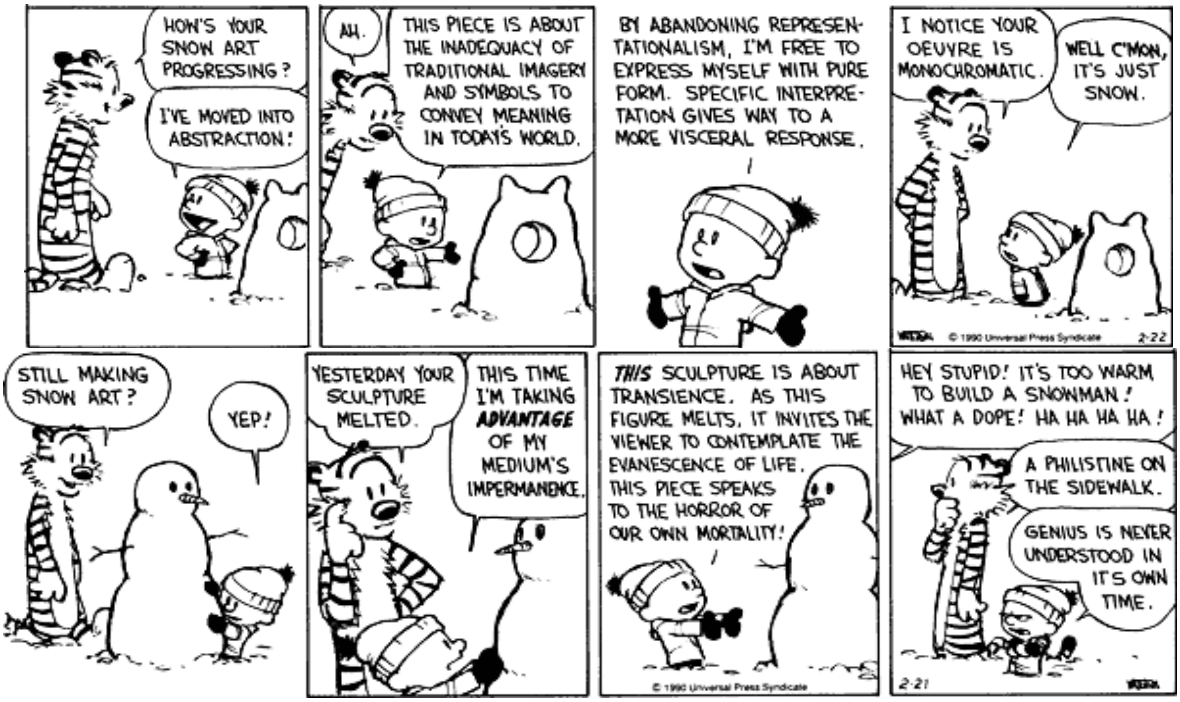
As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist.

~ Friedrich Nietzsche

This is the way light fell on the picture for me;

for others it will have fallen differently.

~ Jennie Erdal, *Ghosting: A Double Life*



Calvin and Hobbes. Used with permission of United Feature Syndicate

# PART ONE: “I”

(AN AUTOENTHNOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE)

CHAPTER 1: WHAT I AM DOING AND WHY

CHAPTER 2: AN ACCOUNT OF GETTING TO HERE AND NOW

Part One provides context and orientation for the rest of the book. These take the form of an auto-ethnographic backgrounder, an introduction to the concerns of this research, and an overview of the chapters.

# CHAPTER 1: WHAT I AM DOING AND WHY

*Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said. 'One can't believe impossible things.'*
*'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it half an hour a day. Why, sometimes, I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.*
~ Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass: And What Alice Saw There

*Let's revel in the splendor of our madness*
*'Cause in chaos there is energy, color and excitement*
*In peace I see stagnation and death*
*In chaos, life and beautiful lights*
*In peace, your eyes will close*
*In chaos there is movement, achievement, direction*
*In peace, only existence*
*Embrace the chaos*
*For when you least expect it*
*Peace will be put upon you*
~ Clint Boon, *In Chaos, I See*

The purpose of this inquiry is to explore how writers of personal essay and related forms go about writing by asking them to write about writing process in a reflexive manner. The impetus for it comes from something Mike Harris (2009), Sheffield Hallam University lecturer in creative writing, wrote about the current push for a stronger theoretical foundation for university creative writing programs:

> There have been repeated calls for Creative Writers in Universities to end their suspicion of Theory. But most Literary Theories were invented by academic readers for academic readers and have little or nothing to say about composition. If we examined more closely the writing process and

> that writers say about it, might it give us an evidential basis for theories more appropriate to CW pedagogy? (Harris 2009, Abstract)

## Writing and Romantic Individualism

Personal narrative writing would seem the epitome of individual enterprise. It is, after all, an activity performed by an individual the aim of which is to record his or her lived experiences.

The Romantics would have it that artists of all kinds hold a privileged position in the world, being in closer contact the human spirit, the writer/artist listens to their inner truth and transcribe it to their chosen medium. They work beyond the constraints encountered by the everyman (McIntyre, 2008) for the edification of everyman. Cognitive science professor, Margaret Boden (2004) argues that

> these views are believed by many to be literally true. But they are rarely critically examined. They are not theories, so much as myths: imaginative constructions, whose function is to express the values, assuage the fears, and endorse the practices of the community that celebrates them. (Boden, p.14)

Most of the research on creativity and innovation, both in the context of organizations and in social science in general, has been on creative individuals (Montuori & Purser, 2000). Oliver Bown (2009), researcher in computational creativity at the Centre for Cognition, Computation and Culture at Goldsmiths College, University of London, says such a focus is

"justified by the assumption that creativity is best addressed directly by individualist cognitive science" which "welcomes social and cultural factors as a part of the external environment" that influences the individual "but proceeds in anticipation of a situation in which creativity can be observed in the system … as something that happens in individual humans." (p. 1)

> Although we talk of humans as machines, consciousness as illusory, and the quirks and idiosyncrasies of our not-obviously-rational behavior as a product of turbulent evolutionary interactions, we still hold onto a view which identities individual humans as the only significant units of creative agency. (p.2)

Boden contends that the study of creativity still overestimates the importance of the individual as a distinct creative unit. Scientifically and technologically, there is greater scope for the development of a holistic approach … that finds a more appropriate balance between the social and the individual (i.e., it needs to be a sociological perspective). (Closely paraphrased from p. 2)

Yet, certain tributaries of literary dialog—postmodernism and, in particular, social constructionism—have called into question the notion of the isolated individual (Barthes, 1977; Lyotard, 1979/1984). In view of this come questions about the individual as source of its own knowing and its own inspiration—and about the idea that any creative activity or its produce has "the individual" as its original source (Montuori & Purser, 1995).

## Postmodern Problematizing of Individualism

This "problematizing" of the individual author together with Harris's call for a look at "the writing process and what writers say about it" prompted and energized this project and dissertation. It also raised a few questions:

1. What are the differences between modern humanist and postmodern constructionist notions of persons and authors and persons-as-authors?

2. What do the responses of nine writers of personal narrative to a series of questions about their writing process and practices suggest about their views on persons and authors and persons-as-authors?

3. Specifically, how much have postmodern and constructionist considerations affected the process and practices of these writers of personal narrative?

In this inquiry, I attempt to construct a meaningful context for writing—my favored way of being-in-the-world[1] (Heidegger, 1962)—while considering "the postmodern condition"[2] (Lyotard, 1979/1984) and certain related constructionist concepts such as intersubjectivity[3] (Scheff, Phillips, & Kincaid, 2006) and intertextuality[4] (Irwin, 2004; Kristeva, 1969/1980).

Kenneth J. Gergen, social psychologist and the acknowledged "Dean of Social Constructionism" (Anderson & Gehart, 2006, p. x) states, "Our taken-for-granted understandings are not required by the way things are" (Gergen, K., 2001, p. 54). Grounded in writing practice, this is a dialogical inquiry with nine experienced practitioners of personal essay. As well, it is an interrogation of postmodern and

constructionist literature on issues that intersect personal essay writing and the writing process—namely such "taken-for-granteds" (Gergen, K., 1999; 2004) as authorship, self, mind, creativity and personal history.

## Postmodern Skepticism of Positivist Metaphysics

This inquiry builds on the constructionist skeptical stance toward positivist metaphysical dualism which "presumes a real world (objective, material) somewhere 'out there' and a psychological world of the experiencing agent 'in here'" (Gergen, K., 2004) who is able to reproduce out there in more or less mirror fashion. Rather, inquiry is both generative and transformative (Hosking & McNamee, 2009). To study an object is to act upon it, to alter and attenuate it in ways that make it more compliant with method (Law, 2004, pp. 38-40). Studying what is "out there" translates it into something compatible with the "in here" community of discourse (Watzlawick, 1984, pp. 17-18). In short, studying something "out there" renders it more like what we already know (Law, 2004, pp. 12-14; Watzlawick, 1984, p. 24).

I make no pretense that this is a "scientific" study in the sense of testing a hypothesis about some narrow cause-and-effect state of affairs using a predetermined sequence of events by which to isolate the impact of selected variables drawn from tightly wound operationalized definitions and randomly selected participants, a group that receives a contrived intervention or a placebo intervention and a no-intervention control group. Such methodology and attendant methods have a place and produce "answers" to certain kinds of questions and "solutions" to certain kinds of problems.

Conducting such a narrow study is easier in many ways than what I have set out to do. The real cost of such methodology is oversimplification of the complex and the façade of tidiness where there is mess (Law, 2004, p. 14; John Shotter, 2008, p. 15). The richness and complexity of experiential grounding is sacrificed to construct minutiae that are more measurable. This practice depends on the notion that "if only you do your methods properly … you will discover specific truths about which all reasonable people can at least temporarily agree" (Law, 2004, p. 9) and that a finite number of these truths can be fitted together to form an all-encompassing singularity, a Great Jigsaw Puzzle of Truth. I join with John Law in striving toward the ideal of "escaping singularity, and responding creatively to a world that is taken to be composed of an excess of generative forces and relations" (Law, 2004, p. 9); a world, in short, that bears scant resemblance to a jigsaw puzzle; a world that appears as it does when it does not because that is its nature but because of *the hinterland* we construct for it (Law, 2004, pp. 27-36)—that is, the way we position ourselves in relation to it, the way we approach it, the way we study it, and the way we talk about it.

## Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogism

This inquiry is premised on the notions of Mikhail Bakhtin—20th century Russian philosopher and scholar of literary criticism and rhetorical theory—that working knowledge is *generated* in dialog (Ahmad, 2009) and that language is ideological though and through (Edlund, 1988, p. 67). That is, "knowledge-making is not merely passively guided by local epistemic norms. Rather, knowledge-making is mediated by active

ideologies of knowledge, the focus of explicit and implicit ideological labor" (Thorkelson, 2007, p. 7).

I use interrogatory dialogical "data" from practicing writers; that is, I carry on a conversation with each writer as a peer, using a list of interview questions *as a starting point*. As for an ethics of subjective transparency, I seek to make the purpose of the interview as apparent to participants as it is to me (which isn't always saying much); and admit that my subjective experience is integral to the inquiry. I attempt to offset it with transparency.

Being a writer, I see this as a collaborative work: talking to writers in a collegial way and presenting the discussions in as unadulterated and transparent a fashion as possible in recognition that the reader is "always and already" (Jacques Derrida, 1978) an essential collaborator as well (Barthes, 1977).

In this regard, I look to the courageous example set by the doctoral research of Janice DeFehr, a collaborative therapist in Winnipeg Canada. DeFehr calls her method "responding *into"* the conversation (DeFehr, 2008, p. 71) as it unfolds. Though the current work does not step precisely into her footsteps, I do follow her lead in foregrounding and centering dialog as the findings of dialogical inquiry rather than consigning them to the lesser status of data to be relegated to an evidentiary appendix. I owe an enormous debt to DeFehr's distinctive approach.

In the spirit of DeFehr's example, I want to clear a constructive dialogical space between writer and reader by eschewing "impulses toward elimination, the rage to order, and the desire for unity and singularity" (Gergen & Gergen, 2003, p. 604) that leads to a

tidy informational "product" of "static and frozen findings" for the end user to consume (p. 598). This does not mean that I will have nothing to say about the dialogs; rather, it means I will not generalize, summarize or conclude—as if this or any inquiry could settle a matter conclusively and for all time.

## Non-reductionist Inquiry is Less Tidy

Preferring richness, complexity (John Shotter, 2008, p. 11-13) and "mess" (Law, 2004) to the tidiness of ideological compartmentalization or amalgamation, I do not want to "chunk the data" into categories more convenient for entering into a chi square or plotting on a frequency distribution. Rather, I want the conversations present for readers "as is" before I "package" them for consumption in Chapter 9: Responsive Discussion of Themes.

I will pull out threads of discussion and maybe weave something interesting with them. Along the way I hope to get a sense of whether postmodern, constructionist and socialization models of writing prevalent in academic writing departments (Creaton, 2008) affect the practices of these particular writers. Finally, I will consider ramifications of holding writing within a context of the transcendental creative individual or holding it within a context skilled medium of "languaged" relationship.

In general, I plan to:

- Introduce this inquiry and myself.

- Review literature on postmodern concerns (persons, authorship, autobiographical memory and so on) that prompted this inquiry.
- Dialog with writers about personal essay writing in terms of these postmodern concerns (in short, about whether "the personal" we write about might be "social" or relationally constructed).
- Offer up the dialogs in their entirety so that the writers can "speak for themselves" rather than through me.
- Respond to the dialogs in terms of themes and implications for practice.
- Facilitate and participate in a collaborative critique of the project.
- Offer up a "state of affairs" account of this project which will include its impact on me, my impact on it, any misgivings and how I might do things differently in future.

The primary community of discourse for this book is, of course, professor-readers who will appraise on this work. I also hope it offers something of value to members of my community of practice—professional writers and writing consultants, including those who took part in this inquiry. Further, I hope it is salient and useful to all writers.

## Synopsis and a Look Ahead

In this chapter, I briefly outlined what I want to do and to know and why. I want to review the literature on the postmodernist and constructionist stance on the individual

as these might impinge on authorship and “the personal” in personal narrative. I want to dialog with writers of personal narrative to learn how they go about doing what they do (writing) and to learn whether they hold what they do in a traditional individualist and humanist framework or the postmodernist view popular in academic writing. I sketch out the epistemic stance I adopt toward this inquiry and how I intend to work with the data collected in dialog with other writers.

In Chapter 2, I will introduce “myself” as a social construct. By this, I intend to provide an account that may depict predilections that may influence the content of this book. Of course, the account itself is biased by my system of accounting but, hopefully, it opens a clearing from which, we may “go on together” (Wittgenstein, Anacombe & Anacombe, 2001, §§143-201).

# CHAPTER 2: AN ACCOUNT OF GETTING TO HERE AND NOW

*The voyage of discovery lies not in seeking new horizons, but in seeing with new eyes.*
~Marcel Proust

*Reality is not what it seems, nor is it otherwise.*
~Tibetan Buddhist teaching

*All things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.*
~Friedrich Nietzsche

This chapter provides context and orientation for the rest of the book. These take the form of an auto-ethnographic backgrounder, an introduction to the concerns of this dissertation project and an overview of the chapters to come.

Werner Erhard (1974), philosopher and designer of the *est Training* said "the truth believed is a lie"[5] and many responded to this as doubletalk and gobbledygook. Such is often the case when one tries to express the contextually ineffable. What I took him to say is that holding a truth as a clearing to stand in or a "Wittgenstein's ladder" to stand on (Kolak, 1998, p. 49 §6.54), it may have value and power. The very same truth held in feverish belief becomes a set of blinders or a straightjacket.

Erhard's attitude can illuminate self-stories as well. The narrative we contrive is a place to stand, hypothetical and paradigmatic (Vaihinger, 1952) and, if we embrace it lightly and live it playfully, offers truth-value[6] and the power of "as-if" (Vaihinger, 1952). As-if affords the authority to test and push the limits of possibility. If, on the other

hand, we cling obstinately to narrative and insist on its inerrant and unshakable correspondence to essential Reality, truth becomes domineering and parasitic, deferring possibility in favor of a more constrained certainty.

## If I Only Knew Now What I Knew Then

I once suffered the notion that I knew what I was doing when I started this project. I did too, as far as it goes; but I did not know then that what I knew then would not be what I know now. My experience in writing this dissertation is that describing what you know is generative and what you know expands and transforms as you describe it. Knowing is provisional and contingent. (Wait. I knew that!)

## A Linguistic Prolog

Ferdinand de Saussure, the leading figure in structuralism, asserted that linguistic signs are arbitrary, that there is no essential relationship between the signifier (words, symbols, sounds) and the signified (conceptual, emotional "baggage") (Saussure, 1986). He also distinguished between, langue (language) and parole (speech). La langue represents "the abstract systematic principles of a language, without which no meaningful utterance (parole) would be possible" (Phillips, J. & Tan, C., 2005).

This was in sharp contrast to the commonsense notion that signs are transparent and ontologically referential; that is, a given word is suited naturally and uniquely to reference its particular independently existing object. Roses are rosy. Skunks are skunky. No other combination of letters, symbols or sounds could do the same job. Saussure

argued that signs are part of a system of meanings built on dichotomy and contradistinction (Saussure, 1986; Best & Kellner, p. 19).

While Saussure continued to believe that language is a structured system of signs that expresses ideas (Saussure, 1986), that the signifier and the signified are a stable unit and the resulting sign has unwavering and direct relation to its referent (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 20), poststructuralists and postmodernists went further, arguing that meaning is transient, or "endlessly deferred" as Jacques Derrida (1976) would say, and intertextual (Best & Kellner, 1991). In signifying, a word (sentence, conversation) creates the reality it signifies. As such, words (sentences, conversations) are self-referential (Jacques Derrida, 1976, p. 58) and ontologically moot.

Words (sentences, conversations) depend on each other for meaning; to assert that a thing is "this" means nothing except that this is *not* "that" (Saussure, 1986, p. 120). "It is day" must be understood as *it is not night* which must be understood as *it is not day*. Sometimes linguistic referents are more complex than a simple 1:1 binary. A house is yellow because it is not white red, orange, green, blue, brown or black (is *not* any of a nearly infinite number of color distinctions). People, indeed, sometimes say, "It's not really a yellow but more of an orange, though not a true orange-orange." Twilight is *not-day, not-night*.

Meaning is attached to (but is not *caused by* or *inherent in*) signs found within a shared system of codification that "not only conveys information but also expresses a world view" (Watzlawick, 1976, p. 9). The worldview or life form within which the linguistic code functions stylizes "Information." In short, context transforms content.

The use of language in social practice or “language games” (Wittgenstein, Anacombe & Anacombe, 2001, p. 23) “connects language, thought and world view, especially if some particular usage becomes the commonly accepted norm” (Kienpointner, 1996, p. 475). Thus, traditional points of view and prevailing ideologies become “naturalized.” They become the “things we don’t even notice that we don’t even notice” (John Shotter, 2008, p. 37)—the stabilized, invisible and unquestioned background assumptions from which conversation begin (Kienpointner, 1996, p. 475).

If meanings negotiated in the everyday practice of language games (Wittgenstein, Anacombe & Anacombe, 2001, p. 23) are related to “Reality” at all, the relationship maybe only partial or tangential (Wittgenstein, Anacombe & Anacombe, 2001, p. 241). This is not to suggest that some methodological correction or fine-tuning of sign systems will align us with a knowable reality. There is no way for us to step outside *forms of life* or their *language games* to calibrate how directly and accurately they represent reality (Wittgenstein, Anacombe & von Wright, 1991). We can never know “Reality” independent of our system of knowing (John Shotter, 2008, p. 37) because our system of knowing both constitutes our reality and sets the criteria for valid knowledge of it (pp. 36-37) (Wittgenstein, Anacombe & von Wright, 1991). Methods used to validate knowledge are congruent with the system that produced the knowledge and, therefore, not “objective” but self-referential (Law, 2004). The most we can say, then, is that a thing is true or valid within the discourse from which it was derived.

To paraphrase Heidegger, we think we master language but it masters us; we think we speak a language but it speaks us (Heidegger, 1971, pp. 111-136). We experience our linguistic (symbolic) constructions and the meanings derived from these constructions rather than "the thing itself."[7]

"The map is not the territory," Korzybski (1948, p. 58) pointed out, the word is not the thing itself and the menu is not the meal. "Two important characteristics of maps should be noticed. A map is not the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness" (Korzybski, 1948, 58).

Paraphrasing Rutgers University English professor William Lutz (1996), naming is a human act and not an act of nature, a very creative act has nothing to do with the "real" name of anything. We create things out of the phenomena using language and we forget this at our peril (p. 46).

> Naming things— using language—is a very high-level abstraction, and when we name something we 'freeze' it by placing it in a category and making a 'thing' out of it (p. 59).

> Language is a map but three important things to remember about maps are: *the map is not the territory*; *no map can represent all aspects of the territory*; and *every map reflects the mapmaker's point of view*" (p. 72) [Italic added for emphasis.]

Language may not directly *represent* the world but only provide a map for negotiating daily life, to "go on" as Wittgenstein expresses it (Wittgenstein, Anacombe & Anscombe, 2001, §§143-201).

There may be "a real world out there" but there need not be any direct correspondence between "it" and our significations (Burr, 1995, pp. 85-88) of it. As bees have a way of communicating that serves the life of bees, humans may have a way of communicating that serves the life of humans without mirroring "out there" any closer than the bees. Consistent with this view, subjective reality, individual and communal—however practical for daily navigation—is relatively independent of ontological reality. "Reality" *as we experience it* is more "us-ness" than "it-ness"—more it-in-social-context than it-in-isolation, more metaphorical-it rather than it-in-the-raw.

Communal (social, cultural, dialogical, relational) understanding becomes further re-construed as persons-in-relationship re-construct (negotiate) meanings through usage in their daily activities—especially as communities of discourse become more heterogeneous (Gergen, K., 1991, pp. 245-251) and understandings become broader, more off-center and idiosyncratic, each participant's prior experiences being somewhat eccentric to those held by other conversational partners (Gergen, K., 1991, pp. 250-251).

## Who "I" Is and How That Affects This Work

> "Who are YOU?" the Caterpillar asked Alice.
> This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, "I—I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then." (Lewis Carroll's *Alice's adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 5: Advice from a Caterpillar.*)

> “I can't explain ***myself***, I'm afraid, sir,” said Alice, `because I'm not myself, you see.”
> “I don't see,” said the Caterpillar.
> “I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly,” Alice replied very politely, “for I can't understand it myself to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.”
> ~ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's adventures in Wonderland (Chapter 5: Advice from a Caterpillar.*)

I join with linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in saying, “One of the most misleading representational techniques in our language is the use of the word ‘I’” (Wittgenstein, 1991, 88, §57). The word “*I”* refers to nothing more than a field of experience; yet we use it *as if* it refers to another person. Therefore, the word “I” has no epistemic validity (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1968: p. 268; Wittgenstein, 1991, 88, §57; Wittgenstein, Anacombe & Anscombe, 2001, §§404-41).

I am a field of experience, a discursive space for meaning and a performance (Burr, 1995, p. 147). I *am* by virtue of positioning and reference (Burr, 1995). I am a *negotiated* performance and a *negotiated* space for meaning (Burr, 1995, p. 148). Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre maintained that “existence precedes essence” (Sartre, 1948, pp. 26-28) and Werner Erhard said that this nothingness is the creative space (Erhard, 1982) for becoming. From the “everything and nothing” (Erhard, 1982); that is, from the possibilities available within the social context of negotiation (Carbaugh, 1999), I am the relational performance known as me (Gergen, K., 2009).

I settle on *I am* “this” or “that” (and, by implication, not the somethings-else by which “this” and “that” are demarcated by difference (the always different and the always

deferred) (Jacques Derrida, 1973, p. 129). “I am” avowals are positioning declarations available to us within the social context of negotiation (Carbaugh, 1999, pp. 173-177).

In this view, “I” am a human organism *and* a fabrication of social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 47-50), a critter *and* a construction. I confess to a “primitive realist” (materialist) conviction that the creature typing this manuscript is ontologically “real” in the very practical sense that if I leap from a very tall building, I will not levitate or hover (all convictions to the contrary notwithstanding) but will plummet to earth and I will die  shortly after impact. That said, our everyday experience of human *being* is largely if not entirely a social production of confluence (Gergen, 2009b, 44-45, 49-57). This human organism is real but most of what we “know” about it and everything it knows is putative, relationally negotiated and, therefore, open to question (Gergen, 2009b, p. 97).

I am a socially constructed critter. The self-referential “I” and the “me” pronouns are befuddling linguistic practices (Wittgenstein, 1991, 88 §57; Wittgenstein, Anacombe & Anscombe, 2001, §§404-41) that create by distinction alone (Erhard, 1982) a world of divisions and isolates—the internal and the external, the individual and the community, the self and the other, even the self-as-object from self-as-subject. I pronoun you. You pronoun me. We *pronoun*ce each other autonomous and separate individuals.

Self-referential language enables schismatic experiences like “scolding myself” or “being self-satisfied”—a fabricated dualistic “alternity”[8] wherein I am juxtaposed as both

subject and object. In our culture, this sensation is naturalized and attributed to “self” or “mind”—e.g. “I want to go but I can’t make up my mind.”

The schismatic language that cleaves self from body and body from world is often attributed to Rene Descartes (Gergen, 22009, p.100-101; Warburton, 1999, p. 131; Magee & Williams, 1999, pp. 260-261), physicist, physiologist, mathematician and philosopher-theologian (*cogito ergo sum*) who broke with Aristotelian philosophy by developing a mechanistic model in opposition to the “final causes” teleology of the time (Skirry, J. 2008, p. 114-119). In building a foundation for his mechanistic universe through a regimen of radical doubt, Descartes “established” the existence of a world external to the mind and the division of a non-material mind from the corporeal body (Burr, 1995, p. 35; Magee & Williams, 1999, p. 254; Warburton, 1999, pp. 130-131). From this perspective, a human being is essentially a mind cut off from the rest of the world, including the body that hosts it (Burr, 1995, p. 35; Magee & Williams, 1999, pp. 254-255). In the Cartesian model, an individual engages the world from a distance, in the privacy of this autonomous encapsulated mind and derives ideas and knowledge through self-engagement and rationality (Gergen, K., 1991, pp. 99-101). Meaning that who “we really are” is a kind of ghost manipulator (puppeteer) that sits somewhere behind the eyes and pulls the strings so that its “meat puppet” (Gibson, 1984) can manage in the outside world.

“I” am no longer a freewheeling ghost driver; rather, I am an ongoing conversation and a collaborator in meaning construction (Gergen, K., 1991, p. 242). The “I” and the “me” (dribbled in a conventional manner throughout this book) are subject-

object referents pointing to a nexus of dialogs, performative installations as it were, constructed through conversations that both facilitate and delimit this creature dubbed Rodney.

## A Brief Autoethnography

> But it's no use going back to yesterday,
> because I was a different person then.
> ~Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass: And What Alice Found There

What we find "out there" depends a good deal on personal history; personal history depends a good deal on what we find out there. What we "find" out there is biased by what we "already know" and what we already know changes (occasionally transforms) with new relationally negotiated understanding (Gergen, 2009, p. 111-112). Said another way, knowing is transitory and contextual.

What follows is a brief autobiographic account intended to gesture toward my interest in the social construction of writing and authorship and to expose biases that might influence the content of this book.

As for factuality in this account, I effort to be ethical and do not intentionally deceive. However, there are always issues of what constitutes a "fact" and even agreeable facts have to be sifted for relevance—a process that turns particulars into slant. In short, all accounts are slanted. Some slants are more agreeable, others less so.

Although our culture encourages us to take our personal histories and ourselves (our selves) seriously—as actual and factual, we all know people who recall only happy events and others who could remember winning the $20 million lottery as a tale of woe.

Consider “coming in third” in a highly competitive five-person race. One racer might report placing third, others “just in the middle of the pack” or “third from last” place. These renditions are all “factual” and which of them sounds “true” depends on meanings and understandings extraneous but contextual to those facts. Researchers have found a strong association between mother’s storytelling style and child’s style of experiencing the present and recalling the past (Nelson, 1993).

I am not hyping positive thinking here. Rather, I wish to emphasize the slipperiness of factual accounts and the importance of the contextual assumptions of author and reader in understanding representations of fact. You, reader, are beyond my grasp, for this text now belongs to you and those with whom you converse.

### *Demographics*

Reared into American English, I am described in certain linguistic binaries (Watkins, 2004). I “am” a white, male, graduate school educated, creative and professional writer, consultant, atheistic Buddhist, politically progressive (and so on).

Much of the fabric of my “story” is woven with humanistic yarns (pun intended[9]) like “pulling myself up by my own bootstraps” and “personal courage” and “overcoming the odds.” No matter how pilled and shabby these threads seem now, shearing them looks perilous.

### *A Narrative of Marginality*

Sometimes sentences uttered about life become life sentences. They become debilitation- and deficit-generating contexts which drain transformative possibility from

the future, leaving a present capable only of sustaining a morbid congruence with the past.

I was born into abject poverty in a small town in Grafton County, New Hampshire, the United States of America, in 1950, the bastard child of an adulterous affair and given the wrong last name out of spite. This was not a good era for such shenanigans or for their offspring.

Can you appreciate what it might be like to discover at age twelve that *everyone* in my tiny township, certainly every adult and perhaps every peer, knew the "facts" and their moral implications; how it felt to scrutinize every face for hidden meanings and to wonder what a smile "really" means?

Most of my childhood memories prior to this revolve around hunger, the constant search for food, and fear of volatile parents and their fits of unrestrained rage that often left me crumpled against a wall, bloody and unconsciousness; perhaps worse, their ability to scorch my subjective world with careless indictments of stupidity and worthlessness.

Occasionally, I felt loved and wanted – by the very stepmother who beat me. Tell me that would not be confusing.

I am quite certain my father loathed me and wished me, if not dead, never-born. Nodding in my direction, he once told party guests, that he "should have shot *that* load into the bushes." Although he kicked me the way he kicked the dog, he never beat me. My intuition was that he feared that once he started he might not stop. Why? I am sure I

do not know. The only storyline that makes sense to me is that somehow they both blamed me for the dreadful life they had created together.

*Writing as Keel*

*Writing can change the trajectory of events.* I began personal writing as an act of desperation. I wrote to my grandparents often. In these letters, I included idyllic recollections of being with them in summer months and contrasted this with the nightmare of returning to my parents for the remainder of the year. I will wager these letters were not as clever or as subtle as I remember them; I desperately needed them to help me escape an abusive family so violent that I was convinced that I would never survive into adulthood. (In fact, I gave no thought to and made no plans for adulthood. My majority came as a complete surprise to me. In fact, I find it astonishing that I am now 61 years old!)

To my surprise and relief, my grandparents negotiated for me to live with them at their rustic cabin in rural New Hampshire in exchange for accepting full responsibility for me. Though the agreement netted me an outhouse, no running water and no end of chores, I felt advantaged by the deal and stayed there from age 12 until I graduated from high school.

*Writing can be an act of positioning.* The bemused and amused faculty of Lisbon Regional passed around a 50-page paper I submitted in seventh grade on the mulish inefficiencies I saw all around me. Written in the style of a comedy roast, it skewered the town's Board of Selectmen, the town road crew, the school principal, faculty and staff—I

spared no one except by oversight. I even used my own pathetic physical condition as grist for deriding the physical education program. I imagine that explains its popularity—because my wild-eyed “scorched earth” treatment was hilarious.

Some of the "targets" called me in for a roasting of my own. I took it good-naturedly, and there were no further repercussions. Before I wrote this “mockumentary” I felt like a nonentity. For a while after writing it, I was a minor celebrity and enjoyed it immensely. I concluded that humor sometimes creates a space of impunity for speaking the unspeakable.

*Writing can be an act of love.* As a youngster, I saved the quips and sayings of my grandfather on 3 x 5 cards because, I experienced an advance sense loss when I imagined them vanishing when he died. And, being a man in his early sixties, he seemed to my young eyes ready to keel over at any moment. I did manage to get some of his sayings published under the title of “*New England Witcracker”* or some such. Looking back, I now sense that his stories might not be as funny to a stranger, that part of the joke was Socratic irony implied by the twinkle in his eye and a certain cant to his toothless grin, that the story was improved by my affection for the teller of the story.

*Writing can generate dialog and “companionship”* when you feel cut off and lonely. While writing is usually conceived as a solitary endeavor, it served for me the same role that an imaginary playmate seems to serve children (Goodnow, 2004) despite today’s electronic fantasy saturation (Gordon, 2004). Writing gave me a channel for saying what needed said simply for the sake of saying it and hearing it and responding to

it. As such, it offered a form of camaraderie and conversation when I felt bereft and socially impoverished.

I stopped writing for a while after the school counselor informed me in carefully paced matter-of-fact tones that my I.Q. scores showed me to be inherently and immutably dim-witted. I do not believe that she used those exact words. She did trouble herself, however, to emphasize the *inherent* and *immutable* nature of I.Q. and strongly advised that I prepare for a life of swabbing decks and latrines, in the U.S. Navy perhaps.

Devastated, I began spending a lot of time watching the sweep hand on the big white-faced clock on the front wall, counting the number of seconds in a school day. (Twenty five thousand two hundred, if you did not include lunch period.)

*I Don't Need Nobody, No, No, No.*

After graduating from high school in 1968, I accepted a ride from New Hampshire to California in exchange for sharing the driving. As I was not fully reconciled to swabbing decks, I packed up a small time-tested (circa 1920) luggage case and headed West with just $10 in my pocket.

Being the first of my family to complete a college degree despite the scorn of other family members for both education and the educated, despite a financial aid system that deducted sums family *should* provide, though they rendered not one cent, I invested a lot in a "survivor" and "going it alone" individualist storyline. And that narrative has been difficult to vaporize. Laying in the dark, listening to *The Wolfman Jack Show* late at night, I wailed along in sympathy if not in harmony with Simon and Garfunkel:

I have my books

And my poetry to protect me;

I am shielded in my armor,

Hiding in my room, safe within my womb.

I touch no one and no one touches me.

I am a rock,

I am an island.

And a rock feels no pain;

And an island never cries.

Tweedle deedle deedle dum dee. ♪♪♪

Yes, indeed. Yet, always lurking behind this stout individualist account, there was a dank must of loneliness. And always a belying subtext of love and hands outstretched.

What if Reverend Jon Day had not asked me to help his family build a cabin in the Vermont woods? What if his sophisticated brother-in-law had not flattered me on my "intelligent questions" and thrown my I.Q. scores into doubt? What if Susan Hazelton, our wonderful freshly minted high school English/Drama teacher had not challenged (introverted) me with a lead role in high school production of *The Odd Couple* and directly dared me to "come out of hiding" when I first refused her offer? What if Leroy Smith, a community college psychology instructor, had not insisted on me taking another I.Q. test that replaced my "95" self-concept with a shiny new "155"? What if a woman I met on a Greyhound bus had not stepped up to the ticket booth and paid the extra $10 (a

significant sum in 1970) I lacked for the remainder of the trip? I could have hitchhiked, certainly. But I would not have basked in her kindness and, I would guess, her significant sacrifice on my behalf? What if …? Of course, I cannot answer "what if" with any certainty; but without them, I well might be just another Thomas Hardy character.

*College and University.*

My first two years of college, of course, focused on meeting the general education breadth requirements but as I intended to be an English major, I bulked up on literature, writing, and the humanities. I changed objectives and enrolled in psychology for my third year; but, finding it an unsatisfactory study, I jettisoned that in favor of sociology supplemented by interdisciplinary social sciences. Finally comfortable, I earned my undergraduate degree in sociology in 1975.

In 1979, intrigued by the idea of earning degrees by the European research model, I matriculated at Columbia Pacific University and earned a Master of Arts (1980) in Psychology and the Doctor of Philosophy (1983) in Psychology. Both theses took a decidedly sociocultural slant to psychology.

As these degrees did not achieve promised accreditation status, I returned to the classroom and earned a professional Master of Public Health (1989) in Community Health Education. In 2001, State of California court ordered Columbia Pacific University closed after finding improper awarding of a small percentage of its degrees to friends and wealthy Korean businesspersons. The court specifically validated all degrees earned prior to 1997. Because the cloud hanging over CPU has never dissipated and the Internet is

loaded with accusation and innuendo, I have discontinued using my own degrees, degrees deemed "equivalent to those of accredited universities" by proclamation of the State of California.

*An Accounting of Vocations and Avocations.*

I have a short attention span when it comes to work. I need variety. Consequently, I have held a variety of jobs. In most cases, I have "risen" rapidly into leadership and responsibility. For much of my life, however, I have been self-employed.

For several years, I have owned two consulting businesses (DegreeFinders™ and Elite Word & Image™) though I am currently failing to lavish them with the attention and diligence they require to flourish in favor of completing my Ph.D. in a timely manner. DegreeFinders™ matches client work and educational background and educational preference criteria to available distance learning programs. It also steers them clear of deceptive programs and diploma mills. I began www.DegreeFinders.com and in DegreeFinders™ 1996 (although I operated it for about ten years prior as *Rodney Merrill's Global University Homepage).* It was a lot more difficult to identify the unscrupulous distance learning "providers" in those early days because very few legitimate colleges were able to achieve regional accreditation. For a modest consulting fee, I saved my clients thousands of dollars and untold humiliation. There are still a lot of scam operations but there are a lot more legitimate alternatives too.

Even as I write this, I am completing negotiations with a Swedish company to buy the DegreeFinders.com domain name and a large part of the DegreeFinders Web site

content. Though I received a substantial sum, I am surprised to feel as though I have given up my favorite pet.

Elite Word & Image™ offers a full range of writing and editing services but the bulk of revenue is generated by public relations and marketing communications for both profit and nonprofit companies. Clients range from one-person offices to Fortune 50. I do most of the work myself but sometimes subcontract work beyond my expertise.

In addition to the more technical/professional writing for my business, I write freelance articles and essays. If reprints are included in the tally, I have had over 400 items published. I favor humor and storytelling. Stories invite readers to locate "facts" in meaningful context. Even when writing how-to, informational, or service articles, I write them with a human interest. (I even pepper annual reports and funding requests with stories about the people who receive and deliver services made possible by the funding.)

I am an NGH certified consulting hypnotist, an AFL-CIO OPIEU certified Master Hypnotist and a certified NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) Master Practitioner. I am currently working on NLP Coaching certification. Although it seems to me that NLP and hypnosis (guided imagery, creative visualization, etc.) are built upon dodgy ontology, they do generate results for many people—including me. (With one month of listening to a hypnotic guided imagery CD, I overcame a lifetime fear of flying that was resistant even to anxiolytic drugs.) I understand these "mind technologies" to be a dialogical "ecology of possibility" in which it becomes permissible for extraordinary things to happen.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

In the interest of transparency and for those interested in “obituary” data, I have appended a curriculum vitae and related documentation of my educational, occupational, and avocational activities. The reader may judge how these qualify, disqualify or otherwise impinge on the work I present here.

## A Postmodern Dissertation?

I find it difficult to say “postmodern dissertation” with a straight face. As Professor Mary Klages (2003) points out, postmodernism, unlike modernism, does not lament fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that. The world is meaningless? OK. Let's not pretend that art can make meaning then, let's just play with the nonsense. How can such a quagmire of disjointed, multivalent, multifaceted meta-disciplinary hodgepodge be considered a dissertation at all?

How does one create a “postmodern dissertation” when the very concept of treatise is a modernist anachronism situated within such a highly evaluative institution as a university? Disciplinarity, rationality and the progress of knowledge seem anathema to postmodernism. Can there be such a thing as a postmodern dissertation? A postmodern methodology? A postmodern finding? Certainly not a postmodern *conclusion!*

There is no point, really. To anything, I mean. So why write at all? Besides, according to Jean Baudrillard (1988) all is simulacra:

> Abstraction no longer resembles the map, the mirror, or even the duplicate. Simulation no longer represents a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or

> reality. A territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it; the map precedes the territory; the map that engenders the territory, indeed, creates it from nothing.
>
> Not merely mediations of reality, nor merely misleading arbitrators of reality, not that which conceals the truth, this precession of simulacra is the truth which conceals that there is none. Neither based in a reality nor do they hide a reality, they simply hide that anything like reality is irrelevant to our current understanding of our lives.
>
> Our lives have become so saturated with simulacra, so preemptively inundated with the constructs of society, that all meaning is rendered meaningless by being infinitely mutable and insubstantial. (Paraphrase of pp. 166-184.)

Even were this not so, has what one intends to say not already been said in some form or another ad nauseam and ad infinitum? Why bother to produce what, in the end, will be pilloried as yet another indefensible act of intertextual piracy?

Yes, there is something contradictory and hard to defend in this postmodern philosophizing, this constructing of constructionism, this stringing together of words that, in the end, cannot mean anything more than the reader reconstructs. I am reminded of the Zen master who, when asked to expound on the essence of Buddha, passed gas and left the room.

Perhaps these concerns are my own misapprehension; “jejune words and useless empty phrases” as novelist Anthony Trollope writes (1998/1857, p. 52). There is, after

all, this unaccountable need to make sense of things. And so, to make sense of my world, to justify my actions, I call this not a dissertation but an *inquiry*, and I go on.

## Why this ~~Dissertation~~ Inquiry?

At 57 years of age, I decided to earn the Ph.D. that I had intended to earn by 27. Impetus for this decision came from overhearing other older men say that it was too late for them, that they missed their chance and there is no going back. Based on that, I am determined not to pull the dirt over my head until I am dead.

The postmodern and social constructionist movements apparently were in full bloom when I was a youth at college but this was not evident in the courses I attended. My professors were teaching structural-functionalist sociology and behaviorist psychology. And I remember my physics professor becoming quite agitated by my suggestion that atoms were conceptual devices and not "real" in any essential sense.

Having only recently read *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and completed the *Certificate in Social Construction and Therapeutic Practice* sponsored by Houston Galveston Institute and Taos Institute, I knew that the constructionist path of "no answers"-and-"many answers" is the best path for me. I mean to say that I ~~am comfortable with~~ accept the idea that no answer is entirely satisfactory and that living within the possibilities prompted by the questions may be the best we can do.

So here I am, nearer to old age than to youth, embarking at last on a Ph.D. research and dissertation. As do many living the rural life, I earn money in multiple ways;

but my enduring passions continue to be social studies and creative writing. It seems only fitting that I have conspired to bring them together in a practice-grounded research inquiry on the social construction of personal writing practice.

## Synopsis and a Look Ahead

In this chapter, I provided a short auto-ethnography to allow for a more transparent relationship with readers. I provided an accounting for my interest in writing and particularly in a social-philosophical interest in writers and authorship. These comprise "my story" as I perceive and articulate it (my narrative). It is unclear to me how much my potential story and my narrative coincide.

I discussed the quirkiness of the whole idea of a postmodern dissertation and then moved on to describe how I came to this particular inquiry.

We now turn to Part Two which consists of two chapters, one a brief chronicle of the entire project and the other a discourse on method, with particulars on method used in this inquiry. For the purposes of this work, method is "an assemblage" (Law, 2004) that includes an epistemological stance, a dialectical dialogical interview process, the specific questions asked and the rationale for them, the progression of the project and the "write up" of the dissertation.

# PART TWO: PROCESS & METHOD

# CHAPTER 3: A PROCESS CHRONICLE

*"Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end: then stop."*
~ Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

What follows is a process chronicle describing the progression of the project and the writing of this dissertation based upon it. As such, it is open to revision until the project is finished.

## Devising a Cover for the Dissertation

I feel fortunate that Tilburg University allows some latitude in cover design. We are not stuck with the staid uniforms that traditionally cloak dissertations. I am excited by the prospect and want to design something that communicates to the reader and inspires me in the effort ahead. I take as my inspiration a spontaneous collaborative effort undertaken by runners and hikers who pause along their way to add their bit to transforming a mound of construction rock into elaborate gravity-defying works of performance art.

## Harkening a Call

I write Hearkening a Call, prefatory remarks in response to something Kenneth Gergen (2000) wrote lamenting the continued use of the detached voice of science and the need to write in ways that "generate a more recognizably human persona" ( p. 5) by diminishing the impoverished me/you-ness of individualism in favor of an us-ness which

recognizes that I and you exist only because we constructed it that way. My response includes certain stylistic promises.

## Writing Chapter 1: What I am Doing and Why

In Chapter 1: *What I am doing and Why*, I delineate, to the extent that I am aware of it, why I am drawn to this project and this dissertation. In doing so, I discuss enduring romantic notions of the individual as this relates to writers and writing, authors and authorship, as well as postmodern problematizing of same. In the second half of the chapter, I discuss Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism as a model for knowing and John Law's views on method assemblage and what gets left out as we try to make tidy out the mess of life.

## Writing Chapter 2: An Account of Getting to Here and Now

In *An Account of Getting to Here and Now*, I make available to readers my "story"—the historical narrative that holds my life and my reality together and makes them seem uninterrupted, sequential and meaningful. This account includes demographic "facts" that are regularly given on the "subjects" of ethnography but less often on the "investigator" of same.

The narrative process generates a core theme of stepwise progress that might be described as victim→ survivor→ thriver, each plateau hard-earned through intelligence, courage, personal strength and sheer will. I let stand this investment in narrative that

Kenneth Gergen (2009) characterizes as heroic saga (p. 39), though I position it alongside equally appealing sentiments of relational construction.

My desire in doing this is to reveal rather than revel in it and is motivated, as far as I can tell, less by morbid self-absorption or an exhibitionistic need to air the sordid particulars of dirty laundry than to advantage the reader with narrative context. I hope, as well, that it will keep me alert to how this autobiographical narrative might slant the project.

## Writing Chapter 3: A Process Chronicle

At times, I confuse progression with method (perhaps because both are strategic?) and must return periodically to sort them out. At the urging of Dr. Harlene Anderson, dissertation adviser, progression and method became separate chapters.

Originally, I intended this to be a later chapter because I add to it intermittently. There are two reasons for this. First, as it covers the entire project, I cannot complete this chapter until the dissertation is finished. Second, the inner dialog capriciously goes still and for unpredictable periods I am uninformed as to "what I think" or what I will do next. Dr. Anderson waxes metaphorical when I become anxious at not having a clear idea of where this project is going. Crediting Tom Andersen, she reminds me that you don't have to work out how a dog wants to be stroked. If you are patient, "the dog will teach you how to stroke it." I respond that this doggy is disappointingly unresponsive or I am exceedingly slow to grasp its meaning.

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In either case, I will need to jump from chapter to chapter as I become conscious of what to do with them. So, from a writing standpoint, it seems "natural" to put this chapter toward the end of the dissertation because it will be finished last. Later on, I reconsider: from a reading standpoint, this chapter may belong closer to the front. The inner voice I call The Pragmatist manages to work out a compromise: I write most of the chapter while it is still toward the rear of the dissertation then move it toward the front and renumber the chapters. The remainder of the chapter was updated as needed.

## Writing Chapter 4: Method

"Under postmodernism," says Kenneth Gergen (2001), "methodology loses its status as chief arbiter of truth" (p. 160). In fact, under postmodernism, final answers are suspect.

In keeping with this position, I discuss questions surrounding choice of method, data collection tools, reportage and interpretation. I consider reportage and interpretation inseparable from method, although strictly speaking not the same. I attempt to give reasons for choices made.

## Writing the Literature Reviews (Chapters 5, 6, 7)

Although I have been reading for background, I now begin reading in earnest to pull together a literature review pertinent to postmodern issues in personal narrative writing. The topic becomes so multivalent that the literature becomes endless. Books for this dissertation displace those on every floor to ceiling bookshelf in the house. Three 3"

D-binders bulge with journal articles. Hundreds more fill disk space. Even when I delimit the review to a social psychology of personal narrative writing, topics spawn more topics. As my first draft literature review lumbers toward 300 pages, I realize that I will be unable to say everything that needs to be said. The literature review needs less volume, not more, and I begin the sad work of paring.

Even then, in the interest of readability, I need a three-part literature review: Knowing, Authoring, and Dialogics (as methodological stance). The first two parts are to explore how the whole idea of personal narrative writing *as* personal, as an unraveling of the wholly internal, can be witnessed as problematic from a constructionist perspective. The third part explores a rationale for using dialog for data collection in this project. Together, these three reviews set a base for responding to the questions guiding this project:

1. *What are the differences between modern humanist and postmodern constructionist notions of persons and authors and persons-as-authors?*
2. *What do the responses of nine writers of personal narrative to a series of questions about their writing process and practices suggest about their views on persons and authors and persons-as-authors?*
3. *Specifically, how much have postmodern and constructionist considerations affected the process and practices of these nine writers of personal narrative.*

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### *Writing Chapter 5: On Knowing*

I prepare for writing Chapter 5 while waiting for responses from potential participants. The readings tell me that this chapter should undertake a comparison of modern-realist and social constructionist ontology (the nature of being and reality) and epistemology (the nature of knowing and understanding) as these define our experience of writing and being writers. "The limits of my language means the limits of my world," says Wittgenstein (Kolak, 1998, p.37 § 5.6). I take this to mean that "world" appears understandable because world is only available by virtue of the social constructs we superimpose on it and ourselves. What does this mean, I wonder, for writers of personal narrative who, by definition, come from a position of knowing?

### *Writing Chapter 6: On Authoring*

Preparing for this chapter, I take up post-structuralism and find that philosopher-critics Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes have very specific things to say about authorship. Though they have differences, both write the author out of writing. Barthes' *The Death of the Author* and Foucault's *What is an Author?* deconstruct the relationship between author and text and conclude that, contrary to what most of us were taught in literature classes, one cannot decipher literature in terms of its author. The very idea of "authorship" artificially limits a text by confining it to the personality and circumstance of the person who wrote.

In saying that "the birth of the reader must come at the cost of the death of the author," Barthes avows, in essence, the author is a lie and, the lie now revealed, the

author is dead and was always already dead. “It is language which speaks, not the author” (Barthes, 1977, p. 142, citing poet Stéphane Mallarmé).Therefore, a reader gains nothing by knowing the life and the feelings of the writer because once it is written a work becomes text. Text stands on its own as language and does not rely on an author for its significance. Long live the readers (and, conveniently for Barthes, the critic)!

Foucault, always concerned with power relationships, is content to decenter the author, questioning the author’s influence and investigating the relationship between the author and the work. Foucault is willing for the writer to exist as the creator of a work, to serve “the author function” as he puts it, but once the text is out there, the author loses significance because language defines a text, not the individuality of the writer. Foucault agrees that the author is (in Barthes’ words) “an instance of writing”—a fictional character empowered by language to create other fictional characters. In Foucault’s philosophy, the author is not dead per se, but fictional, having no more authority or authenticity than a character in a story because, effectively, the author *is* one of the characters in the story.

In reading journal articles on writing, memory, develop of identity and self, development of personal history, I am surprised to find a plethora of literature suggesting that these key attributes of personal narrative can be understood as social, dialogical and, in a sense, fictional. By *fictional*, I imply that these are constructed through social interaction without having an essentially inevitable outcome predicated on “how things are” in the world.

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## *Writing Chapter 7: On Dialogics*

Russian philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, viewed dialog as always unfinished and "unfinalizable" (Bakhtin, 1984) and he, like philosopher-theologian Martin Buber (1937) were convinced that individual consciousness cannot be encompassed by an account of the individual in isolation. Self is a space of inter-being and I exist because you exist. As such, we, like dialog, are not a "thing" but a process—always unfinished and never final.

Social science, said C. Wright Mills (1959) has been undone by *abstracted empiricism,* a hodge-podge of check-the-box surveys, controlled experiments and other tools that treat process as thing. Amassing these snapshots of process-as-thing is supposed to reach a tipping point and avalanche into breakthroughs in grand theory. Mills believed that industrious accumulation of trivial findings only "adds up" to an abundance of trivial findings.

In that spirit, I have no desire to study personal narrative writing as a "detached scientific observer" or a linguistic accountant—tallying the incidence of words and plotting z-scores on graphs and scattergrams. I want this project to be a vantage point from which to juxtapose what writers say in conversation with constructionist considerations about the autonomous individual, the mind, and the author.

## Writing Chapter 8: The Writer Dialogs

In "real life," the writers respond to the open-ended questions, I respond their response, and then they respond to that. In the interest of transparency, I intended to

present these documents untouched; but revisiting them, they seem jumbled and tedious to follow. They lack the flow and enthusiasm of conversation that is possible even in written conversation if the co-respondents are "fully present" to the task. *The small voice behind my ear* which I identify as The Doomsayer is nearly convinced that only a powerful accelerant and a match can vivify them when *the small voice behind my ear* which I identify as The Sensemaker says that, paradoxically, leaving them "as is" is what robs them of their "naturalness"—the normal back-and-forth of conversation is lost in pages of apparent soliloquy and monolog.

*Weaving Data into "Naturalistic" Dialogs*

I feel ethically compelled to leave the respondents' words and my words exactly as they are and open to inspection. The lure of summary and redaction is strong. Its ability to smooth over embarrassing blemishes, the way PhotoShop® airbrush does for high school pictures, is appealing; and it is dishonest in representing research as sanitary and clean shaven when it has perpetual stubble and is in need of a bath.

In fact, I vow to reconsider the entire project or find some other way to do it rather than impose my will on the content of the dialogs. In compromise, I weave our back-and-forth conversations so that "supplements" (Gergen, 2009, p. 33, 41) immediately follow the conversation prompting them. This creates a more "natural" conversational effect.

Prior to this weaving of the written dialogs, readers had to shuffle back and forth through documents to sort out the correspondence of questions and their answers. This seems unnecessarily cumbersome and confusing; I see no violence in putting them in a

"more natural" sequence so long as I leave them intact. To my surprise and relief, this, though time-consuming, is fairly easy and does not require distorting content in any way.

*Making the Transcript Weaving Process More Transparent*

Dr. Anderson, as dissertation advisor, urges that I somehow label the integrated conversations to maintain procedural transparency. I agree and settle on numerical labeling that will make public what I have done without impeding the flow of reading with unnecessarily convoluted markers.

I insert respondents' original written responses (labeled #1) into the corresponding "pilot interview" questions (labeled #1) and then my written responses (Rodney #2) into their original written responses and their second responses ("Respondent's name" #2) into my written responses. This seems to do the best job with the least kerfuffle.

## Writing Chapter 9: Responsive Discussion of Dialogs

Every sweater owner understands or *will* understand the danger of pulling on loose threads. Pull willy-nilly and sweaters pass into rags. Pull long enough and sweaters revert to yarn.

With this sense of foreboding, I turn in Chapter 9 to the plucking of thematic threads from the dialogs. My aim is to lift them gently and to pore over them, to the extent possible, in situ. It is, of course, an aim doomed to fail: to pluck, to focus upon, to make a separate thing of a thread is to decontexualize it, is to favor threadiness over

sweaterness. That is, *thusness* is always already altered by intrusion of our attention. This cannot be avoided.

## Writing Chapter 10: Reflections & Regrets (Things Learned along the Way)

### *Wabi-Sabi*

Honoring the imperfect offers a way to value practical research that recognizes the impermanence and limitations of research. By gilding the flaw and calling attention to it, the wabi-sabi esthetic asks us to recognize that beauty and value can be appreciate when—sometimes especially when—it is flawed.

### *Philosophical Issues of Method*

I position myself alongside Wendy Luttrell (2000) in the conviction that "perfect method" like "perfect parenting" is fantasy (p. 515, 521 fn 34). Using "good enough" method and accepting and admitting to mistakes or shortcomings rather than defending or glossing them can produce research that "gets it right" enough times to compensate for these mistakes (p. 515). We choose imperfection over being hamstrung by the failure to find perfect methods.

Data *come into existence* because we are *looking for them* in *the way* we are looking for them. An observer co-constructs observed phenomena and a constructed thing is never separate or neutral. Data is never truly "raw" because it is both prospectively conditioned by the apparatus of observation and retrospectively reconstructed by the maneuvers of interpretation and "writing up" of it.

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### *Sampling*

This inquiry offers up a number of methodological issues and concerns. In fact, if the current reader is looking for results that can safely be generalized, this inquiry has nothing to offer.

I use *snowball (or respondent-driven) sampling* in this research, a special purposive nonprobability method that has no controls for randomness or representativeness. As used in this inquiry, the method worked as follows:

1. Find someone to study.
2. Ask this person to refer you others who fit study requirements.
3. Ask those referrals who agree to participate to refer you to others.
4. Repeat this method of requesting referrals until you have enough people.

The snowball method is used by marketing and sales people when they ask current customers to refer new prospects. The resulting sample is extremely valuable because the company (or salesperson) benefits from the umbrella of trust and relationship between the identified person and the referrer and this increases the likelihood that the prospect will make a purchase. In the research case, the idea is that a snowball sample is likely to contain prospects ready to trust the interviewer and cooperate more fully.

While this technique dramatically lowers search costs, this savings comes at the expense of sample bias because the technique intrinsically reduces the likelihood that the sample will represent the entire population of potential subjects.

“Birds of a feather flock together.” People tend to associate with those sharing many characteristics in common, not just the attribute(s) pertinent to the study. In a statistical study, this increases the chance of correlations being found that do not apply to the wider population. Likewise, the same relational characteristics that simplify sample selection can sway the study results compared to a more “neutral” or anonymous method of selection. Data resulting from these methods do not meet the standards of “proof” or generalizability within an experimental research context.

This is not that kind of study. This is more an ethnographical study comprised of concurrent case studies.

Snowball sampling can be a useful method when, as here, research commitments are not experimental but experiential, not explanatory but exploratory, not parametric but dialectic, not extrapolative but evocative, not demographic but ethnographic. The trick is to deliver what is on the freight manifesto and nothing more because the rest is contraband; explicitly, to deliver results that are descriptive of experience not truth claims reserved for experimental studies.

### *Regrets*

In the spirit of the foregoing, I would perform this project in a different way if starting today. In struggling to get away from conventional method, I succeed to some degree. In creating multivocal project, I fail soundly. I don’t mean this as self-flagellation—many well-intentioned researchers with far more experience have failed along the same line. I am in venerable company. That said, I would do some things differently and presumably be better pleased with it. I discuss this further in Chapter 10.

## Writing Chapter 11: Parting Words

I really had hoped that the last chapter would be titled *Last Words: Feedback from Dialog Participants* and would have consisted of responses by the participants to what I wrote in Chapter 9 in response to what they said in Chapter 8. In the mold of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) and other postmodern social researchers interested in dissolving, minimizing (or at least recognizing) the power gradient between the inquirer and the inquired about, I wanted to solicit evaluative feedback from dialog participants. They would have the *last words* in this work, rather than I.

Unfortunately, writing this dissertation took dramatically longer than I had anticipated and my research advisor and I agreed it was too much to ask of my research participants; and, at any rate, was probably less useful two years later than when it was planned. We also agreed that the change of plan ought to be acknowledged and registered here.

Chapter 11, now titled *Parting Words,* is a place for telling stories related to the writing of this dissertation. I talk about how it is that “dead men” and “dead authors” and “nonexistent persons” can write personal narratives. I testify to luminous exceptions to the encapsulated experience, to being written while writing and to writing as a transformative experience.

### *Dead Man Writing*

Some postmodern theorizers—Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard among them—pronounced (I think convincingly) the "death" of the autonomous individual, the mind, and the author. What does this mean?

### *Luminous Exceptions to the Encapsulated Experience*

In special circumstances, our apparent insularity can evaporate, replaced by a pleasurable melding with humanity, life, and world. In those fleeting moments, I "know" that we are what we are because we say we are that; and, therefore, we just as well can be something else.

### *Being Written While Writing*

In "writing up" this inquiry, I become aware that my conversation with the text is generating an unpremeditated subtext about writing as a generative and transformative activity. As I read and talk about personal writing and the issues surrounding it, I become convinced that while I write, I become written. We cannot write a "once-and-for-all factual account" because the sense-making effort—the search for meaning—that attends writing transforms self and personal history even as we write it, even as we are unaware of it. In this sense, every act of writing is revision—not only of the page but of the one who writes.

I am awed but also frustrated by this because it means text never gels. Every bit of tinkering harmonizes "this" but problematizes "that" because tinkering alters context both

concurrently and retroactively, making it always already what it is. Text—utterance, fact, history—that seems "set" suddenly liquifacts and slumps into its renovated mold. I sense that this inquiry and its writing will never "end" except as a declarative act. It will be ready for submission but never finished.

### *Writing as a Transformative Experience*

After many months of reading Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jacques Derrida, Kenneth Gergen, Mary Gergen, John Shotter, Harlene Anderson, Sheila McNamee and countless others parading through the hundreds of books and journal articles acquired specifically for this project, I began to write and "I" altered. That is, the experience of "I-ness" and of its location budged. This is one of those special circumstances, one of those luminous exceptions to individualizing experience that I pledged to speak about.

I am said into the world. I exist in conversation and I am never without conversation, even when alone. The capacity to converse and, with it, the ability to participate in human relationship enables us to become humans being. Dethroned as the source of myself, I exist where you exist, in the intangible communicative social space that envelopes us, the incorporeal place where "we" is.

## Synopsis and a Look Ahead

This chapter has been a narrative overview of the process and progression of the research project and the writing of this dissertation based upon it. Although this is

Chapter 3 and situated relatively early in the book, it is actually the last chapter to be completed because the project mulishly refuses to follow the path I set out for it and will remain open to editing until I, my dissertation advisor and Tilburg University can agree that it is sufficiently “finished” to be read and defended. I place it here, as Chapter 3, because it offers orientation for readers.

Chapter 4 focuses on issues of method in general and the particulars of methodological choices in this project.

# CHAPTER 4: METHOD

*The will to a system is a lack of integrity.*
~ Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols.

Among the concerns of method discussed in this chapter are the hypotheses and assumptions holding sway, interviewing methods, writing and reportage as method, rationale for dialogical method, questionnaire design and rationale, documents common to all dialogs, participant selection (sample size, sample characteristics, sample distribution), the nature of the "pilot interview" and follow-up interviews. Taking my cue from the "assemblage" view of method described in John Law's *After Method* (2004) and discussed at length in the literature review, I discuss each constituent of the inquiry process—including the "writing up"—in terms of its place and part in method.

## A Postmodern Constructionist Stance

Situated within a postmodern constructionist orientation, this dissertation is a conceptual bricolage pieced together from the utterance of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jean-François Lyotard, Mikhail Bakhtin, John Law, Kenneth Gergen, John Shotter, Harlene Anderson and others who remain anonymous to me. This philosophical stance foregrounds relational interaction and the generativity of language use in human affairs: from day by day meaning-making to the construction of totalizing reality. This approach presumes that "knowing" is ever-contingent rather than a once-and-for-all affair (Gergen,

K., 1991, pp.137-38) and knowledge is generated not within us but between us (Gergen, K., 2009, pp. 204-05).

## Dialog as Method

Dialog is a "natural" enactment of a postmodern-constructionist stance, according to Harlene Anderson (1997, 2007) who calls dialog "a way of being in relationship with, thinking about, acting with, and responding to people ... [with] an attitude of openness to, respect for, curiosity about, and connection with the other" (Anderson, 1997).

Dialogically-oriented research is unavoidably participatory, where "no audience is permitted and nobody can take a disengaged or privileged perspective" (Sullivan, P. & McCarthy, J., 2005, p. 634) and, to me, aesthetically more pleasing and ethically more comfortable. I have adopted "a view of dialogue that aims for participation with the other rather than aiming to master the other" (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2005, p. 634). By this, I intend to suggest Immanuel Kant's ethic of "acting in such a way as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of anyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means" (Kant, 2005, p. 29).

I turn away from assumptions of "pre-knowing" and "already understanding" the other and his/her meaning (Anderson, 1997); embracing such assumptions ignores the disorienting strangeness and difference (Shotter, 2003) that attends authentic dialog. Sullivan & McCarthy (2005) propose that

> Content is never simply information to be retrieved or applied to particular situations but a … living engagement with a particular other" that

> "entails actively questioning and interrogating the other, asking others to ask questions, feeling the texture of their strangeness through creating it anew in the research process (p. 634).

In this way, it is possible to enrich or supplement the other through the particularity of responses that implicate our way of thinking and our sentiments. Such a dialogic posture repositions as selves searching for consummation and completion through dialogical encounters with concrete others rather than researchers of subjects or all-knowing experts.

Taking these suggestions to heart requires openness to altering how we view academic and professional authorship (p. 635) in journals, book articles and conferences, which presently tends towards the monological and has tidiness and order as its principle goals (p. 635). The experiences and texts of participants become objects for analysis through a preset method (p. 635). Bakhtin argues that the text is an "other*" that addresses us and requires a creative understanding from us as much as any living other* (p.635). (Italics mine). This suggests that our participation does not stop in the field, that *the text and voices in dialog with us in the text ask us to respond in an embodied rather than a detached and analytical sense* (p. 635). [Italics mine.] In this sense, the participants in this project create me just as much as I create them; the dialog between us changes the way I view the research and the unfolding text. As a consequence, I come to experience authorial agency in a very different (interactive) way.

## Hypotheses and Assumptions

I have no hypothesis *per se*. I have no preconceived notion of how this project will proceed or what will emerge in its wake. I do have an *inkling* that most "ground level" writers (as simplistically contrasted with "ivory tower" writers) are *not* conversant in, perhaps not even aware of, postmodern or constructionist ideas about the "death" (or decentering) of the author, the "promotion" of the reader to co-author, the exigencies of cultural situation and historicity on truth claims. I suspect that they, as I until recently, inhabit the American narrative of the self-contained creative individual from whose mind springs novel ideas and original text. If so, I am not sure how I will manage the project—or how the project will manage me—from that point on. The small voice behind my ear (which I identify as The Hand Wringer) wistfully hopes for "the lottery"; that is, an outcome that will put legs under[†] the project.

I ask that the responses to the questions be in writing. Dr. Anderson's reservations notwithstanding, I do this because I believe oral responses to questions about writing will not produce the information than I seek—mainly, how writers experience going about writing personal narrative. Writing is an ideomotor practice, a largely preconscious skill that translates idea(s) from one symbol system to another through learned motor actions. Asking writers to talk about writing strikes me as comparable to asking someone to write what it's like to sign.[10] It can be done—but not well.

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[†] "put legs under it" is an idiom for allowing it to stand on its own or travel under its own power.

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I am persuaded that writing and conversation are not mutually exclusive, however; and writing, like talking, is conversation. Harlene Anderson (2010) "view[s] writing as a form of conversation: an inner conversation that the writer is having with him/herself and a conversation with the imagined reader." It is that at minimum. Writing, like other conversational forms draws on experience—on all other conversations constituting the dominant narrative of the discourse in question—in this case, the discourse of writing. Hoping to capture the dialogical possibility of conversation in writing, I respond as quickly and spontaneously as I can to the initial responses to my questions hoping that timeliness and responsiveness will encourage further discussion.

In the Reflections chapter, I respond to each writer and the dialogs as a whole. At one point, I thought to send this discussion and the nine writer dialogs to all of the writers and solicit their reactions to the project, to our dialog together and to my discussion.

## Interviewing

Deciding to interview and how to go about it has profound implications. Researchers Andrea Fontana and James Frey (2005) suggest that:

> interviewing is … inextricably and unavoidably historically, politically, and contextually bound. This boundedness refutes the whole tradition of the interview of gathering objective data to be used neutrally for scientific purposes. (p. 695)

"If the interview cannot be a neutral tool (and … it never really was)" (p. 695), why not turn it into something more creative?

*Creative Interviewing*

Creative interviewing, say Fontana and Frey (2005) is close to oral history but is used more conventionally as a sociological tool by those opposed to the political implications of conducting highly structured interviews. Essentially casting conventional by-the-book interviewing aside (Fontana and Frey, 2005), creative interviewers "adapt to ever-changing situations" by "collecting oral reports from members of society" (p. 709) that "go well beyond the length of conventional unstructured interview … with interviewing taking place in multiple sessions over many days" (p. 709).

I opt for a middle ground. I want this research to generate knowledge in a particular area of writing practice while remaining aware of the political utility of traditional sociological and anthropological research. In compromise, I pass over the free-wheeling style of creative interviewing and choose a two-phase approach—semi-structured questioning followed by dialog.

The initial "interview" is comprised of 39 open-ended written questions clustered under 12 topics. Correspondents were told that they need not directly address *any* of the questions (unless they want to) but they can use them to suggest a general area of interest on which I would like them to write. After this initial semi-structured interview, I switch to a more creative method: I responding into their responses and they respond into mine.

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### *Dialogical-Constructionist-Postmodern Interviewing*

Interview designers and interviewers are humans. Moreover, they are humans with a narrative, a stance, a perspective. In short, they are biased and unavoidably so (p. 709). While this may seem "obvious" to you, the current reader, it is not universally accepted as such. Researchers concerned about interview bias have sought to find

> new ways of conducting interviews in the hope of minimizing, if not eliminating, the interviewer's influence. One such way is through *polyphonic* interviewing, where the voices of the respondents are recorded with minimal influence from the researcher and are not collapsed as one through the interpretation of the researcher. Instead, the multiple perspectives of the various respondents are reported, and differences and problems encountered are discussed, rather than glossed over (p. 709). (Italics original.)

Critics of the postmodern notion of "polyphonic voices" claim that interviewer and the respondent collaborate to create an essentially monological view of reality, the "I" and "thou" merge into "we" rather than two separate versions of it (p. 718). While such criticism is worthy of consideration, homogeny is not inevitable. Of course, "subjects" can be overly groomed and responses can be overly interpreted, so that a more homogenized "we" emerges in the "end product"—particularly when an end product is the primary purpose of the study.

This idea that “polyphonic voices” work in partnership to create an essentially monological view of reality assumes, however, that the product of conversation must be either consensus or synthesis. Other possibilities include synergy, emergence and incoherence. Dr. Peter Corning (2002) at the *Institute for the Study of Complex Systems* writes that emergent possibilities unexplainable by reduction can simply outcrop without apparent cause.

There are several other possibilities as well. “The interviewee” can decide the conversation is not worth continuing. Something of the sort happened in this research project. “The interviewee” can decide the conversation is bullying and entrench to an intractable position. Something of this sort also happened in this research project. “The interviewee” can joyfully participate while maintaining a voice and stance emblematic of them-discussing-writing regardless of what I say. Mostly *that* happened in this research project.

My strategy is to minimize my influence by not undervaluing it. Rather than rely on caginess and one-way mirrors, I am starkly obvious. I respectfully but diligently ask my dialogical partner to consider a social constructionist viewpoint. I expect that “putting my cards on the table”[1] will reduce the edginess of interviewing by making my motives apparent and will allow the conversation to become more ordinary.

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[1] North American idiom: telling someone honestly what you think or what you plan to do.

## Writing and Reportage as Method

My voice and those of other participants are never "collapsed as one" through statistical summary, selective reportage or heavy-handed interpretation. In assembling this book, I "center stage" my initial questions, the responses, and my part in the follow-up dialogs because, although writing and reportage are not part of the data collection process, they are integral to staging them and to meaning construction and, therefore, methodological tools.

David Shields (2010), an essayist who defines genre as "a minimum-security prison," describes memoir writing in this way:

> My picturing will, by definition, distort its subject; it's a record and embodiment of the process of knowing; it's about the making of knowledge, which is a much larger and more unstable thing than the marshaling of facts. (p. 133 §393)

From this perspective, write Fontana & Frey (2005), writing is unavoidably political (p. 714). Authorial positioning, writing posture and voice, these are not the tools of scrivener's; they are aesthetic and ethical choices that undertake to establish relationships: between the writer and the reader, between the writer and the read, between the reader and the read. Choices made, whether habitually or reflexively, writing insinuates epistemic and metaphysical presumptions that are de facto method-integral because they shape, form and limit method, drawing a caul over the research, data and findings, leaving them always already transformed.

The "turn to the social" in many disciplines has been accompanied by a simultaneous "turn to the personal" in writing and reportage across the same disciplines. Insofar as the "turn to the social" downplays or excludes "the personal" (as the possession of individual minds), it seems to me odd that many proponents of post-individualist models favor writing in a first person narrative style. While the intent seems to make the human side of research more transparent by eschewing the air of objectivity, it strikes me as paradoxical and problematic. As Candace Spigelman (2001) puts it:

> Indeed, the question of the personal in composition remains stunningly political. Often scholars who prize the telling of personal stories for their colleagues emphatically oppose writing instruction that would allow the same for students. Their objections are based on a postmodern understanding of the social construction of human subjectivity. Thus, while traditionalists in the academy reject personal experience as inherently subjective and "unscientific," postmodernists question its representation of subjects as individuals. (Spigelman, 2001, p. 69).

I find other difficulties as well. If I reign in my subjective voice *too far*, I give the impression of a hegemonic elitist and insufferable monologist; if write too much in the first person or become overly familiar, I seem self-absorbed, self-indulgent, and lacking in scientific rigor. In the old days, I simply wrote everything in the first person, then "edited myself out" by replacing personal narrative and the active voice with passive committee-speak. It was a silly game but at least the rules were clear.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

As a fan of the postmodern and relational constructionist philosophical stance, "I" confess to being "fictional" and want to avoid the sham of self-sufficient *subjectivity;* yet I am somewhat constrained to be an "I" because it is just as fictional to take up the position of "science automaton" and I want to avoid the sham of *objectivity*. "To thine own self be true" was all well and good for Polonius; but things have become a lot more complicated! For the present purposes and to avoid the peril of Hybris [11] (hubris), I take up an informed position of self-reflexively "fictional" I. That is, readers are advised that every "I" is accompanied by an imaginary satirical wink which acknowledges the socially constructed "baggage"[12] inuring to this simplest of pronouns, "baggage" that may be carried for convenience but can be discarded if it becomes too heavy.

## Why a Dialogical Method?

"Within the modernist frame," contends Kenneth Gergen (2001), "the technologies of empirical research … were largely used in the service of evaluating or supporting various theories …" (p.160). The idea is that a controlled process of elimination identifies the blind alleys and the false leads, winnows the chaff from the wheat and ultimately turns up the truth of the matter.

In the Preface to *Reductionism and the Development of Knowledge*, Professors and Piaget scholars Terrance Brown and Leslie Smith write:

> Among the many conceits of modern thought is the idea that philosophy, tainted as it is by subjective evaluation, is a shaky guide for human affairs. People, it is argued, are better off if they base their conduct either on

> knowhow, with its pragmatic criterion of truth (i.e., possibility), or on science, with its universal criterion of rational necessity. (Brown, 2002, p. vii).
>
> … The problem comes when philosophical and scientific solutions are conflated, when ideas that owe their existence to subjective evaluation are put forward as scientific truths. A dramatic current example may be drawn from the incestuous dealings of a motley group: neuroscience, neuropsychology, neurophysiology, psychology, neurology, psychiatry, the pharmaceutical industry, government, and the popular press. In the mythology that has arisen and, unfortunately, in the practices stemming from that mythology, it is often assumed that mind can be discovered by studying brain. Pondering this strange and dangerous development leads ineluctably to the question of reductionism … (Brown, 2002, p. vii).

"Under postmodernism," Gergen (2001) continues, "methodology loses its status as chief arbiter of truth" (p. 160). In fact, final answers are suspect. While

> research technologies may produce data … both the production and interpretation of data must inevitably rely on forms of language … embedded within cultural relationships. Thus, research fails to verify, falsify or otherwise justify a theoretical position *without outside a commitment to a range of culturally embedded assumptions* (p. 160). (Emphasis mine.)

Educational Psychology professor Mirka Koro-Ljungberg (2008) writes:

> No meaning or shared experience can be isolated from the socially constructed knowledge-production event and no meaning can be examined outside the performance itself. In other words, the analytic and interpretive focus of the interview shifts from individual responses to shared knowledge and meaning making that occurs during the interaction. Consequently, constructionist sensibilities lead researchers to consider the *polyvocality* of knowing and thus of the interviews. (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008, p. 431-32)

Viewed in this way, interviews can "sensitize us to alternative interpretations of the world" (Gergen, K., 2001, p. 160). So long as one does not reify and objectify the interpretation and is wary of the valuational implications of such work, then such *methodologies of sensitization* are welcomed by constructionist arguments (Gergen, K., 2001). University of Florida Professor of Qualitative Methods, Koro-Ljungberg writes: "The point of an interview, from this perspective," writes, "is to examine how knowing subjects (researchers and study participants) experience or have experienced particular aspects of life as they are co-constructed through dialog" (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008, pp. 431-32).

### *Dialog as Generative Research*

While research is often thought to be a discovery process, a detecting or unearthing activity, it can be seminal and creative. Dialogical forms of research "often enable participants to escape the limitations of the realities" they bring with them and "to

formulate modes of understanding or action that incorporate multiple inputs" (Gergen, K., 2001, p. 161). In this "broadened conception of research" (p. 161) inquiry not only excavates; it generates. Because dialog transforms the researcher, the researched and the research, its outcomes cannot be reliably predicted by its inputs (Hosking & Pluut, 2010, pp. 67-68). The research itself "may *generate new realities"* and "engender perspectives or practices as yet unrealized" (Gergen, K., 2001).

### *Dialog and the Workshop Method*

I made the assumption that the writers participating in this project would be experienced with the workshop method as it is commonly practiced in MFA (Master of Fine Arts) writing programs and, less formally, in community writing programs. That being the case, I expect dialoging on writing practice to be familiar and homely for respondents.

Writers Workshop is a writing- and revision-centered method of teaching writing craft. Workshop leaders usually offer group instruction based on most frequent problems noted during consultation with individual writers. Writers then spend a large portion of workshop writing, sometimes in exercises directly related to the group instruction, sometimes writing around a more general assignment. After the writing period, writers take turns reading from "the author's chair" and receiving feedback from peers. Depending on the skill and style of the workshop leader, this critique period can be cooperative and helpful or it can be corrosive and cannibalistic. Private consultations

between the workshop leader and the individual writers are usually scheduled at regular intervals to offer guidance and mentorship specific to that writer.

Far into the dissertation, I trouble myself to ask whether my assumption has any merit. Most, it turns out, *are* familiar with workshop method; however, three are not and another does not care for it. In retrospect, I don't think this makes a big difference but it is a valuable lesson in taking a "not-knowing" stance (Anderson, 1997) in this kind of research.

## Documents Common to all Dialogs

Besides discussing my project with each participant by instant messenger or email, I provide the following documents to all research participants to introduce and orient them to the process. These documents are attached as appendices.

1. Consent Form (Appendix A.)
2. Introduction to the Research (Appendix B)
3. Phase 1: The "Pilot Interview" Questions (Appendix C)
4. Phase 2: Introduction to the Dialog (Appendix D)
5. Pilot Interview

## Rationale for Interview Questions

I want writers to *write* about writing rather than talk about it. To that end, I develop a list of broad questions. The number of questions depends on how you look at them. If every question on the sheet is counted, there are 39. But I did not want the

respondents to address each of the 39 questions. *In fact, they are not asked to answer the questions at all*. I state flatly that the questions are "guideposts not fence posts"—meaning they are not questions *as such* but orientations or interest areas. I hope to get them to respond to each of the interest areas.

In this spirit, I sort the 39 questions into 12 clusters (or orientations) from which to begin. Each cluster contains numerous related questions or variations on a question, intended to give an impression, a sense of general interest. Participants are asked to *respond to* these as they see fit—responding directly, indirectly, allegorically or not at all.

The "Pilot Interview" questions have levels of purpose. The questions taken individually have little importance to this project. The question clusters have more specific rationale discussed below under each of the 12 question clusters.

### *Questions as a Whole*

The questions taken as a whole are designed to initiate a conversation about being a writer of personal narrative by asking the writers to write personal narrative about writing personal narrative. This conversation is intended to address the guiding questions of this inquiry:

1. *What are the differences between modern humanist and postmodern constructionist notions of persons and authors and persons-as-authors?*

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

2. *What do the responses of nine writers of personal narrative to a series of questions about their writing process and practices suggest about their views on persons and authors and persons-as-authors?*

3. *Specifically, how has postmodern and constructionist considerations affected the process and practices of these writers of personal narrative?*

The question clusters have more specific rationale and this is discussed below under each of the 12 question clusters. Please remember as you read these that the purpose of the questions is to gather a narrative sketch of how these postmodern/constructionist considerations have affected each writer as practitioners of personal narrative writing. It is emphatically *not* about ticks and tabulations, percentages or chi squares.

*Questions as Clusters*

The 12 "question clusters" and a rationale for each of them follows. The reason I create "clusters" of related questions is to downplay the importance of the individual question. As I mention prior, I do not see individual questions within each cluster as key or pivotal or even the point. I hope the cluster offers a gestalt or an orientation for discussion. I want questions to *expand* the possibilities for response rather than narrow them, as individual questions will do. Thusly, I promote the "question clusters" as *starting* places for conversation. Each "cluster" offers a general bearing for response.

*1. Why do you write? What is your motive in writing? Is it to influence others? Is it to a share something about yourself with others? If so, say more about why you desire to share life stories with others?*

In this cluster, I hope writers will speak to "motivation" for writing personal narrative by reflecting on what prompts them to write. I am hoping for directionality. Do writers *experience* "the urge to write" as inner-directed or other-directed, neither, both?

*2. Do your stories have some "truth" to share? If so, do you think this truth is "universal" (that is, that is something true about all people or all times) or do you think this truth is more "local" (that it is something you learned that might be true of some people or sometimes).*

I want writers to consider "outcomes" of personal narrative. Is personal narrative simply sharing stories meaningful to them or do these stories represent universal "truth claims" of value to all readers? I wonder if writers believe stories spotlight "truths" for "like-minded" readers, for all members of our cultural group, or do they illuminate universal "Truth" relevant for all readers?

*3. How did your interests in personal writing evolve? Have you written personal stories for as long as you can remember or was there a specific time when the desire to write personal stories appeared? In short, what is the story behind your story writing?*

With this cluster of questions, I hope writers will talk about "nature/nurture" issues of writing. "I've been given a great gift" versus "My father was a writer and role model" or "I've had some great teachers" are the kind of statements I expect to hear.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

*4. How are you drawn to certain story ideas? In other words, where do you think your ideas come from? How do you know that it's a good idea or an idea with potential? Have you noticed that there are certain times or places or circumstances that precede a writing idea?*

Once again, I look for writers to reflect on what "prompts" them to write, where motivation originates. Do my correspondents sense that ideas originate from within them or can they point to social interaction, communal discourse or other externals as "source" or "stimulus" of story ideas?

*5. How does an idea become a manuscript? Why are you drawn to writing them down? Why can't you just have an idea and leave it at that?*

What makes an idea a good one, worth doing versus a poor one and unworthy of the effort? I am looking for notions of genre or communal standards. This also affords an opportunity to speak of being internally driven to write.

*6. What happens between "an idea" and "a finished story?" (Or, what is your writing and editing process?) For example, when you get an idea, do you write it down and do some sort of concept map or storyboard? Or do you just kind of wait for more ideas to evolve? Once you are convinced that you have the makings of a story, do you map out your story before you start? Or do you kind of "free write" until you have something to work with? Do you write from an outline? Or do you write from a basic concept, and then take care of organizing it later? Do you revise and edit as you write or do you pretty much write a draft, then return to revise and edit?*

Here, I look for adherence to craft-oriented method taught in school, books and magazines, and workshops.

*7. Is your writing and editing process pretty consistent from one story to the next or is it circumstantial?*

Here again, I look for adherence to craft-oriented method taught in school, books and magazines, and workshops or improvisational method that changes with resources and external circumstances.

*8. Do your stories turn out pretty much as you conceived them or do they tend to change and evolve as you write them? If they change, why do they change and how do you know the change is for the better?*

I hope for process language that centers on either the generative character of the writing act or on its inward cognitive nature.

*9. Do you have any dialogical or feedback process that you can identify? Do you discuss your story with friends, family, colleagues at various stages of the writing? Do you consult the writing of authors you admire for inspiration before and during development of a new story? Do you go to the movies or watch certain television shows when you are writing? Don't let any of these questions box you in; I am interested in any habits you may have that help you write.*

Here, I look for reliance on internal resources and engagement with external sources of "inspiration" (especially to break through "block").

*10. Do you have any internal dialog or feedback process that you can identify? If so, what kinds of inner conversations do you have about your writing? Is it very similar to*

*the ones you have when you cook dinner or make up a shopping list or is it somehow different?*

Here I am looking for the difference between more rote activities like following recipes or writing up shopping lists and inner/outer conversations during personal narrative writing. For me, there is a dramatic difference in that shopping list writing feels very cognitive while creative writing feels far more conversational and is attended by tributes and tribunals so powerful that they are almost physical. I hope these questions will open up a discussion about this difference.

*11. Does the writing of personal narratives change or influence you in anyway? Do you discover or learn new things in the process of writing a story? Do you "see" or perceive things differently during or after writing a story? Please describe anything of this nature.*

This question wants a response that shows the writer's self-image on a continuum ranging from "overlord" of the writing process to someone transformed by it.

*12. Is there anything else you would like to add? Or suggestions you would like to make?*

The purpose of this question is simply to solicit ideas for revisions or additions for a second version or for future use.

## Selecting and Inviting Participants

I contact each potential respondent informally and discuss the project prior to sending "official" documents, then use the *Consent Form* (Appendix A) and *Introduction*

*to the Research* (Appendix B) that includes a written description of the project and solicits their participation.

*Snowball (Purposeful) Sampling*

I use a purposeful (non-probability) sampling method known as ***snowball sampling***[2] in this research, which offers no "controls" for randomness or bias. "With snowballing," says Martyn Denscombe (1998), Professor of Social Research at De Montfort University, "the sample emerges through a process of reference from one person to the next. (p. 16).

"Cases of interest" are identified by asking current participants to refer others who might represent good candidates to participate in the study. If these referrals turn out to be good, then those participants are also asked to nominate good candidates. This method of recruitment is commonly used in studies that want anecdotal information rather than categorical or statistical information.

For this inquiry, I select and "interview" first contacts Susan Bono and Mridu Khullar. They both recommend Sheila Bender because she, like Susan, is a personal essayist who also publishes and actively participates in writing communities. I met Brian Doyle when he spoke at Columbia Forum, a local supper club featuring talks on subjects of interest to members, and asked him to participate. The remaining participants were referred by Susan and Sheila. I asked and got a strong nibble from humorist David

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[2] Also know as chain sampling and respondent-driven sampling

Sedaris, one of my favorite personal essayists but his speaking engagements make him difficult to pin down and his participation remains a fantasy.

Denscombe (1998) recommends that “snowballing” as “an effective technique for [quickly] building up a reasonable-sized sample, especially when used as part of a small-scale research project (p. 16). Access to “subjects” is eased because “the researcher can approach each new person, having been, in a sense, sponsored by the [referring] person” rather than having to “approach the new person cold” and this tends “enhance his or her bona fides and credibility” (p. 16).

This nomination method simplifies finding participation “who meet certain criteria for choice, certain conditions related to the research project and certain characteristics such as age, sex, ethnicity, qualifications” (p. 16) and the like.

In a nutshell, snowballing is efficient and inexpensive but not without its problems. The same characteristics that make it ideal for small-scale anecdotal research make it prone to bias and cast doubt on its generalizability.

The only screening criterion for this inquiry is experience in personal narrative writing. I am prepared to be generous in operationally defining “experience in personal narrative writing” but as it turns out, we all have considerable expertise and are published in the field at some level.

All of the contacts agree to participate.

## *Sample Size*

For the purposes of this inquiry, I feel that maintaining a timely dialog is important to getting the kind of participation I want. Realizing that responding in depth will be time-consuming, I limit the sample size to n=9. Although I would prefer a larger sample, I am pretty sure this will result in long delays in my response, loss of interest and an increase in drop outs.

## *Sample Characteristics*

### *Sheila Bender*

I am 61, have been writing seriously since I turned 31. I write and publish personal essays and poetry in magazines and in *Writing It Real*, my own online magazine dedicated to helping those who want to write from personal experience. My memoir about turning to poetry in the months after my son died will be out in September 2009 from *Imago Press* in Tucson, AZ. I will be at work on more instructional books after that for two other presses. I have a BA in English from the University of Wisconsin and an MAT in Secondary Education from Keane College in NJ; my MA in Creative Writing is from the University of Washington. I have published over eight books on creative writing to help others trust their abilities to put their experience on the page. I am usually a member of an ongoing writer's group and very much value others' response to my drafts. The workshop approach I learned in graduate school has been of great help to me in developing my work all these years since graduation.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

*Susan Bono*

I am 54 and have been drawn to creative writing since Dingle Elementary School in Woodland, CA. I started working with my own life experiences as a teen with poetry. It wasn't until after I graduated with a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing at San Francisco State University and a single subject teaching credential in English from University of California, Davis, that I began writing prose.

As a child, I suffered to read the newspaper only for Erma Bombeck's "At Wit's End" column, though for years I didn't know she was called a columnist and wrote personal essays, or that other such writers and writing might exist. In college, I read other essayists, like Joan Didion, but never studied them formally until 1994 when I worked with Gerald Haslam. I had been writing personal essay for about 10 years before that time, so by 1995, in my slow to realize way, I knew essay would become the focus of my magazine, *Tiny Lights: A Journal of Personal Narrative*. My editorship with the magazine has brought me many opportunities to work with essay and memoir over the years. I haven't been writing much lately, except for short columns and "flash" pieces.

My formal education consists of some exceptional English teachers in high school who helped fuel my desire to major in English and Creative Writing at San Francisco State in the 1970s. I earned my single subject teaching credential in English at UC Davis. Teaching high school English taught me a lot about writing, as did participating in the Central California and Northern California Writing Projects (symposiums for teaching writing in the public schools); classes with writers such as Gerald Haslam, Julia Whitty,

Anne Lamott, Jean Hegland, Sheila Bender and others, have been essential. Attending conferences and craft talks add to the store of information.

I have participated in writers' groups since the mid-1980s, although I am finding in recent years that I work best with just one partner, instead of a larger group.

*Diane Leon-Ferdico*

I am 63 and have been writing personal essays and memoir since 2001. I studied at New York University; a BA in art history with honors in 1991 and an M.A. from the John W. Draper Interdisciplinary in Humanities and Social Thought, NYU Graduate School of Arts and Science, 1995. I am also a professional artist and have studied at the Art Students League, 1974-78, NYC and the National Academy of Design, NYC 1984.

I took a Gotham Writing class on non-fiction writing in 2005. This was a very positive experience for me because of the feedback from other students on my writing. My work has been published online and hard copy magazines since 2001. I also served as arts editor with Hercircle e-zine from 2005-2007. I teach at New York University as an adjunct associate professor of arts (studio art) and have participated in "Creative Words Spoken Here" a literary event at NYU. Writing personal essays is another important way of expressing my feelings and memories in addition to my abstract paintings.

*Brian Doyle*

I am 52 going on 400, been writing since I was ten, mostly an essayist although I have committed two books of 'proems,' B.A. from Notre Dame, trained on newspapers and magazines in Boston and Chicago, not much for writers' groups, I am afraid.

*Don Edgers*

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Age: 70 on June 29, 2010

I started getting things published in 1978 (31 years)

Writing experience with personal essay: 3 years

Writing experience with memoir: 31 years (back then it was called autobiography)

Participation in workshop or writer's group that includes feedback on my writing: Some college classes, but primarily the feedback I received was from my instructor at Writer's Digest School ('Writing to Sell Nonfiction'), and my mentor (retired professor from the University of AK, Fairbanks - journalism & English). These men died, so I'm like the Lone Ranger. I briefly joined a writers' group, but they weren't much help or encouragement since they were interested in other writing markets.

*Mridu Khullar*

Mridu Khullar, 28, is an award-winning independent journalist currently based in New Delhi, India. In 2008-09, she spent a year at the University of California, Berkeley, as a Visiting Scholar at the School of Journalism.

For the past six years, Mridu has written extensively about human rights and women's issues in Asia and Africa. Her work has been published in *Time, Marie Claire, Ms., Women's eNews, East West, New York Times, International Herald Tribune, Global Post, The Caravan: A Journal of Politics & Culture,* and *Christian Science Monitor*. She is also a contributing editor at *Elle*, India edition.

Mridu participates in three online support groups: one critique group and two discussion lists for professional writers and journalists, "where we share contacts, ideas

and have discussions on the craft." She spends about an hour on these groups every day and considers them free education and an opportunity to share professional knowledge.

*Charles Markee*

1. Age: 74

2. years of writing practice = 10 years for fiction, 34 for non-fiction

3. your writing experience with personal essay, memoir or closely related = Serious work on an autobiography undertaken during 1998, primarily as an exercise in writing. First personal essay written in 1998. Subsequent personal vignettes/essays written for critique between 2002-2009. Personal essays submitted in contests 2008-2009. Film review essays submitted for email group distribution 2002-2009.

4. formal education = BS Electrical Engineering 1960 from University of California, Berkeley. Certificates received from University of California, Santa Cruz in Software Engineering and Network engineering, circa 1995. Independent class work in transistor circuit design, digital design, and web design.

5. writing education/training (if not the same as formal education) = 3 semesters of creative writing classes at Foothill Community College, Los Altos, California. 3 semesters of creative writing, plus semester classes in poetry analysis, American literature, British literature, and Jane Austen's works at Santa Rosa Junior College. One semester of Memoir writing at Sonoma State University.

6. Participation in writing workshop or writer's group that includes feedback on your writing? On-going critique groups:

North Lights writers from 2001 to present.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Charlie Brown writers from 2006 to present,

Friday Sonoma Writers from 2003 to present.

Workshops with feedback: 2003 Mendocino Coast workshop and conference and Ken Rogers poetry workshop. 2004 Mendocino Coast Workshop and conference, East of Eden workshop, Ehret prose poem workshop, Sacramento friends of the Library workshop.

2005 SCBWI - LA conference/workshop, SCBWI Spring Spirit Conference/workshop, Sebastopol Conference/workshop. 2006 SCBWI. Asilomar workshop, SCBWI Davis workshop, SCBWI - LA conference/workshop. 2007 Pacific Coast Children's writers' workshop, SCBWI Asilomar Workshop. 2008 SCBWI Asilomar workshop, Andrea Brown Big Sur workshop, SCBWI Mills College workshop, Pacific Coast Children's writers' workshop, SCBWI San Francisco Agent's workshop.

*Sue William Silverman*

Age: 63

Formal education: MFA in Fiction Writing

*Jack Swenson*

1. age: 75

2. years of writing practice: 68 years

3. your writing experience with personal essay, memoir or closely related 60 years;

4. formal education B.A., M.A.

5. writing education/training (if not the same as formal education) 12 yrs.

6. Participation in writing workshop or writer's group that includes feedback on your writing? none

I was born with a pencil in my hand. I've written lots and lots of essays, letters, book reports and several books. For the past twelve years I have been writing flash and micro fiction, and reading lots of it, too. Great stuff! Have a nice day.

*Sample Distribution*

As you read the dialogs, you may well wonder if these are the real names of real people. The answer is, yes! As part of the "informed consent" process (see Appendix A), I ask participants if they want me to use their real names or a pseudonym. Without exception, they choose to use their real names.

Here is a demographic sketch of the writers who participated in this project. All have extensive experience and all are published writers in personal essay or a closely related form of personal narrative. (A more extensive biographical description is available on each writer in Chapter 9: Reflections, Responses and Regrets.)

- Rodney Merrill, 60, 15 semester credits in Creative Writing, BA Sociology, MPH in Health Education
- Mridu Khullar, 28, one year of university Journalism
- Brian Doyle, 52, BA, trained in Journalism
- Susan Bono, 54, English Literature & Creative Writing/ Teaching Credential
- Sheila Bender, 61, BA English, MAT Secondary Teaching
- Diane Leon-Ferdico, 63, BA History, MA Humanities and Social Thought

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

- Sue William Silverman, 63, MFA Fiction Writing
- Don Edgers, 70, Writer's Digest course in Nonfiction, private coaching
- Charles Markee, 74, BS Electrical Engineering, 6 semesters in creative writing
- Jack Swenson, 75, BA Journalism and MA in Language Arts.

## The Pilot Interview

I begin with a pilot interview. This series of questions is intended as an invitation to written dialog about writing. Depending on the responses, I intend to revise questions, eliminate some of them, and to undertake whatever restyling seems necessary to move closer to the objectives outlined above.

When the responses come back, I am inexplicably but deeply disappointed by the responses, devastated actually. I send them to my dissertation advisor for her feedback. Dr. Anderson finds the responses both generous and exciting in the way their responses invite "you" into conversation with them. She cannot fathom why I am dissatisfied. Neither can my crew.[3†] Neither can I, really, but there you have it! I sink into a miasma of "blue funk"[‡] at the very sight of them.

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[†] "crew" *Slang/Informal (U.S.):* my circle of friends and informal consultants, aka my peeps.

[‡] *"blue funk" Slang (U.S):* a pessimistic sense of inadequacy and a despondent lack of activity; a state of great terror or loss of nerve; a state of nervous depression. Source: The Free Dictionary http://www.thefreedictionary.com/blue+funk

## Revising "Pilot Interview" Questions

I come to see that, of course, the responses *per se* are not the problem. They are, as Dr. Anderson suggests, both generous and exciting. The problem lies with me. I do not know *what to do with them*. I remain disenchanted and discombobulated until I realize that I do not need to *do something with them*. My obligation is to *respond to them*, better yet, *to respond into them* (DeFehr, 2008, p. xi-xii). How easy it is to become overturned by simply stumbling into an experimentalist frame of reference.

Ultimately, I *do not* revise the questions. Doing so no longer makes sense. Rather, I revise how to *go on* with the project. With three clicks of my ruby red slippers, the interview passes from a pilot state into a dialogical inquiry. (Yes!)

Leaving the interview questions unmolested, I turn instead to *responding into* the conversational space generated by the first round of responses. Once the responding begins, clouds evaporate and the excitement returns.

## Collecting Data

The research "data" consists of written dialogs (correspondence) between each of nine other writers and me. The only criterion for participant selection was that they have experience in writing personal narrative.

The conversation centers on a series of "question clusters" that I present as "guideposts, not fence posts"—suggesting that the questions are intended as conversation starters and points of departure (Appendix C) rather than direct questions to be answered precisely. I specifically state that the questions do not need to be answers individually.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Really, I am interested in two things: How writers go about doing what they do and where they suppose their "ideas" come from. I hope this conversation might address my primary research questions:

1. What are the differences between modern humanist and postmodern constructionist notions of persons and authors and persons-as-authors?
2. What do the responses of these nine writers of personal narrative to a series of questions about their writing process and practices suggest about their views on persons and authors and persons-as-authors?
3. Specifically, how much has postmodern and constructionist considerations affected the process and practices of writers of personal narrative?

## Synopsis and a Look Ahead

In this chapter, I discussed method as defined and applied in this inquiry.

The next chapter, Chapter 5, begins Part 3, a three-chapter review of literature at the intersection of personal narrative writing and the postmodern critique. Chapter 5 reviews literature on "knowing" and "knowledge" from "modern" and "postmodern" perspectives as these affect nonfiction writing, particularly in personal narrative. Chapter 6 reviews questions of authoring and authorship, while chapter 7 concludes the review with a look at "dialogics" as a methodological stance.

# PART THREE: THE LITERATURE

## ON KNOWING

## ON AUTHORING

## ON DIALOGICS (AS A METHODOLOGICAL STANCE)

Part Three consists of a three-part review of the literature germane to this project. *Chapter 5: Issues of Knowing,* sorts out a postmodern-social constructionist understanding of the world, our place in it, and our ability to comprehend it, partly by way of contrasting it with a modernist (or "realist") understanding of same. I discuss modernist and postmodernist (and constructionist) stances on ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (the nature of understanding). *Chapter 6: Issues of Personal Authorship,* contrasts a modernist-humanist take on authorship and personal narrative with postmodern-constructionist ontology and epistemology. *Chapter 7: Dialog as a Methodological Stance,* I situates my take on personal essay writing within the crosscurrent of constructionism and Bakhtin's dialogism. This melding also forms the basis for the "methodological assemblage" (Law, 2004, pp. 14, 55) I use in talking with other writers about personal essay writing.

# CHAPTER 5: ON KNOWING

*"I am the Guardian of the Gates, and since you demand to see the Great Oz I must take you to his Palace. But first you must put on the spectacles."*

*"Why?" asked Dorothy.*

*"Because if you did not wear spectacles the brightness and glory of the Emerald City would blind you. Even those who live in the City must wear spectacles night and day. They are all locked on, for Oz so ordered it when the City was first built, and I have the only key that will unlock them."*

*When they were on, Dorothy could not take them off had she wished, but of course she did not wish to be blinded by the glare of the Emerald City, so she said nothing.*

*Then the green man fitted spectacles for the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman and the Lion, and even on little Toto; and all were locked fast with the key.*

*Then the Guardian of the Gates put on his own glasses and told them he was ready to show them to the Palace. Taking a big golden key from a peg on the wall, he opened another gate, and they all followed him through the portal into the streets of the Emerald City.*

~Frank Baum, Chapter 10: The Guardian of the Gate, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

In this chapter, I present what I take to be modern-realist and postmodern-social constructionist understandings of the world, our place in it, and our ability to comprehend it. Stated in philosophical terms, I discuss modernist and postmodernist ontology (the nature of being and reality) and epistemology (the nature of knowing and understanding).

This discussion is offered as a way of building a context for inquiry into personal narrative writing, a system of "saying the world" (Low, 2007, p. 222) and constructing a reality (Low, 2007, p. 228) in written form based on the subjectivity of a single author. The practice of personal essay (along with related genres of autobiography and memoir) is rooted in our individualist-humanist understanding of creativity and veracity.

When I began writing personal essay, I supposed myself to be an autonomous subject mining the slag and binder of my experience in hope of striking upon a deep

subterranean vein of insight and extracting a sparkling nugget of universal truth, some transcendental life lesson having transportable value to my readers. I am by no means alone in this view, as the writer dialogs show.

Since immersing myself in postmodern critique and social constructionist epistemology, I have moved to a more skeptical position. While running through the woods, though, I sometimes stub my toe on a root. Landing on my hands and knees, there clearly seems to be a "reality outside the text" (Anderson, 1997; Burr, 1995). My immediate relationship with reality seems straightforward and gravity seems true; likewise, the ground gives a strong impression of being unyielding and abrasive, quite independent of my considerations about it.

At such times, I can lose confidence in the more sweeping versions of constructionist skepticism about an essential reality. Fortunately, this does not happen often and I quickly return to the sense that most of our matter-of-fact and taken-for-granted reality is constructed and chimerical and the relationship between observation and ontology once again problematic (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

## A Modernist/Humanist Take on Knowledge and Reality

Humanism and its psychologies derive from an epistemology that assumes human beings have an encapsulated mind "in there" (in the cranium?) that apprehends a reality. It also assumes one true, real world "out there" (Warmoth, 2000). This is the Cartesian dualism that has occupied philosophy and the behavioral sciences for much of the modern era (Gergen, K., 1999), an awkward coexistence of an ethereal soul-mind and a

material body (Gergen, K., 1999). This transcendent soul-mind is the “real us” more or less trapped in a human medium in a material world.

This dualistic view was incorporated into the "objective scientific method" that is privileged as the best possible way to obtain knowledge about the world (Warmoth, 2000, ¶ 2). Scientific method is based on the premise that reality and its observation are notionally unproblematic (Law, 2004, p. 9) and, when properly engineered, observation provides a reliable gateway to knowledge that corresponds directly to an objective reality (Law, 2004, p. 22). That is, there is *one* real world out there and we can extract facts and general laws about it if we conscientiously apply rationality and its servant the scientific method of observation in ascertaining the universal properties of real things and real phenomena existing in this one real “out there” world. University of Michigan Professor of Education, Jay Lemke (1994) adds that “a further characteristic of modernist assumption is that knowledge is a product of the activity of the individual mind, fashioning its ideas or mental schemas to correspond with this objective reality” (Lemke, 1994).

Being born into these notions, this is our “common sense” of the way things are. I experience myself as a solitary subject “in here” discovering a real world “out there”; yet this says more about the ability of notions to shape experience than it does about the state of affairs (Castaneda, 1971). As Lemke (1994) suggests, “Modernism, like any intellectual movement, will ultimately be defined from the viewpoint of its successors” (Lemke, 1994). Meanwhile, postmodernism and social constructionism have begun

offering a philosophical critique and alternative perspectives as ballast to the more extreme and unyielding modernist view of reality and knowledge.

## Knowledge Construction as Linguistic and Communal Action

Lev Vygotsky (1934/1978) and George Herbert Mead (1934; 1964, p. 142-9), both working and writing at the turn of the 20th century, believed that "knowing" and "mind" develop in a social context. This was the beginning of social psychology and the serious search for at least some of the inside (mind, knowing) outside the human skull.

Social constructionism views knowledge as the creation of communities of people in discourse rather than as the creation of individuals (Anderson, 1997, p. 201-210; Burr, 1995, pp. 4-5, pp. 48-51; Gergen, K., 1991, pp. 81-110; Virgil, 2006, p. 20). That does not mean that social constructionist epistemology precludes individuals "having ideas"; it simply decenters the individual and foregrounds the epistemological "situatedness" of individuals within relational contexts (Warmoth, 2000).

Berger & Luckmann (1966) pioneers of a social construction perspective on knowledge, place language at the very center of contextualized human reality:

> The common objectivations of everyday life are maintained primarily by linguistic signification. Everyday life is, above all, life with and by means of the language I share with my fellowmen. An understanding of language is thus essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday (p. 37).

Foregrounding language, Gergen suggests, decenters the individual as the focus of social psychology (Gergen, K., 1991, 1994, 1999). Although individuals

may manipulate, organize and synthesize constructs in (relatively) novel ways, the starting place for these constructs is always discourse within knowledge communities. communities.

Humans actively create and shape the world (as they know it) through social interaction in which language allows us to

> speak about innumerable matters that are not present at all in the face-to-face situation, including matters I never have and never will experience directly. In this way, language is capable of becoming the objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience, which it can then preserve in time and transmit to following generations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p.37).

In this way, writes sociology professor, David Newman (2011), “human-created ideas become so firmly accepted that to deny them is to deny common sense” (p.27). “We live in a symbolic world and interact chiefly through symbolic communication—that is, through language. Language gives meaning to the people, objects, events, and ideas of our lives” (p.27). Ideas passed through generations become “the way things are” and language both determines our reality and reflects it back to us.

Sapir-Whorf "linguistic relativity hypothesis" or axiom (Sapir, 1983; Whorf, 1956) carries this idea further, suggesting that the social reality we experience is so tied

to language that people who speak different languages perceive the world differently and to some degree inhabit different worlds. Sapir (1983) writes:

> Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (p. 162)

Language patterns pattern thought. Prolific philosopher, Richard Rorty (2008), argues that philosophers had become obsessed with the notion of representation and insisted on comparing the mind to a mirror that reflects reality (p.19). Rather than representing "the world" or "reality" in some mirror-like fashion, language "constructs" or "generates" incommensurable realities by training our perception. If so, there is no direct connection between words or speech acts and an "out there" world (pp. 12, 126).

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

A social constructionist take on knowledge proposes that knowledge is grounded in conversations among members of knowledge communities and that the authority of knowledge ultimately derives from a "knowledge community" of people who agree about the truth (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Kuhn, 1996). Sonoma State University Professor of Psychology, Arthur Warmoth (2000) sums up this position:

> Human societies are made up of many overlapping knowledge communities, all based on the unique human capacity for symbolic human communication. These knowledge communities range from cultures and subcultures to groups and organizations that perform particular social functions to the constellation of relationships found in extended families. These knowledge communities or cultures and subcultures, are not static or rigidly defined systems. They are constantly change and evolving; they overlap and compete with one another; they embody varying degrees of complexity and sophistication; and they embody different types of organizing principles based on different purposes and historical circumstances. (§ 5, “Knowledge Communities”).

Jacques Derrida (1976) coined the term “deconstruction” in the early 1960s to encompass processes by which “texts” (in the general sense of symbolic interaction) can be “read” in light of the suppositions and “absences” (things negated or not said) that are revealed under critical questioning, thus calling into question the notion of ultimate meaning (Jacques Derrida, 1976; Gergen, K., 2001, p.45). One way to look at de-

construction is that it attempts to “reverse engineer” the constructions of knowledge communities by asking what happens if these constructions are unpacked from outside rather than from inside the community. In general, what happens is that knowledge is reduced to nonsense.

“Linguistic representation does not function mimetically,” says Gergen, “but is determined by the conventions of signification itself” (Gergen, K., 2001). In other words, “the way things are” cannot be unpacked by language because language *is the packaging* (Watzlawick, 1984, p. 37, pp. 274-284). Unpacking “what is” simply repackages in the process. Said another way: conversational traditions package “reality” in ways that produce certain kinds of facts and ways of knowing them (epistemology) (Watzlawick, 1984, pp. 10, 26) as well as a system of value and meaning (aesthetics, ethics) by which to approach those “facts” of life (Watzlawick, 1984, pp. 63-66; Watzlawick, 1976, pp.140-142).

“Language is a guide to ‘social reality, ’” Sapir (1983) writes; “Although language is not ordinarily thought of essential interest to students of social science, it powerfully conditions all of our thinking about social problems and processes” (p.162). Methods of knowing (e.g. research methods, mystical traditions) are constructed to validate the assumptions of a discourse community giving results a logical contingency that borders on tautology. Individuals or groups who have experience with one conversational tradition only are likely to overly appreciate their own perspective and to consider traditions of “constitutive others” (de Beauvoir, 1989) less valuable or irrelevant or threatening—as a force to be overcome or suppressed (Gergen, K., 2004).

## Knowledge is Historical and Political

Scientific hegemony cleaves to a grand narrative of Progress in which Science marches onward and upward, powered by a dedication to rational processes of experimentation and hypothesis testing. This process adds slowly but surely to its knowledge base, that is pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle, leading to a Grand Unified Theory of Everything.

Inquiring into how a widely held scientific worldview (e.g. Newtonian mechanical physics) is replaced by another (e.g. Einstein's relativistic physics), science historian and philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1996) developed an alternative model that might be described as "punctuated equilibrium" [13] except that this term already has specific meaning in the field of evolutionary biology.

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, itself an example of Kuhn's argument, Thomas Kuhn offers a portrait of entrenched power and revolutionary succession. As the growing body of research findings erodes support for the existing paradigm, stalwarts continue to prop it up it and make things difficult for proponents of a new model. The scientific community becomes increasingly uncomfortable with the patchwork of exceptions and modifications; eventually, proponents of a new paradigm overthrow the old one. Rather than a rational process of gradual advancement and refinement, science goes through periods of normalcy punctuated by episodes of upheaval and radical displacement.

A scientific community negotiates “knowledge” and who may claim to possess it through accreditation of peers within knowledge communities that control professional books, peer-reviewed periodicals, accreditation of academic programs, and admission to professional practice (Kuhn, 1996, p.167-173). Contrary to science folklore, this monopoly promotes does not the unfettered pursuit of understanding but, rather, complacency and conformity.

One implication of Kuhn’s theory is that this essentially ideological process of paradigmatic entrenchment and intermittent revolution is not the royal road to truer, better or more objective science; but simply to new and more contextually congruent paradigms (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 172). “Scientific knowledge is intrinsically the common property of a group or else nothing at all,” says Kuhn (1996, p. 210). Although *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* focused on the natural sciences, it has prompted similar dialog about knowledge claims in the social sciences as well.

## A Sociology of Knowledge

The publication of Berger and Luckmann’s book, *The Social Construction of Reality,* first published in 1966 and still published today, “is considered a watershed moment in introducing social constructionism and moving it from the esoteric to a wider academic audience and into undergraduate education” (Virgil, 2006). In it, the authors portray everyday life as a dynamic and imprecise feat of negotiation achieved in social interaction (pp. 28-34). They contend that, while the reality of everyday life *seems* solid and factual, it is more fluid and artefactual; that is, it is an intersubjective world (p. 23)

created more or less on the fly through human interaction (pp. 19-21) and intention (pp. 20-21). Because the reality of everyday life is shared among collaborators in face-to-face interaction, it is *privileged* (more substantial and more "fully real") than alternative realities (e.g., imaginings, dreams, intuition or conjecture) (pp. 23-28).

Interaction with other people is shaped by "typifications" (standard schemes of meaning (pp. 30-31). These typifications become more anonymous the further a person is from face-to-face interaction (p. 31). "Social structure is the sum total of these typifications and of the recurrent patterns of interaction established by means of them. As such social structure is an essential element of the reality of everyday life" (p. 33).

Picasso said every act of creation is first an act of destruction (source unknown). Language empowers us to say things into existence through the destructive power of leaving a myriad somethings unsaid (Derrida, 1978; 1981, pp. 37-41) and through the constructive power of presence-building (Derrida, 1976, p. 49; 1978; 1981, pp. 37-41). Language is a sense-making tool that gives the impression of mapping the world but describes it only imperfectly and toward some end (Jacques Derrida, 1981, p. 19); that is, it represents the world in ways that allow us to go on together (Wittgenstein, Anacombe & Anscombe, 2001, §§ 143-201) but in ways circumscribed by Western metaphysics. In short, language allows us to make sense of our senses and to go about the daily business of life as we find it and find ourselves–deeply situated in a specific time, place and culture.

Knowledge Communities

Social constructionism calls the “taken-for-granted “into question (Virgil, 2006, p. 23). What we take to be “discovery” and “knowledge’ is not so much a mirror of the world as it is (Rorty, 1991, pp. 124-125; 2008, p. 172; Virgil, 2006, pp. 23-24) but the outcome of an interpretive community attempting to realize its values within certain domains (Gergen, K., 2001; Shotter, 1993a). What “everybody knows” is the manufacture of social, cultural, historically situated negotiation, confrontation and/or conquest (Moore, 2001, pp. 4-5).

Language and intersubjective validation renders an appearance of structure, substance and primacy independent of individual perception.

> “Essentially, a constructionist perspective proposes that society is composed of ideas, meanings and language. It is not simply a system, mechanism, nor organism. It changes all the time through human action. It imposes constraints and possibilities on human actors themselves” (Virgil, 2006).

Social constructionism asks us to consider what is known as known to some end; that is, as a communal creation that cannot escape being value-laden and ideological (Virgil, 2006, p. 23; Warmoth, 2000; Thorkelson, 2007, pp. 3-5}. Thomas Kuhn (1996) says that

> “Scientific knowledge, like language, is intrinsically the common property of a group or else nothing at all. To understand it we shall need to know the special characteristics of the groups that create and use it” (Kuhn, 1996, p. 210).

Scientific knowledge is the negotiated product of special knowledge discourse communities (Brent, 1992; Harrison, 2002; Law, 2004, pp. 18-45) that define both science and nescience; that is, what is acceptable knowing and "what not to know, what isn't the case or can't be known" (Thorkelson, 2007). Whorf (1956) says emphatically

> We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (p. 213).

As a social construction itself (Gergen, K., 2009, pp. 2, 29; Burr, 1995, pp. 1-2), social constructionism is not monolithic (Lannamann, 1998). There is no canonical or "official" social constructionist perspective (Gergen, K., 1999, p. 47; 2009, pp. 2, 29}. As an orientation generally skeptical of essentialist assertions about human nature, social

constructionism provides an effective scaffold from which to consider self, mind, personality and other identity-based factors as socially created in relationships.

Social constructionism, being no less a socially negotiated construction than any other, advocates diversity and inclusion rather than exclusion of other viewpoints (McNamee, & Gergen, et al, 1999, pp. 204-205). Each perspective is—rather than right or wrong—supplemental to the others. Rather than searching for some ultimate or even penultimate Truth or Grand Unified Theory, social constructionists are content to believe that each perspective is, if not revelatory, at least helpful in some situations and not others (Gergen, K., 2009, pp. 9-10, 29).

Human beings create a world that is intelligible within the context of their time, place, history, technology and culture. We create different understandings of the world and live in different worlds (Sapir, 1983). "Truth"—in the sense of describing the "real world" impartially, accurately, comprehensively and for all time—is epistemological puffery. There are endless plausible alternative truth claims, although the *apparent* number falls far short of infinite because the vocabularies of tenability are proscribed by those who participate in the controlling discourse of the day (Moore, 2001, pp. 4-5).

We are, we want to forget, creatures. As such, we have both abilities and limitations. Method notwithstanding, our personal and social history, indoctrination into grand theories about the world, local beliefs and biases, political and financial entanglements, are integral to our observation the world. This impact on what is knowable, what is "too preposterous" to even entertain, what constitutes a trivial or salient finding, even what is *worth* knowing (Law, 2004, pp. 38-39).

## The Social Construction of Meaning

The world, *as we know it,* pre-exists us because language pre-exists us. We are entreated to believe in the capacity of language to represent or depict the world in an accurate and objective manner that it can point directly and transparently to the world as it is (Gergen, K., 2009, p.6). Yet, what if this is an inversion? What if rather than simply pointing to it or mirroring it the language that precedes us *tells* us what to see and what to experience? David Cooperrider (1995), originator of Appreciative Inquiry, an action research application of social constructionism, says it this way:

> "Not only does external reality not dictate the terms of which the world is understood, it may be the other way around. That is, we confront the world with languages already in place, terms which are given to us by the social conventions of our time: rules of grammar, structures for storytelling, conditions for writing, and common terms of understanding. In this sense, the function and purpose of words is not to picture an out there, but to help us navigate and coordinate our living relations with one another" (p. 165).

Philosopher Paul Ricœur (1985) believes that we give ourselves an identity by telling our own stories (p. 214). Meaning is a narration of experience (Kelly, 2002). Our lives and relationships are shaped by the stories we take on and tell because these confer a sense of meaning and continuity to our experiences (Kelly, 2002; Lax, 1999). We tend to construct certain habits and cultivate certain relationships that stay true to these internalized stories (Virgil, 2006).

Language facilitates meaning-making and world-constructing but meaning and world are not intrinsic to words or language. Language in isolation does not have the power to create meaning. Language and words are the *tools* of meaning construction, not the “stuff” of it. Substance evolves though inter-subjective negotiation. Relational experience creates meaning. (Virgil, 2006, pp. 24-26)

Words are tools of interaction that support patterns of relational activity. This inter-relating, in turn, nuances words and, if our social relationships are diverse, bumps them out and transforms them (Shotter, 1993b) into speech genres.

Speech genres presuppose certain “fictional narratives” (Virgil, 2006) that allow people to leapfrog over a lot of the reality-building dialog required with “outsiders” for whom community jargon would be confusing or nonsensical, leaving them unable to participate in the conversation. Yet, even when there is agreement on language, meaning is not immutable (Virgil, 2006, p. 25). Words, phraseology, even narrative life themes evolve through the relational negotiation that is day-to-day social living. “When relationships change, so does narrative” (p. 25).

## How “It” Looks to Me

> "What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning" (Heisenberg, 1958).

I straddle a conceptional fault line, waxing nostalgic for modernist optimism (Shawver, L., 2007), its blithe humanistic certainty of our place at the apex of creation (whether divine or evolutionary), its belief in the inevitable march of progress toward a better life through our understanding and domination of nature, while sharing

postmodernist doubts about the viability of the whole affair. I am a fierce individualist on some accounts but see the folly and the poverty in such a position. I am a Master Hypnotist and NLP Master Practitioner and a strong believer in their efficacy despite grave reservations about the foundational assumptions of both practices, particularly those grounded in the existence of conscious and subconscious minds.

I am a material essentialist *and* a social constructionist. I agree with Kenneth Gergen (1997, p. 68) that social constructionism "must remain mute" on ontology, but our reasons may differ. Gergen seems eager to avoid the charge that claiming there is no universal truth is itself a claim of universal truth and this makes social constructionism self-contradictory, self-negating and "solipsism with a we." (Margolis, 2003, pp. 42-43).

I start from an assumption that there *is* a real and essential material world (universe, cosmos) but also assume it is largely (perhaps entirely) inaccessible to our means of apperception—our five amazing yet limited senses and our powerful but limited (and largely binary) language tools. "The limits of my language means the limits of my world," says Wittgenstein (Kolak, 1998, p. 37 § 5.6]). I take this to mean that world (reality) appears understandable because world is only available to us by virtue of the social constructs we superimpose on it. There is a "real world" but how we perceive that real world depends most on our conversations about it. *This is not to suggest that the universe would not exist at all* without our conversations—a "solipsism with a we" (Margolis, 2003, pp. 42-43)—but only that "universe-in-the-raw" is not available to us.

“What it is” depends on how we look at it, what we look at it with and the discourse within which we do both.

As such, when we observe, there is no meaningful epistemological margin between ourselves and what we observe. This makes the “real world” largely moot and all but irrelevant. As we interact with the world, we (re)construct it in every moment into something that makes sense to us. If we examine a concrete slab by throwing ourselves upon it, we decide it is quite solid and abrasive. If we examine it at a subatomic level, it is chiefly void with occasional matter. At the quantum level, it is probability of thing versus probability of no-thing, becoming one or the other *only as we observe it.*

If this is so, our fascination with ontology seems a diversion. As Wittgenstein famously put it, “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language (Wittgenstein, Anacombe & Anacombe, 2001, §109). Our energies seem better spent inquiring into the practical consequences of our foundational propositions and asking if there may be ethically and aesthetically more desirable (yet equally workable) ways to situate and position ourselves.

As Wittgenstein observes (Kolak, 1998, 1 §1.1), “The world is the totality of facts, not of things.” In addition, “facts” are the fruit of our languaged relationships. If we apprehend by imposing a structure of reasonableness and understandability over “what is” then the pros and cons of essentialism are largely irrelevant. Yet, without language, the world would be empty and meaningless (Silby, B., 1998).

Wittgenstein offers an apologetic that may apply to all manner of knowing:

> My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) (Kolak, 1998, p. 49 §6.54)
>
> Whereof we cannot speak we must remain silent. (Kolak, 1998, p. 49 §7.0)
>
> Alternatively, in the words of Lewis Carroll:
>
> "`Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
> All mimsy were the borogoves,
> And the mome raths outgrabe."
>
> "Jabberwocky" (Carroll, 1897/2009, p. 132)

## Synopsis and a Look Ahead

In this section of the literature review, I presented what I take to be a modern-realist and a postmodern-social constructionist understanding of the world, our place in it, and our ability to comprehend it. In the process, I discussed facticity, truth and knowledge. I did so to build a context personal essay writing which must take into account the nature of our knowing and being in the world.

Personal narrative writing (along with writing in related genres of autobiography and memoir) is rooted in our individualist-humanist understanding of authoring and authorship. These, in turn, are intertwined with Cartesian notions of encapsulated minds, individual subjectivity, personhood, identity, the historical facticity in personal memory,

and the like. The constructionist sensibility on these matters is quite different. Social constructionists are more likely to view personal writing as a local and historical practice located within a cultural tradition based on belief in the encapsulated subjectivity of an autonomous author.

These differences are the central concern of the next chapter, Chapter 5. In it, we look at individualist and relational notions of personhood and identity and how these shape “authorship” in personal narrative writing.

# CHAPTER 6: ON AUTHORING

*Caterpillar: Who are YOU ?*
*This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation.*
*Alice: I – I hardly know, sir, just at present– at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.*
~ Lewis Carroll, 1897/2009, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, pp. 38-39

Authorship would seem a pretty uncomplicated matter. Yet, even disregarding the legal intricacies, as we will do here, authorship is quite convoluted and problematic and seems straightforward only by virtue of the social constructions supporting our traditional view of it.

This portion of the literature review represents an attempt to work out the social constructionist and humanistic-individualist narratives about the nature of persons and authorship and, in turn, about what it means to author a personal narrative—a work based in personal experience.

## Grand Narratives

As a constituent of the postmodern movement, social constructionism shares a number of highly skeptical critiques that hold in common the perspective voiced by communications expert James Souttar (2008) that the Enlightenment project was a paradigm hyped beyond its ability to deliver ( p. viii). Our sense of historical inescapability—that things "naturally" turned out to be as they are and could be no other way—is due to the way we hold, examine, and interpret it (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 103) with a grand story (meta-narrative). Michel Foucault (1977, 1980) notes that such grand narratives are always

told from the viewpoint of the powerful. Social constructionists tend to mistrust grand narratives and "obvious" and universal truths (Gergen and Thackenkery, 2001, pp. 149-168).

Through use and tradition, diaphanous social constructions take on the appearance of a monolithic, stable and inevitable reality. Born into these schemes, we forget or never realize that they are maps (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp.30-35) and maps are not the territory (Korzybski, 1948, p. 58, p. 498) they characterize. We tend to experience our constructions and "the real" as interchangeable (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 19-23). We forget that the maps we co-created are all we ever had, that the world ("as it is") is beyond our reach.

### *The "Great Man" Narrative*

In the view of Thomas Carlyle, 19th-century historian, "the history of the world is but the biography of great men" (Hirsch, 2002). According to so-called *Great Man Theory*, these individuals shape history through genius, personal inspiration, fortitude and will, and their discoveries or new ideas overturn the provincialism and complacency inevitable to collective thinking. The study of great writing, to paraphrase Carlyle, is the study of great authors. A 1901 article from the New York Times sums up this view:

> "If we can go behind the works and find the man, peep into his heart and brain, and study their workings, we are happy. And we usually find that the really great writer is a great personality. The truth seems to be that only great men produce great works. At first sight it may seem as if this proposition

> could not be easily established but careful examination of the facts will show that it can." (NY Times Staff, 1901)

Ralph Waldo Emerson (2007) put it this way:

> Nature seems to exist for the excellent. The world is upheld by the veracity of good men: they make the earth wholesome. They who lived with them found life glad and nutritious. Life is sweet and tolerable only in our belief in such society; and actually or ideally we manage to live with superiors. We call our children and our lands by their names. Their names are wrought into the verbs of language, their works and effigies are in our houses, and every circumstance of the day recalls an anecdote of them.
>
> The search after the great is the dream of youth and the most serious occupation of manhood. We travel into foreign parts to find his works—if possible, to get a glimpse of him. (p. 161)

On the other hand, Herbert Spencer (1873), a Carlyle contemporary, was "the most vitriolic critic" of Great Man Theory and believed that attributing historical events to the decisions and "talents of individuals rather than the fundamental laws of physical and social evolution" was a "hopelessly primitive, childish, and unscientific outlook" (Segal 2000, p.219). He believed that "the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown" and "before he can re-make his society, his society must re-make him" (Spencer, 1873, p. 393).

Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy writer of novel, essay, drama and philosophy, devoted a large share of the third volume of *War and Peace* to a calculated "assault on the great-man theory of history, dismantling the illusions of individuals" (Ross, 2002) that they are the driving force of history. Tolstoy's account favors a grand narrative that envisions history as propelled by anarchistic energies drawn from the everyday lives of ordinary people. These shape the destiny of leaders rather than the reverse.

Using scenes from Battle of Borodino, "the Emperor is made out to be neither magnificent nor malignant but simply irrelevant" (Ross, 2002). Tolstoy casts Napoleon as decidedly secondary to those "nameless, anarchistic energies" of those who actually did the fighting and shed the blood (Ross, 2002).

In general, Tolstoy represents "great leaders" as buffoons and grandiloquent popinjays puffed up with fantasies of their own significance.

> In historical events great men—so-called—are but labels serving to give a name to the event, and like labels they have the little connection with the event itself. Every action of theirs, that seems to them an act of their own free will, is in an historical sense not free at all, but in bondage to the whole course of previous history, and predestined from all eternity (Tolstoy, 1865, Book IX, Chapter 1).

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*Personal Narrative and the "Great Man" Tradition*

Western discourse, especially the species carried on in the United States of America, sustains an individualist narrative. We so thoroughly construe ourselves as isolated autonomous individuals and are so naturalized to it (Burr, 2002, pp. 7-8) that the idea that we might be anything else seems untenable. When I described a "relational constructionist" model of the individual to my good friend Dave, he responded: "That's insulting."

Ayn Rand captures the individualist idea:

> Individualism regards man—every man—as an independent, sovereign entity who possesses an inalienable right to his own life, a right derived from his nature as a rational being. Individualism holds that a civilized society, or any form of association, cooperation or peaceful coexistence among men, can be achieved only on the basis of the recognition of individual rights—and that a group, as such, has no rights other than the individual rights of its members. (1961a, p. 150).
>
> The mind is an attribute of the individual. There is no such thing as a collective brain. There is no such thing as a collective thought. An agreement reached by a group of men is only a compromise or an average drawn upon many individual thoughts. It is a secondary consequence. The primary act—the process of reason—must be performed by each man alone. We can divide a meal among many men. We cannot digest it in a collective stomach. No man can use his lungs to breathe for another man. No man can use his brain to

> think for another. All the functions of body and spirit are private. They cannot be shared or transferred. (1961b, pp. 78-79)
>
> Mankind is not an entity, not an organism, or a coral bush. The entity involved in production and trade is man. It is with the study of man—not of the loose aggregate known as a "community"—that any science of the humanities has to begin. (1962, p. 5-6)
>
> A great deal may be learned about society by studying man; but this process cannot be reversed: nothing can be learned about man by studying society—by studying the inter-relationships of entities one has never identified or defined. (Rand, 1962, p. 15)

Individualism presupposes a split between "in here" and "out there" and, consequently, between individuals. We are each subject and object to other subjects. According to this view, there is some bottomless place wherein resides an encapsulated, world-independent mind (Gergen, K., 1991, pp. 96-106) that I call "the ghost pilot" and British philosopher Gilbert Ryle (2002) calls the "ghost in the machine" (pp. 15-16).

In *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, political economy Professor Crawford Brough Macpherson argued that the liberal tradition construed the individual as possessive, as "the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor a part of a larger social whole, but an owner of himself" (1962, p. 3). This individual has no social debt and no social obligation. Society, community for that matter, is little more than an aggregate "of free equal

individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise." (p. 3)

Personal writing (essay, memoir, autobiography…) is a strand from this individualist grand narrative. Yet, it borrows from Romanticism the "reliance on feelings and belief in the inexplicable" and "centres creative activity within the extraordinary individual" (McIntyre, 2007, p. 15). From this perspective, the author of personal essay uses story as a kind of mining trolley "for transporting deep personal thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the endogenous mind to the outside world" as University of Michigan professor Mark R. Gover (2000) writes in *The Narrative Emergence of Identity.*

An individualist construction of personal writing relies on a "correspondence view" of language. This is the view that language is "a transparent medium to reality, that the words are used to transmit information about the world … based on a correspondence between the words used, their meanings, and the aspects of the world they describe" (Punch, 2005, p. 177). Assuming this one-to-one correlation between the words used and that which the words are presumed to represent (Gergen, K., 2009, p. 17; Gergen & Gergen, 2004, p. 14; Punch, 2005, p. 177), language is a safe and accurate conveyor of ideas, events, and things. Accordingly, fidelity of story is simply a matter of careful word choice and correct language construction.

Unsurprisingly, in this individualist-realist view, meaning is construed to reside in the thing or the event itself and it is discovered or unraveled by the sensitive mind of the author. Meaning and story in this view is necessarily a private discovery that the author attempts to reconstruct and communicate to others through careful use of highly representational narrative. Narratives *convey* what the author knows and means but are neither catalytic nor

generative; that is, “they do not affect or *constitute* those meanings in any fundamental way” (Gover, 2000). (Italics mine.) The reader may then accurately grasp it with his/her own mind.

The individualist approach to personal writing privileges ontology with the following givens:

1. There exists a knowable world of things and events.

2. Things and events have inherent meanings.

3. We, as selves, remain deeply independent of these representations.

4. Authors can faithfully represent these things and events and their meanings to others through language.

(Adapted from Gover, 2000)

The precise nature of self will vary according to one’s precise speculative allegiances. In any case, the individual is the locus of creation and the focus of analysis “for our understanding of how narrative relates to issues of identity” (Gover, 2000).

Creativity experts Phillip McIntyre (music) and Elizabeth McIntyre (writing) propose (2007) that the Romantic view of the creative is individualist in the extreme:

> In the stereotypes of artistic genius; living alone in a garret and starving for his art, the romantic artist is mythologised as misunderstood genius as well as a social deviant, often characterised as mad, who is permitted to live and act outside the realm of accepted social behaviour. (p. 15)

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> In practical terms, writers operating under commonsense assumptions of divine or supernatural inspiration must wait until they are hit with a bolt from the blue before writing can occur. Furthermore, following the romantic perspective, individuals will either have the talent to be creative or not. (p. 15)

## Personhood & Identity

As discussed in Chapter 2, social constructionism is not so much a complete *theory* (Virgil, 2006, p. 21) as a slant or a stance toward knowledge and knowing (Gergen, K., 2009, p. 29) that allows for considerable *theorizing* based on the premise that ongoing dialogues amongst communities of discourse construct a "reality" for its participants (Gergen, K., 2009, p. 11-12). As such, the constructionist assertion is that knowledge is the product of communicating in social relationship, not the "thinking" of an individual's "mind"—an "internal" (silent) dialog with self-as-other or with others in absentia. In short, subjectivity is intersubjective.[14]

In this view, self, personhood and identity, so central to the genre of personal narrative writing of all kinds and personal essay especially, may have its foundation not in the individual organism (Gergen, K., 1999, pp. 6-13; 2008, p. 336; 2009, pp. 82-87)}but individuals-in-relationship (Gergen, K., 2008, p. 337; 2009, pp. 88-105).

Moral philosopher John MacMurray (1961) has said:

> We may say instead that the Self exists only in dynamic relation with the Other. This assertion provides the starting-point of our present argument. The thesis we have to expound and to sustain is that the Self is constituted by its relation to the Other; that it has its being in its relationship; and that this

> relationship is necessarily personal. Our main effort, therefore, must be directed towards determining the formal characters of personal relationship. (p.17)

Me is we. I am not *merely* a single organism but, moreover, the multitude that accompanies me. In this vein, Judith Butler (2005, p. 257) and John Shotter (1993b, pp. 161-164; 1997; 2008, pp. 33-37) have said that identity is a special kind of situated knowledge, developed through social relationships, about how to be a person.

## The Dissolution of Authority

In *The Gay Science*, German existentialist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche mourns the "death of God" and wonders how man will stand on his own.

> God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? (Fredreich Nietzsche, 1974, §125)

Existentialism, it seems to me, is a precursor to postmodernism not only in the obvious historical sense but in its disillusionment with styles of thinking that had been instrumental in producing a worldwide depression and two world wars, the last

of which was “total war” (Gunn, 2006, p.67), including factory-style extermination of 10-15 millions of human beings (Niewyk and Nicosia, 2000), “the destruction of more than 100 Japanese cities by firebombing” (Gunn, 2006, p. 59) and by atomic bombs dropped by the United States of America—not once but twice—“causing one million casualties, including more than half a million deaths, the majority being civilians” and the majority of those women and children (Gunn, 2006, p. 59).

Confidence in the rationality and basic goodness of man, understandably, had been shattered. Along with these, passed assurance in providence and meaning in life. In suggesting that *existence precedes essence* and foregrounding the issue of human existence and the struggle to meaning in the face of absurdity (meaninglessness), existentialists let the genie out of the bottle; for, if man *projects* meaning into the indifferent world, then meaning is brittle and frail, perhaps delusional. We are constantly in danger of coming face to face with the emperor’s nakedness: the emptiness and purposelessness of the world. It seems to me only a small step from there to deconstructionism, constructionism, and postmodernism. The largest shift is from the individualist orientation of existentialism to the relational stance of constructionism.

### *The “Death of Man”*

Discrediting authority and “as is” power gradients of all kinds is a prominent theme for postmodern theorists of many stripes but especially of philosopher, sociologist, historian Michel Foucault (1977). Foucault favors a wholesale

foreclosure on the agency of interpreting subjects and invites relativism by reducing truth claims to the mere effects of local power relations.

In fact, Foucault questions the reality of power as a force or resource that can be used by certain individuals or groups over and against others. Power only exists where relations of conflict between groups or individuals emerge. Power and freedom are agonists; the relation between power and the free person's refusal to submit cannot be separated. (Paraphrased from Burkitt, 1993, pp. 55-56)

In line with this project, Foucault (1970) announced the death of man:

> From within language experienced and traversed as language, in the play of its possibilities extended to their furthest point, what emerges is that *man has 'come an end'*, and that, by reaching the summit of all possible speech, he arrives not at the very heart of himself but at the brink of that which limits him; in the region where death prowls, where thought is extinguished, where the promise of the origin interminably recedes. (p. 383) (Italic emphasis added.)

In saying man has 'come an end', Foucault means to declare that the idea of the individual human subject that is so central to humanist philosophy can no longer hold "the center of contemporary thought and culture. The humanism of the modern era had been toppled and replaced by the anti-humanism of the postmodern." (Ganaher, 2009)

Foucault cross-examined "the discourses that produce knowledge of the social world along with the identities of those who populate it. Initially, he saw three discourses –on living beings, on language, and on wealth—emerging at the turn of the 19th century that

supplied a social backdrop in which new power relations and new identities would materialize" (Burkitt, I., 1994 , p. 9; Foucault, 1970). Foucault believed that these discourses increasingly foregrounded the humanistic concept of "Man"—which posited a conscious agent whose actions are intentional—and did not so much discern or discover an existant "subject" as to *generate* the subject in the form of "the individual" that is required within the modern human sciences (Burkitt, I., 1994, pp. 9-10). Foucault argues that such a subject is an "invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end" (Foucault, 1970). With this, Foucault predicts the "death of Man"—meaning the end of subject-as-source with self-contained capacities (Foucault, 1970).

Indeed, within contemporary schools of microsociology, social psychology and cultural psychology, the idea of self is moving away from the acquisitive monadic self and toward "a broad-based set of theories" that "first coalesced around the work of Berger and Luckmann" and "became known as social constructionism" (Burkitt, 1994 ). "Since then, a number of theorists have taken up the [constructionist] mantle …" (Burkitt, 1994 ), including Rom Harré (1979; 1984), John Shotter (1984, 1993a), Kenneth Gergen (1991, 1992, 1994,1999, 2001) and Mary Gergen (Gergen & Gergen, 2003, 2004). These theorists "have in common the basic constructionist notion that human reality, including social life" is a social achievement—"the product of conversation or discourse, and this also determines [not only the nature of the social but] the powers of humans as individual persons" (Burkitt, I., 1994, p. 7). [Bracketed material added for clarity.]

"Although, the notion of the autonomous encapsulated individual can be traced back … to the rationalist philosophers of the Renaissance such as Leibniz, Descartes and Kant" (Burkitt, 1991; Elias, 1978) who "believed that consciousness essentially defined what was

unique about the human species …" (Burkitt, I., 1994, p. 8), Gergen (1991) links "modernist" notions of individualism and "self" to the romanticist movement and its belief in an inborn nucleate quintessence unique to the individual person and typically conceived of as "soul" (Gergen, K., 1991, p. 6, 20, 21-25; 1992). According to this view, all morality, creativity, indeed all human progress, is due to this inner core (Burkitt, I., 1994).

"In contemporary society, what undoubtedly sustains the notion of the isolated individual is the experience of everyday life in capitalism, where people are highly individuated within the division of labour and are expected to act autonomously from one another" (Burkitt, I., 1994, p. 9). The isolated self of psychology is a manifestation of the American capitalist ideal of individualism: each "man" existing *in* society but is not *of* it, interacting with others but only as this assists in the search for a competitive edge. "The 'individual' with whom psychology concerns itself" is not a necessary outcome dictated by the nature of Homo sapiens sapiens; rather, it can "be seen as a construction of various discourses in society, *which produce both the image and the capacities of such a subject"* (Burkitt, I., 1994, p. 9). (Italics added for emphasis). The internalized individual is invented and installed [15] by individualist discourse. "The individual" is *performed* by the social discourse thought to describe it. Locating the subject within constitutive discourses, constructionists see the isolated individual as social practice and such a stance calls into question the whole notion of the sovereign individual so essential to proprietary society (Abercrombie & Turner, 1986, p. 74; Burkitt, I., 1994, p. 10).

Derrida theorized that *all* identities are discursive constructions, products of the mechanics of language (Burkitt, I., 1994, p.10). If so, then nothing carries those identities

except the language in which they exist. Independent and irrespective of anything *out there*, meaning is possible by virtue of the rules that allow the language to be written and spoken. Thus, the identities we write and speak about are always "under erasure"; that is, we need the word to communicate a meaning but there need be no such entity independent of the "text" that gives that essence or meaning (Burkitt, I., 1994, p. 10).

Identities are not things in their own right. As the products of discourse, fixed identities are impossible. The subject is a process, not a thing (Burkitt, I., 1994, p. 11), a process ever in flux, without beginning or end, multi-dimensional and without center or hierarchical integration (Sampson, 1989, p. 15). The centered subject, from this view, is an illusion created by the "traces of the western text" of fixed, stable and centered identity (Burkitt, I., 1994, p. 11; Sampson, 1989, pp. 14-15).

Philosopher George Yancy (2002) puts it this way:

> We are condemned to an existence where anonymous others have already established social, political, and ethical normative webs of meaning within which we move and have our being. The self, however, does not step into heteronomous stream of values, meanings, justifications, and boundaries, but evolves within this stream. (p. xiii)

This stance—that self, identity, consciousness, indeed all of our personal qualities and capacities are only possible by virtue of constitutive intertextual social relations—contrasts sharply with the mainstream Western view of persons "as more or less integrated universes and distinctive wholes" (Sampson, 1989, p. 14) and holds up "wholeness and integration" as "an ideal state of personhood to be attained" (Sampson, 1989, p. 14). As philosopher Ian Burkitt writes:

> In summary, then, we find in poststructuralist and postmodernist theory a double deconstruction of the isolated individual that psychology has always taken to be the object self-evidently present for its scrutiny. First, Foucault has shown that the individual is a product of the very discourse that has isolated and identified it. The capacities of this individual are shaped within the power relations of modem societies … so that there is no pre-given individual to which we can refer. Second, in the next wave of deconstruction, we find Derrida opposing all attempts to identify the subject with a new discourse, and instead making a deconstructive attempt to keep texts and identities in a fluid state of absences and presences. Through these ideas the tide is slowly shifting away from notions of the lonely but heroic Romantic and the sovereign individual of capitalism. (Burkitt, I., 1994, p. 12)

Consciousness is structured by *something absent and out of awareness*—the textual *milieu* that precedes all perception, that allows consciousness to be (Burkitt, I., 1994, p.12). This view proposes that our unique self-identity, our perceptions, even our personal capacities *always already exist,* that "self is always already linked to a web of significant and meaningful relations that precede its constitution" (Yancy, 2002, p. viii). Consciousness "is a constituent of cultural and historical traces outside and absent from consciousness that are nonetheless the stuff of consciousness" (Burkitt, I., 1994, p. 12; Sampson, 1989, p.11). In the words of Jacques Derrida (1978, pp. 226-227): "The 'subject' of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author. The subject of writing is a system of relations…."

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

### *Decentering the Writer-as-Author*

Roland Barthes (1977) examined the author and pronounced the author dead. In doing so, he declared (p. 148) that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (p. 148). I take this to mean that, while the writer may be an individual, every work is unwittingly co-authored. Both writer and readers bring social competence, a chorus of voices and a wealth of anteriority to the reading that co-constructs the text by creating context for it.

Barthes held that a eulogy for the author is pointless because writing and creator are unrelated (p. 147) and the author was always already dead. Every time the writing begins, the author enters into his own death (p. 142). While this may be a bit of hyperbole, it is intended to weaken individualist models of creativity and criticism while strengthening the claim that individuals enter a world already fashioned of relationship and language. I take it to mean that a writer claiming sole authorship of a text is comparable to a quilter taking full credit for a coverlet assembled from remnant textiles and a pattern handed down for generations.

Although individuals had the social role of storyteller even into antiquity, the teller of stories made no pretense that the tales were entirely of their own creation (Bennett, 2005, pp. 32-35; Woodsmansee, 1994a, p. 26-27). "From the Middle Ages right down through the Renaissance new writing derived its value and authority from its affiliation with the texts that preceded it, its derivation rather than its deviation from prior texts" (Woodsmansee, 1994b, p. 17).

The writer constructs a pattern of words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters to create something "unique"—at least in the sense that there is nothing unerringly the same. Nevertheless, the model for sentences, paragraphs, the genre models of fiction or nonfiction,

persuasive essay or personal essay, even the significance of the writing are hand-me-downs of communities of discourse. Michael Capek (2009), clinical associate professor of management communication at NYU Stern School of Business, describes language as milieu:

> Human beings are born into language, into an already ongoing conversation, the way a fish is born into water. Language is the medium in which we exist, survive, and thrive. It is the means by which we create, navigate, and interpret our world. (p.1)

While most of us are aware of language as a means of communication, we are less aware that language is our primary tool for representing reality to ourselves and to others.

Louis Althusser (2001) said that "individuals are always-already subjects" (p. 119) positioned by ideological language and semiotic systems. Heidegger (1971) said language speaks us rather more than the converse. If this is so, then, to a large degree, writing is independent of and "unrelated" to the author's identity or intentions (Wimsatt, 1954). It is more fruitful to talk about text in terms of discourse and *intertexuality* [16] (Kristeva, 1980) than in terms of the idiosyncrasies of the author.

Sans autonomous self or mind, there can be no *thought* in the humanistic sense of original ideas deriving from within—fresh, unique, and bearing no necessary relationship to existing ideas. The constructionist proposition asks us to consider the possibility that "thought" is internal dialog (a conversation in silence) or internal monolog (a "lecture" conducted in silence) (Anderson, 1997, pp. 43-45; Gergen, K., 2009b, pp. 141-42 ), that it derives not from a place deep within the individual but from performances learned and perfected in relational interaction (Gergen, K., 2009b).Thought and imagination in this

context are forms of para-vocalization—sense-making conversations wherein I assume the roles of both performer *and* audience (Sampson, 1993, pp. 97-101) From this vantage point, creativity and intelligence are not innate personal traits but a sign of discourse mastery (Gergen, K., 2009b, pp. 91-95; Sampson, 1993, pp. 101-105).

Without an autonomous mind or thoughts unique to the individual, there can be no "author" in the traditional humanistic sense. The writer becomes more a recorder and manipulator of available conversations. Or, as Barthes puts it: "language speaks, not the author; language acts and performs, not me" (Barthes, 1977, p. 143).

Literary critic and deconstructionst, Paul de Man (1979) wonders if the creativity of writing is a two-way street:

> We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity? (p. 921).

This decentering of the writer-as-author has profound implications and begs the reconstruction of writing as a social process. Being located in discourse and being a creation

of social dynamics, powers and practices, meaning is actively constructed and value-laden (Bruner, 1990). Although a word or phrase has culturally accepted meaning(s), the meaning of a word or phrase is not stagnant; situated in a dynamic relational context, meaning is plastic, transactional and generative, with the propensity to morph through use.

If all text is intertextual, if all persons are interpersonal, if writers of personal narrative are not originary authors but co-creators in relationship with significant and generalized others—even of their own grasp of self, writer, personal history and so on— then distinctions blur, between authenticity and assumption, between facticity and misapprehension, between first person and hearsay.

Writers are (re)written as they write. To be taken seriously, writers must participate in genre conventions. (Thus, I give credit to Barthes for saying he is *not* the speaker—despite the inescapable irony—because citation is a nonnegotiable expectation in a doctoral dissertation.) Writing is a cultural act and, thus, inherently a reply, a restatement, a modification, or even a parody but always a dialog.

"Authorship" of a text, as Barthes sees it, is more a matter of organizing "the already-written" and "the already said" than one of creating something new (Barthes, [1970] 1974, p. 21) :

> The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. (p. 146)

In short, no text stands alone. Each necessarily exists in reference to others. The true author of any text is the polyvocal discourse of other texts.

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Michel Foucault (1972) declared:

"The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network" (p. 23).

Just as authors write the already-said, readers "never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself (Jameson, 1981, p. 9). In other words, readers encounter the text as members of a community of discourse in a specific time and place and they frame it accordingly. In this sense,

" … texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or--if the text is brand-new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited and interpretive traditions" (Jameson, 1981, p. 9).

Terry Eagleton (1983) observes that "all literary works"…"are rewritten" to some degree "by the societies which read them" (p. 11) because the reading is mediated by everything that stands between (p. 192). Readers can "derive" only those meanings for a text that make sense within the confines of their discursive frame and this may have little relationship to the author's intention. Just as there can never be two identical translations of a work from one language to another, "there is no reading of a work" that spans time and place " that is not a re-writing'"—"and this is one reason why" …. " literature a notably unstable affair" (p. 12). As discussed earlier, my reading of my poem and the editor's reading of it bore so little

resemblance that I considered them two divergent poems, despite each containing the same structure, the same words—identical in every way, except for the reader!

Social constructionists and other postmodernists, I have endeavored to show, tend to find Cartesian dualism problematic. We tend to render mind and self as sociolinguistic constructs generated and maintained by relational discourse (Gergen, 2009b).

## Remembering as Factual

The "nature" of autobiographical memory is especially important to writers of personal narrative. Readers of personal narrative expect a reasonable degree of fidelity and veracity. Exposé stories appear with some regularity about writers caught spinning indefensible yarns about themselves in essay, memoir, and autobiography.

While certain kinds of "autobiographical facts" are verifiable or refutable, degrees earned or jobs held are good examples, the idea that there is one correct factual account of "life" is problematic. Whatever else memory might be—"a biological fact, a faculty of mind, an exercise in rhetoric" (Kihlstrom, 2002) —it is also "a social construction" (Kihlstrom, 2002; Pasupathi, 2001, p. 651). Memory might be a neurological archive and memories might be bits of archived data but this archive is like a LEGO® construction set and requires creative intervention to become something meaningful.

Though we speak of remembering as if it were simple retrieval, like locating a book on a shelf or a file on a computer, but remembering is more than merely calling up a memory (Kihlstrom, 2002) and displaying it faithfully. Remembering is more "a problem-solving

activity, where the problem is to give a coherent account of some past event, and the memory is the solution to that problem" (Kihlstrom, 2002).

In short, remembering is something we *do* with/to memories. Because "memory is stored throughout the brain and must be reconstructed" (Fogarty, 2009, pp. 4-5), remembering "… reflects a blend of information contained in specific [neurological] traces encoded at the time it occurred, *plus inferences based on knowledge, expectations, beliefs, and attitudes derived from other sources"* (Kihlstrom, 2002). [Bracketed content and italics are mine.] "Remembering is more like making up a story than it is like reading one printed in a book" (Kihlstrom, 2002).

Autobiographical memory researcher and theorist Fivush & Schwarzmueller (1998) contend that language "is critical to the development of a consciously accessible, socially sharable autobiographical memory system" (p. 483) but is not sufficient to establish autobiographical memory alone. Likewise, simple self-recognition is not enough. "Being able to recognize one's physical self" in a mirror "is not the same as being able to understand one's self as spanning time, an understanding that is the core of autobiography"(p. 483). For memory to be autobiographical, they must go beyond a listing of events "to representations of what occurred to me, how I thought, felt and reacted to it" (p. 483). These skills do not derive from simple mirror self-recognition but "begin when children first begin sharing their experiences with others" (p. 483).

"We come to understand our personal experiences by discussing those experiences with others (p. 484). As such, autobiographical memory "often has less to do with merely recounting the past than with making sense of it" in "an interpretative act the end of which is an enlarged understanding of the self" (Bird & Reese, 2006; Freeman, 1993; Olney, 1998).

Robin Fivush (1991, 1998, 2000, 2006, 2007), Fivush & Schwarzmueller (1998) and "fellow" autobiographical memory theorist Katherine Nelson (1993, 2004), maintain that parent-child conversations about the past not only communicate information about the self, but the unique language of "past event conversations" is actually integral to the construction of both autobiographical memories and self-concept (Bird & Reese, 2006, p. 613). "Specifically, conversations about past events … communicate information about *why* certain experiences are important" by placing them within an "evaluative and emotional" context (Bird & Reese, 2006, p. 613). (Italics mine.)

"When children understand *why* a particular experience is personally meaningful, they are then able to connect discrete past events into a coherent autobiography. This personal life history" may even "form the basis of a subjective self" (Bird, 2006, p. 613). (Italics mine.)

"More specifically, children learn how to organize personal experiences into conventionalized narrative forms of describing the past through parent-guided conversations" (Fivush, 1991, pp. 62-64, pp. 74-75; Fivush & Schwarzmueller, 1998a, p. 457; 1998, p. 484). [These] conversations we have about our experiences shape our memory for our own past" and "... conversations about the past can influence the development of identity in adulthood" (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 651). The tale one "chooses to tell provides information not only about the event but also about one's preferences, interests, abilities, and values: in essence, one's self" (Bird & Reese, 2006, p. 613).

"Growing evidence suggests that memories are dynamic, fluid, and situationally bound constructions that are influenced by the context in which they are produced"

(Pasupathi, 2001, p. 652). Language does not serve simply "to reinforce specific bits of information through rehearsal" but in formative years it "… allows the child to engage in a new form of interaction, joint reminiscing" (Fivush & Schwarzmueller, 1998, p. 483). Language "can be conceptualized as a tool, provided by the culture, that allows human cognition to move beyond the limitations of what can be accomplished as an independent being to what can be accomplished as part of a social-cultural group" (Fivush & Schwarzmueller, 1998, p. 483).

Autobiographical storytelling "is a joint product of the speaker and the audience" and audience response "influences the way we subsequently remember the told event" (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 651). "Through language interactions… children develop the ability to converse with members of their culture" and "they are able to engage in qualitatively new kinds of activities that lead to the development of specific skills" (Fivush & Schwarzmueller 1998, p. 483).

"Specifically… children tend to use external evaluations to understand the personal meaning of positive events, whereas a more in-depth discussion of causes, consequences, and potential solutions is required to understand negative experiences." (Bird & Reese, 2006, p. 624) This implies that "conversational remembering is one process by which people's social worlds influence their development ... by shaping both what they remember and how they think of themselves" (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 651).

Recent memory research suggests two principles governing "conversational recounting: co-construction and consistency" (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 652). The principle of co-construction posits that "autobiographical recollection in conversation" is always "the product of both the speaker and the context" (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 652). The co-construction

of past events “influences both which events are talked about and what sorts of interpretive statements, details, and emotions are connected with the event…” (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 652).

Moreover, recent studies on autobiographical memory

> suggest that parents and children discuss negative and positive events quite differently. Of interest, they found that children talked about their thoughts and emotions more during negative events and that negative events were narrated more coherently. They concluded that, at least for children growing up in violent environments, greater personal meaning may be derived from negative, as opposed to positive, experiences (Bird & Reese, 2006, p. 614).

Neurologists and psychologists have provided evidence that internal narrative is a primary factor in constructing and maintaining a self-in-time and a socially viable identity (Eakin, 1999, pp. 124, 126, 137; Neilson, 2006, p. 3). And this internal dialog depends a great deal on how “language interactions” (external dialog) shape both what we remember and how we think of ourselves (Bird & Reese, 2006, pp. 613-14; Fivush & Schwarzmueller, 1998, p. 483; Pasupathi, 2001, pp. 651-55). In our autobiographical storytelling, “anticipating telling during an event, having the opportunity to tell, the presence of a listener, and specific characteristics of listeners ... all influence whether experiences get recounted and how they are retold" (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 655).

“Historically, Western culture was not always individually focused, so there was a time when individually focused autobiography would not have made much sense…. The sense of humans as persons, as unique, and as free standing individuals seems a cultural matter, not something hard wired ...” (Rosenblatt, 2009).

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

"In sum, conversational tellings are likely to influence subsequent *remembering* because they"… rehearse material in ways "that is selective, is schematic, and can lead to source memory confusions; however, because conversational recollections occur in social contexts, there are other reasons to expect them to be consistent across time" (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 658). (Italics added for emphasis.) The co-construction of past event recollections would be of little interest "if it did not have more lasting implications for how events are remembered" (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 656}. Those implications are related to "the principle of consistency" which predicts "that a collaborative telling on one occasion will influence subsequent recall of the event in another situation" (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 656). In other words, "later recollections of events will be consistent with earlier recollections. Consistency is not the same as accuracy or veridicality, which… reference… some objective standard of what really happened." (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 656)

"However, because of the constructive nature of autobiographical remembering" the matter of "consistency" is "complex and problematic"— sometimes counterintuitive. In this regard, "*consistency* can be understood as implying that recollection of an event produces small, incremental *changes"* in autobiographical details such that the factual and interpretive content of "a later reconstruction of a memory will resemble earlier reconstructions" because those small changes "strengthen associations between those details and the *notion* of that event" (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 656). (Italics mine.)

Consider that "flashbulb memories, or memories for time and place in which one learns surprising, consequential news, are well retained and vivid. This may be because such memories are often rehearsed, both mentally and conversationally." (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 657) At the same time, flashbulb memories are sometimes quite mistaken. This implies "that

rehearsal can introduce errors that persist over time" (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 657). Perhaps "because rehearsed items are more accessible than initially experienced but unrehearsed items… people are more likely to recall the rehearsed (but incorrect) version of events than their original experience." (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 657)

"Formulating events in story form, however, involves" applying "a schema around the event; such schemas render many details comprehensible and meaningful" simply by "excluding schema-inconsistent information" (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 657). When talking about experiences with others, the storyteller must render them into

> culturally shared schemas for structuring narratives of personal experience. Once established, schemas function as recall aids, ensuring that the recall is consistent with schema and decreasing the likelihood that schema-inconsistent features of the events will be included. In fact, schemas can result in schema-consistent errors, that is, memories for details that set the schema but did not occur. (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 658)

"Everything we know about memory indicates that more organized memories are more robust" and the "subjective perspective allows the memories to be autobiographical, in the true sense of the word. It is remembering my conscious experience that makes a memory autobiographical" (Bird & Reese, 2006).

> Rehearsals of events in conversation connect memory for facts and interpretations of those events to two different information sources: the original experience and the telling of the experience" (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 658). Memory for source … "is more quickly forgotten than memory for the

> information itself." Over time, it may become difficult to "distinguish between the recollection and the initial event …. Thus, source memory errors may displace a memory for how it actually was by one for how I told it ... (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 658).

"Extensive research has established day-to-day parent-child past event conversations as an integral medium through which autobiographical memory develops" (Bird & Reese, 2006). The general idea is that adults tend to facilitate a child's independent recall when they elaborate and explicate discussions of past events rather than repeatedly reciting a log of events (p. 613).

> The events that children and their parents choose to discuss, as well as the specific aspects of the event highlighted, differ widely. The tale that each individual chooses to tell provides information not only about the event but also about one's preferences, interests, abilities, and values: in essence, one's self. (p. 613).

Fivush & Schwarzmueller (1998) found that "as parents and children talk about past experiences together, children begin to construct their own personal history. This process suggests that autobiographical memory is socially constructed" (p. 457). When parents and other significant figures "focus on particular events as important or self-defining in reminiscing," these events gain salience and significance and they "may come to form the core of the child's autobiographical self-narrative. Some have even argued that children's early memories are not memories of the event at all, but memories of the talk about the event" (p. 457).

“Although still quite speculative, there is some evidence the early memories are not simple retelling of family stories” (p. 458). Across studies, very little content from family stories were the mothers’ recollections or even the same information recalled by the child on a previous occasion, suggesting that children are accessing different aspects of an event on different recall occasions (p. 458).

Conversational recollections of the past, in effect, are performances of one's history for an audience (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 658). In normal dialog, “speakers reconstruct memories … in ways that simultaneously take into account their own objectives and those of their audiences. Consequently, the audience also plays an important role in conversational remembering” (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 654).

Memory is usefully hermeneutic in function, not just a way of assembling data (Neilson, 2006, p. 1). Not merely a literary form, narrative is “a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience, while self–the self of autobiographical discourse–does not necessarily *precede* its constitution in narrative” (Eakin, 1999, p. 100; Neilson, 2006, p. 3). (Italics mine.)

Narratives make available “ways of linking disparate events” by providing a matrix of background information, and “ways of evaluating events through providing subjective perspective.” Such “is critical for autobiographical memory” because “narratives allow children to create more coherent and more subjective memories” (Fivush, 1991, p. 77; Fivush & Schwarzmueller, 1998, p. 484). “It seems that the ability to verbalize about an event when it occurs is critical for the long-term retention of a verbally accessible memory”; but language also gives us “the ability to construct an extended, temporally organized” narrative

about the experience that “may be crucial for subsequent memory" (Fivush & Schwarzmueller, 1998, p. 469-470).

I join with Fivush & Schwarzmueller (1998) in finding “a social interaction model, not a verbal rehearsal model” most resonant in describing autobiographical memory. Rather than learning precise facts through rote drill, through repeated recalls of the event, “children are learning generalized skills” through relational interaction that make possible an organized narrative and an autobiographically enriched life story (p. 484).

## Writing as a Private Activity

In *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills (1959) says that sociology is interested not only in social structure, social stratification, and social problems and their interrelationships; sociology also is interested in the micro-social processes where personal biography meets social milieu (Mills, 1959/2000, pp. 8-10). Sociology is concerned with how social structures and processes impinge on individual experiences and shape the most private domains of our lives.

How many *private troubles*, Mills asks (pp. 8-10), are strictly speaking “personal” or “private” and completely understandable without situating them within the social? Many *private troubles*, in fact, are social issues that powerful entities have an interest in defining as personal (pp. 8-10) for political and economic reasons, i.e. private troubles can be dismissed as a private responsibility (McNamee & Gergen, et al., 1999, pp. 3, 50).

Paul C. Rosenblatt (2009), University of Minnesota professor of Family Social Science, says that dictionary definitions of terms like "autobiography" ordinarily offer some variation of the following: "a history of a person's life, written by that person" or “a true story

about something momentous that happened to the person telling it." In our culture, it is difficult to imagine "autobiography" or "personal writing" being defined in any other way.

Rosenblatt (2009) goes on to say

> The mass media and virtually every other vehicle for expressing societal values in the United States reinforces the notion of individual achievement, individual success, and individual identity in isolation from the significant others in a person's life. Some of that must surely spill over into how people frame their own lives and into family myths about achievement, success, identity and so on. (http://www.journaloffamilylife.org/familyautobiography).

In this sense, any notion of *private troubles* is problematic without a context that addresses language- and power-based relational interaction.

Sociology professor Keith Roberts (1993) writes: "Few experiences are considered more personal, more private, than writing. But writing is also a profoundly public activity, shaped by many norms and by the social context in which it will be read" (p. 317). By reflecting on this reality, we may find ways to help writers "understand that their struggles with writing" are social and relational in nature (p. 317) rather than strictly cognitive or psychological. Sociology is interested precisely because the personal is social.

"If the meaning of our words relies on their placement within forms of human interaction, then we as authors, cannot, in the end, control the meaning … of what we do. What it is we mean … depends on some form of supplement (Gergen, K., 1994) , an act of reading and responding by another, which serves further to shape the use and thus the

meaning of our words" (McNamee & Gergen, et al., 1999, p. 5). In sum, the meaning of text is only available when supplemented by the response of a reader (Gergen, K., 1994).

Writers of personal narrative, including those in this research project, often speak of the need of solitude and introspection when writing, the better to "find" or "get at" the truth. In his celebrated article, *The Talent of the Room*, writer and cultural commentator Michael Ventura (1993) writes that when people ask if he "can tell them something useful about the task" of writing, he responds this way:

> The only thing you really need … is the talent of the room. Unless you have that, your other talents are worthless. Writing is something you do alone in a room. Copy that sentence and put it on your wall because there is no way to exaggerate or overemphasize this fact. It's the most important thing to remember if you want to be a writer. Writing is something you do alone in a room. (p. 21)

I wonder. Of course, I can speak of a need of fewer distractions, less noise, and better task-orientation and, in this sense, perhaps speak of a need to be "alone in the room" to better realize those desirables. Likewise, the habits of tenacity and discipline might accrue to persevering "alone in a room" until the task is complete. Writing is taxing, exacting, exasperating work and tenacity is essential. I imagine this is, to a large extent, what Michael Ventura intends and champions; but he goes on to build up a scene of digging deeply within and of fighting inner demons. I think this sense of intrepid quest for the Holy Grail—the mysterious and essential self—may be why *The Talent of the Room* appeals to writers of personal narrative.

To “write alone in your room” in this latter sense is to embody the Western narrative of the heroic autonomous individual from whom ideas spring forth by virtue of sometimes sinister, sometimes benign subterranean drama. This image of writing, of human life for that matter, trivializes the ontogenic role played by language, cultural heritage, and social interaction—both immediate and mediated—in manifesting the phenomenological experience of internality.

I wonder about this heroic notion of ascetic exile, of being alone in a room. As a social being, am I ever alone in my room? I say no. My writing sessions are attended by “a network of internal others who [I] carry in conversation with [me]” (McNamee, S., 2004, p. 45): the room, far from empty, teems with conversations I've had, voices I’ve heard, characters I’ve met—in person, by means of books, magazines, newspapers, television, movies, manuscript submissions, the internet.... Why would I settle for an impoverished self-sufficiency—even if such were possible— when I need only bid these many attend me?

“Writing makes many people … feel exposed and vulnerable,” writes Roberts (1993, p. 317) and “even experienced writers may fear that their writing will reveal a lack of profundity and sophistication” (p. 318). Once the first draft is done, many want to keep it close to their chest “until they are satisfied that revisions have delivered a product able to sustain their image as competent writers and capable intellectuals” (p. 318).

For me, writing at this draft stage is a struggle to corral a cyclone of inner dialog and to charm it into something calmer and more coherent, to begin making sense of things I do not yet—and many not ever—fully understand. This is why too much “thinking” before writing is counterproductive. I lean toward Anne Lamott’s (1994) indelicately stated view

that to produce good work, “you have to be willing to write really shitty first drafts” (pp.21-32).

The process of moving internal dialog from body to paper often seems private, even intimate (Roberts, 1993, p. 318). “This internal struggle to express ideas is not merely a matter of picking the right word” nor is it entirely a matter of “impression management”; it is more “a matter of deciding how to *construct the reality* I am trying to understand. In essence I am trying *to define a situation* for my audience, but also for myself.” Accordingly, insofar as writing involves discovery through invention and demands correctness in thinking, “it is part of the social construction process for the writer” and is the “micro social experience *par excellence*” (p. 318).

The writing process also seems a profoundly personal experience in other ways. Each of us has our own habits, practices and rituals to get us started (p. 318). Writing practices often seem not only idiosyncratic but also eccentric. As I write this, I sit surrounded by mounds of books and scraps of sticky paper with hurried notes scribbled on them. I reserve a tiny clearing next to the computer monitor for a cup of coffee. This is usual for me. Some writers would consider this an abysmal and impossible working environment.

I begin each project with a quirky form of “prewriting” that begins with a stack of used paper turned blank side up, gripped under a powerful albeit toothless jaw of a dime store clipboard. I sharpen several medium-soft pencils and post a Pentel Hi-Polymer® eraser at the ready so that I can erase the same spot numerous times without tearing the paper. During this phase, every word truly is “under erasure” (with apologies to Jacques Derrida).

I scribble feverishly, building idea maps as I go. Topics and subtopics, keywords, images, juxtapositions, anything even remotely related to the subject is committed to the

page. When one “stream” runs dry, I leave it and start down another. When I seem to have run out of tributaries, I set the clipboard aside and go for a run in the woods or start a potential loaf of bread to rising. Upon return, I gather the scribbled oddments together under an ad hoc schematic (perhaps trunk, branches and tendrils; Olympics-style overlapping circles; a pentangle) to suggest possible order or possible relationships among them. This busyness sometimes generates additions, sometimes deletions, and occasionally nothing more than stymied wheel spinning.

I often chunk work around the clothes dryer cycle. (It’s a method and it works. Who says it has to be logical?) After I twist the timer knob and push “start” button, the dryer manages quite well without me. Fifty minutes later, the dryer buzzes and I break from writing.

I “remove clothes promptly for best results” and strew them across the bed to “cool down” before folding. (Actually, I loathe folding and this is only one of innumerable pretexts for delay.)

I go back to writing until midday when I use my break from writing to scratch together a huge pot of something that can simmer. As with writing, I seldom know what I am about to cook until the available ingredients are lain before me. If I believed in a writer's muse, I would posit mine in kitchen cutting boards and very sharp knives. A few moments of uninhibited carnage—slashing through pitifully defenseless members of the plant kingdom with razor sharp cold-forged steel, pupils dilated, nostrils flared by the cruel redolence of exsanguinous chlorophyll—and I am rejuvenated.

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When I return to the clipboard, I circle the pearls and erase the dreck. The pearls hang on the “notion map” like ornaments on a Christmas tree and become a rudimentary outline. I have learned from experience that fussing further is uneconomical as structural detail is certain to change. It is a starting place, nothing more. I have worked a more stringent regimen, following a rigid outline from beginning to end and it “works” after a fashion, as *any* system will do; but the blinder and tackle seemed more an encumbrance than a help.

I lean toward the opinions of E. M. Foster and/or Saul Bellow, both attributed to have said, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" That approach works for me. Yet, I have writer friends who fastidiously adhere to their outline, only making meaningful changes on a complete draft, and that seems to work just fine for them.

Putting words “out there” not only generates new ideas, it puts them in a form available for review and criticism. The “subjective” becomes more “objective”—more *other*—and allows me to criticize my thinking and my writing as if they belonged to someone else (Roberts, 1993). Not utterly so, of course, but more so.

In the B.P.C. (before personal computers) epoch, I typed a manuscript in its entirety, then read the typed manuscript, bloodying it up with edit marks as I went along. I then took scissors and literally “cut and paste” the pages into a new arrangement, affixing three- or four-foot sections of textual collage above my desk using long strips of cellophane tape. Then I dutifully type the entire document again, dabbing new mistakes with painty white correction fluid as I went. If a page became too encrusted with correction fluid, I doggedly typed that page yet again. I do not exaggerate when I say that the first time I used the WordPerfect® “cut and paste” feature on a 90-page document, my eyes welled with tears of joy and thanksgiving.

Yet, there are well-known writers like Graham Swift who write an entire draft by hand:

> I write with a fountain pen and black ink. My fountain pens are very precious to me and I would never take them out of the house. I have written three novels with my current pen and all the others were written with another pen, which died, but I still have it. I am very much a hand-writer. I have a computer, and in the last stages of a novel I use it, and indeed, find it very valuable, to do all those editing things which used to be incredibly time-consuming on a typewriter. But I would only go to it at that late stage. The actual creative work of composition is always with pen and ink. I just don't think, for me, it could be otherwise …. My handwriting is virtually illegible, even for me, but when I write, I do any number of squiggles and little signs, which are message to me about things, and I could only do them with a pen. (In Baker, 2006, pp. 173-74).

Of course, this isn't precisely so. Modern word processing software allows for comment boxes, editorial and proofreader marks, even handwritten "squiggles and little signs" using an electronic pen and writing tablet. That really isn't that point, though, is it? Swift is saying that the computer word processor does not have the evocative charm of a fountain pen. It does not position him as a writer.

A fountain pen is charmingly antediluvian, more so than a ballpoint pen or even a pencil. Fountain pens rouse wistful thoughts of artistic legacy. A computer wants you to be a chronicler of fluid intake and bowel movements, a biller, perhaps,

or a bank teller. It is a multipurpose machine designed to do lots of work quickly. Another thing it does quickly is become outdated—not in the attractive, almost sacred manner of fountain pens but in the charmless, galling manner of shoddy equipment preordained as scrap metal and recycling slag.

In this way, writing is more than the placing of words on a page or screen. It is a communal performance. It is a process of entreating admission into a communal context, of positioning oneself as "this" or "that" sort of writer and testing the viability of this claim. As Kenneth Gergen (2000) writes:

> A variety of disparate dialogues usher into presence the communal … dimension of discourse [and] we gain increasing … appreciation of the functions of linguistic form in shaping the contours of cultural life. Traditional concerns with syntax and semantics give way to *what is performed with and for others* in the process of conveying content. (Italics added for emphasis; bracketed verbiage added for clarity.)
>
> As I shall propose, writing is fundamentally an action within a relationship; it is within relationship that writing gains its meaning and significance, and our manner of writing simultaneously invites certain forms of relationship while discouraging or suppressing others.

Some writers complete an entire draft before editing and correcting and others polish as they go, I use a hybrid approach, writing as rapidly as it comes to me, in complete sentences, until I lose momentum. When the next sentence will not come easily, I fiddle for a while with spelling, typos, grammar and syntax, deleting the repetitious, replacing certain word choices with nuanced alternatives and so on until I am relatively satisfied that the

chunk of new writing meets muster. Quite often, the process of refining the language of the already written (particularly the making of nuanced word choices) will prompt new ideas and jog me back to rapid writing.

Other writers will tell you that such a way of working is untenable as it leads them into the abyss of endless dallying and procrastination. They want to get their ideas on screen and worry about fine-tuning later.

As Roberts says,

> Clearly the writing process is not simple and linear nor is it universal, as we learned in our composition courses.
>
> Writing is recursive; the early steps of deciding on an outline, a purpose, an audience, and so forth often are revised and redecided as one works with the material. The outline itself and even the format may change at any point in the composition process. Different people prefer to enter at different points in that process. Our styles of attacking a writing task are a highly individual matter. (Roberts, Oct 1993)

## Writing as Dialog

Writing is a social affair and a relational one. As users of language, and members of discourse communities," says Martin Nystrand (1989), "writers do not merely *will* texts; rather, they work in terms … of givens" and challenges that are "always already there" ( p. 71). (Italics mine.) "In effect, they operate in a stream of discourse that has been in motion for far longer than they themselves have been" (p. 71).

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"Cognitive models of writing depict writers as solitary individuals struggling mainly with their thoughts. While audience has been viewed as a relevant constraint, it is usually not seen as central to the writing process" (p. 70). Indeed, models of writing have been developed "on the idea that writing significantly differs from speech" because "learning to speak is interactive" while learning to write is presumed to require the creation of "texts that have meaning independently of any interaction with readers" ( p. 70).

Such ideas are being called into question (p. 70). "Despite the power of the individual focus in psychology and the social sciences, there are scholarly and professional lines of thought that underline the importance of attending to multiple … voices" (Rosenblatt, 2009). Writing is increasingly being "viewed as inherently interactive and social" and more than transcribing ideas into text (p. 70). Writing is interaction with a particular community of practice; it is intertextual—exhibiting an understanding of communal "premises, issues, and givens" (p. 70).

As recursive and reflexive as writing may be, writes Roberts (1993), "it does not end here—as an isolated individual experience. Writing is not merely personal; it is profoundly social experience" … "shaped by the norms of writing and by the social context in which it is produced" (p. 319). It is also social because we "want our work to be read. The process is somehow incomplete until someone has read our piece and provided feedback. We write to communicate ideas to others; if no one reads our work, the entire venture is disappointing" (p. 319) perhaps even meaningless. "Again," Roberts continues, "this problem in writing is an issue of the social relationship between writer and audience" (p. 320).

Clearly, notwithstanding "its apparent privacy," writing is shaped in countless ways by the "society in which the writer works" (p. 323). We always write within the faculties and

“confines of a particular language” and must comply with certain “common expectations about word usage, spelling, appropriate punctuation, sentence structure, the meaning of certain morphemes, and various norms about how to communicate tense” … “before the prose is suitable for public distribution.” (p. 321)

Writers and readers interact in the sense that they occupy certain positions and play certain roles in the joint enterprise of written discourse, says Nystrand (1989). They do not interact, of course, in the immediate way that individuals at a cocktail party interact in conversation. Nonetheless, the respective purposes of the writer and the reader intersect “when the reader comprehends the writer's text [and] the meaning that the reader gives to the text is a unique result—a distinctive convergence or interaction—of writer and reader purpose” (p. 74).

> The process of writing is a matter of constructing text in accord with what the writer can reasonably assume that the reader knows and expects, and the process of reading is a matter of consuming predicting text in accord with what the reader assumes about the writer's purpose. More fundamentally, each presupposes the sense-making capabilities of the other. As a result, written communication is predicated on what the writer/reader each assumes the other will do/has done” (p. 75).
>
> Clearly, texts do not take the shape they do merely because the writer wants to say something or has something to accomplish. One does not merely “will” a text. Moreover, writers do not merely “act on readers.” It is more accurate to say that the shape and direction of discourse are configured by the

> communicative need of writers to balance their own purposes and intentions with the expectations and needs of reader (p. 75).

"If the aim of writing research is to account for writer behavior," Nystrand says, "then the claim that writing is shaped chiefly by writers acting on readers … fails to do justice to the multiplicity of interacting variables operative during the act of composing …" ( p. 75). Focusing on writer purpose alone "says nothing about the way in which *what writers do* is synchronized with *what readers do* when readers finally read the text" (p. 75). Text is not the outcome of writing in vacuum; it is also a medium of communication (Nystrand, 1989, p. 75).

> If we conceptualize writing not as the process of translating authorial purpose and meaning into text but rather as the writer's attempt to negotiate meaning with an anticipated reader, we radically alter our conceptions of writing, text, and text meaning"…because "texts have meaning not to the extent that they represent the writer's purpose but rather to the extent that their potential for meaning is realized by the reader. (Nystrand, 1989, p. 76)

That is, "text has meaning in terms of interaction between writer and reader purpose," not in terms of its "semantic content but rather in terms of its semantic potential" (Nystrand, 1989, p. 76).

What of the apparent "stability and objectivity of written text meaning, especially in contrast to the transience of spoken utterance"? (Nystrand, 1989, p. 76) Doesn't this relative stability suggest that "objective properties of written text… are invariant across the intentions of writers and the interpretations of readers"; that in writing, "meaning is in the text, whereas in spoken utterance, meaning is largely in the context of utterance"? (Nystrand, 1989, p. 76)

The folly of this reasoning becomes apparent when the uninitiated dive into Shakespeare, or better yet, Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Not only have the properties of the language (grammatical relationships, sentence structure, phonetics, and so on) changed but so also the cultural context, so that with benefit of footnotes the reader may *understand* that a remark was intended as funny and yet not experience it as so. As Nystrand (1989) says:

> The fact that texts have invariant objective properties, however, cannot be taken to mean that their meaning is comparably objective, that is, that text meaning can be wholly deduced from properties of text. Any text has more objective properties than readers can or do use in interpreting its meaning, and comprehending a text requires that readers treat some of these objective properties as more salient than others. Hence, whereas properties of text are objective, interpretations are not. (pp. 76-77)

This has led some (e.g. Derrida, Fish) to conclude that readers' power to interpret overrides all else; that "any text can mean virtually anything, that is, that meaning is altogether in the reader" (Nystrand, 1989, p. 77). Likewise, no text can be said to mean anything in particular (Fish, 1982, p. 305).

Roland Barthes (1997) asserts that writers have nothing to say that is their own; "it is language which speaks, not the author" (p. 143) and writing is merely an opportunity for language to perform the writer, writing and content (p. 143). In this sense, writing is creative only in the sense that arranging flowers is creative. Certainly, one cannot claim credit for the flowers themselves or even the aesthetic of flower arranging but only the effort of learning of the skill and performing flower arranging.

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While sympathetic to this view, I wonder if it overstates. I lean toward Nystrand (1989) in embracing "neither Olson's formalist position that meaning is in texts nor Fish's idealist thesis that meaning is in the reader " (p. 78) nor Barthes' stance that writing and reading is little more than exchanging preformed information packets; but rather a social perspective that

> affirms the proposition that meaning is a social construct negotiated by writer and reader through the medium of text, which uniquely configures their respective purposes. The limits of text meaning are determined not only by objective properties of text and not only by the reader's cognition, but also by reciprocity between writers and their readers that binds the writer's intention, the reader's cognition, and properties of text all together in the enterprise of text meaning. *In other words, meaning is between writer and reader.* (p. 78) (Italics added for emphasis.)

Both writer and reader bring to text all other texts, conversations and voices they have known. To the degree that these are disparate, so may be the meaning "found in" the text. Bakhtin and Medvedev (1978) write, "There is no ready-made communication X. It is generated in the process of intercourse between A and R." (p. 152)

> Furthermore, X is not transmitted from one to the other, but it is constructed between them is as kind of ideological bridge, is built on the process of their interaction. And this process causes both the thematic unity of the generating work, and the form of its actual realization. These cannot be separated. (p. 152)

These are no more separable than a coin cloven “head” from “tail” can remain a coin.

“In real life, readers come looking for texts—when they pick up newspapers or check books out of libraries or buy novels to read—prepared to meet halfway the writers whose texts they select” (Nystrand, 1989, p. 79). In real life, writers likewise come to writing prepared to meet halfway the readers interested in what they have to say. They do this by reading well-liked and admired writers, and by reading the commentary of professional and, more and more in this electronic age, by engaging in conversation with their readers.

Bakhtin and Medvedev (1978) describe this meeting halfway in terms of relational meaning making:

> Works can only enter into real contact as inseparable elements of social intercourse. This interaction has absolutely no need for the mediation of subjective consciousness, since, outside their material manifestations, these are not given an objective intercourse. It is not works that come into contact, but people, who, however, come into contact through the medium of works and therefore bring them into reflected into relationships. (p. 152).

## A Dialogical Slant on Personal Writing

“There is an intimate connection between the project of language and the project of selfhood: they both exist in order to mean.” (Holquist, 1990, p.23)

We are accustomed to speaking of writing in general and personal writing in particular in individualist terms, as though it is an insular and private affair. In this view,

personal writing strives to bring the outside in and take the inside out. In this way of speaking, personal writing is an artful representation of an "inward journey" to *discover* meaning. This discovery process is described as something akin to converting "outside events" into thought representations, putting them in a backpack and spelunking "deep within" in search of the true self (a sort of guru kernel-self). The writer seeks the guru-self's assay of these "outside events" because this essential self has core and inviolable meanings and values that are not always clear to the everyday self, exposed as it is to the pollution of social life. Inasmuch as the assay report tends toward the cryptic, the personal writer translates it from feelings and emotions into consumable narrative.

There are alternative ways of understanding the personal writing project that rely on the notion of a social self that develops not deep within us but in the space we call "us" (you-and-me as a dynamic unit) and lives in conversation. The self in this way of speaking is an ongoing process that gives an impression of being more stable than it is because we are asked to construct it that way and to behave as if it is that way.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) brought this alternative distinction to life with his proposal of a dialogical self. The dialogical notion of self suggests that it is polyvocal. Dialogical self is not so much a sender and receiver as a narrated experience of communication, not so much a user of language as language in action. Self is not a thing but a storied process constituted by our conversations and we homo sapiens sapiens—as self-conscious beings—are linguistic epiphenomena (Ricœur, 1991; Kerby, 1991; Lysaker & Lysaker, 2005; Lysaker, 2007).

To be a human being requires conversational relationship with other human beings (Lysaker, 2007, p. 327). The self does not know itself immediately but only indirectly through the detour of cultural signs of all sorts (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 80). And this means we are

born into or “thrown” into a preexisting web of meaning (Heidegger, 1962; Lysaker, 2007, p. 327). Our self and our world emerge through ongoing conversation (Bakhtin, 1981). As such, the socially constructed chimera of permanency and wholeness of both self and world belies their fluidity, temporality and impermanence (Hermans, 1996; Lysaker, 2007).

## Writing as Dialogically Transformative

Our existence as selves is inseparable from the account we give of ourselves (Lysaker, 2007). It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity (Ricouer, 1985, p.214). In writing, but especially in personal writing, we render fragments of the ongoing conversation that is our lives. I cannot recreate anything resembling the fullness of my world (Lysaker, 2007) because our moments are alive with meaning only by virtue of context and background. An apparent singularity incorporates volumes of detail.

Instead, I render “it” (an event, a memory) not as *it* was but as *I* was. Even this is not quite right. Closer, I re-create “it” not as “*it”* was but as my current self (altered by intervening experience) recollects *it-I* of another time. This implies boundless unreliability, *even granting some independent gold standard* on what “really” was. Of course, from a constructionist perspective, there is no such standard. The most I can say, then, is that I have re-created my current understanding of what happened and my current understanding of what it meant to a rather different person in a different time and place.

Putting that representation “out there” (on paper) as myself and my personal history, creates an time-bound alterity (Lysaker, 2007). My lived self continues to morph but the

alter-self remains stubbornly fixed by its commitment to paper. In this sense, interacting with something I wrote a long time ago is a dialogical event (Lysaker, 2007).

Writers of personal narrative, including those participating in this research project, often note the transformative effect that the writing has on them. From a dialogical perspective, the act of self-representation is an extended conversation. In accordance with Bakhtin's (1981) notion that it is through the presence of contrasting *voices* that we recognize (re-cognize) ourselves more keenly because this allows us to experience sameness and difference simultaneously. The narrated self, because it riffs on many voices, becomes "symbolic other(s)" that mirror(s) the "looking glass self" (Cooley, 1983 (orig. 1902)) generated dialogically in everyday relational encounters. Each time we visit the text, it seems to have new meaning and new subtexts, which, because we are no longer the same person, we may find interesting (or not) and agreeable (or not) compared to our last encounter with it.

The apparent permanence that exists in the written text requires reinterpretation of the text, reinterpretation of self, or, more likely, ongoing intertexual negotiation of both. As Stanley Fish states, a text can never not mean (Fish, 1982). Remembering the process of its construction, rereading, editing, rewriting and attending to both the structure and the meaning of the writing experience all constitute a sense-making conversation that becomes part of the generative process of self-authorship. As the conversation goes on, retrospective order replaces the messiness of daily life and the lessons "learned" emerge and thicken into obviousness.

Two to Tango and More to Line Dance: A Dialogical Spin

David Ho et al. (2001) define “dialogical” expansively. The term “dialogical” usually conveys the idea of a conversation between two or more people—what might be called “external dialog” (p. 395). Here, “dialogical” also refers to internal dialog (thinking) or what might be called “silent self-talking” or talking to oneself silently (p. 395). I do not deny that there may be qualitative differences between internal and external dialog (p. 395). Internal dialog is intrapersonal speech; that is, dialog directed to oneself, involving only one person acting as both speaker and listener. External dialog is interpersonal speech; dialog that one person engages in with other(s) (p. 395).

“The apparent simplicity of the idea of dialogue is deceptive,” say Ho and associates, “for complicated questions immediately arise. Who are the interlocutors? Are they subordinate to a unified self? What do internal dialogs tell us about the nature of human cognition?” (p. 395)

Internal dialogue is an integral part of daily living. “We fall into internal dialogical states, without conscious effort, as readily as we walk.” (p. 397) In social interactions, we engage in internal dialog to monitor and to guide our actions. In dialogical terms, write Ho et al. (2001), “we must grant internal dialogue to others, no less than to ourselves, in order to act effectively” (p. 397).

> The phenomenal world of the dialogical self is thus alive with selves and others—different selves of the same person and a host of other actors, tangible, imaginary, remembered—“interacting directly or indirectly with one another in a multiplicity of relationships. It is a dynamic field of forces and

> counterforces generated by, and acting upon, the dialogical self. At the same time, the dialogical self responds to these forces, transforming itself anew." (p. 398)

The dialogical self is extremely adept at looking at itself and others, directly or indirectly, through the eyes of others (p. 398). Social interactionists will recognize the idea that others act as mirrors for us as we act as mirrors for them. Charles Horton Cooley (1983[orig. 1902]) , one of the early theorists of social interactionism, offered the metaphor of the "looking glass self" (p. 184) "to describe how we often see our reflections in the eyes of others, even imagine what they think of us" (Ho et al., 2001, p. 398). Yet, even this is too simplistic. The dialogical self requires an analogy more like the ability to view all of the mirrors of a disco ball simultaneously. Self-reflective writing becomes polyvocal when the writer anticipates how readers may react (Anderson, H., 2010).

Bakhtin's dialogical concept applies to writing as well as vocalization. "To many people, writing is arduous, even tortuous." (Ho et al., 2001, p. 399) Writing is not merely a matter of putting one's thoughts to paper. It is anything but simple when the writer engages in self-reflective internal dialog—questioning, doubting, and arguing each statement. Some experience writer's block or paralysis brought on by "endless possibilities and branches of thought confronting, tormenting and, at the same time, alluring their creator" (p. 399). Once in, some find the dialogical abyss impossible to escape.

"In the West," write Ho et al. (2001), the dominant view is that each individual has a unified, continuous and self-same identity. The self is sovereign, or at least should have a sense of mastery, in its own household" (p. 399). In this view, the healthy self is "stable over time; it is a coherent, integrated and unitary whole" (p. 399). Clearly, this is at odds with the

polyvocal self which, “in the extreme, appears to be the antithesis of psychological health: unstable, incoherent, disintegrative” (p. 399).

Cornell University professor of psychology, Ulrich Neisser, even suggested (1988) that when the self is considered as a unitary object, it is full of apparent contradictions.

> It is simultaneously physical and mental, public and private, directly perceived and incorrectly imagined, universal and culture-specific. Although there is nothing with which we are more familiar, we are often enjoined to know ourselves better than we do. One way to clarify this puzzle may be to consider what makes it possible for individuals to know themselves at all, i.e. to analyse the information on which self-knowledge is ultimately based I. (p. 35)

Neisser came to the conclusion that there are several distinct kinds of self-specifying information, each establishing a different aspect of the self.

> These aspects are so distinct that they are essentially different selves: they differ in their origins and developmental histories, in what we know about them, in the pathologies to which they are subject, and in the manner in which they contribute to human social experience. (p. 35)

Ho and colleagues (2001) gesture toward Hermans’ view that dialogical self is not one or the other; it is a combination of continuity (in line with William James) and discontinuity (in line with Bakhtin). Dialogical self is a paradox of unity and diversity, being capable of experiencing both (Ho, 2001, pp. 399-400).

The capacity for self-consciousness and other-consciousness are necessary conditions for the emergence of selfhood. As mentioned above, they also play a central role in the

symbolic interactionist tradition of Charles Horton Cooley (1983 [1902]) and George Herbert Mead (1934; 1964 [orig. 1913]).

Selfhood and otherness thus imply each other (Ho et al., 2001, p. 400) as do sides of a coin. They also "mark a qualitative quantum leap in the evolution of consciousness" (p. 400).

> We argue that metacognition is vital to the development of the dialogical self. The dialogical self must be aware of its ignorance, its own self-awareness, even its potential nonbeing … and to entertain possibilities of what it may become—something posited in the future that it has never experienced. It has to assess how accurately it perceives and is perceived by others. It must also deal with tensions that may arise from discrepant perceptions in this bidirectional process. Thus, metacognition renders new forms of thought and action possible for the dialogical self, in relations with both itself and others (pp. 400-01).

A similar argument applies to writing. A writer cannot complete write something coherent if there is no "chief of staff" able to organize the different voices, each proffering different views and priorities. Properly managed, "the dialectical tension between unity and diversity is generative. For the dialogical self, new meanings and possibilities of action emerge through achieving dialectical synthesis, unity with diversity" (pp. 400-01).

## Synopsis and Look Ahead

In this chapter, I highlighted issues of personal authorship, including the strikingly Western notions that history is the product of great men and that great men are the product of their inborn nature. With the decline of Enlightenment certainties and humanistic

individualism, especially during the mid to late twentieth century "the 'subject' of writing evaporates if we mean the sovereignty of writer-as-author. " Writing is a system of relations…," says Jacques Derrida (1978, pp. 226-227) and requires no particular individual as author.

Autobiographical memory which would seem especially important to personal narrative is likewise problematic. Memory researchers seem to agree that whatever else memory might be, it is also "a social construction" (Kihlstrom, 2002; Pasupathi, 2001, p. 651). Remembering "… reflects a blend of information contained in specific [neurological] traces encoded at the time it occurred, *plus inferences based on knowledge, expectations, beliefs, and attitudes derived from other sources"* (Kihlstrom, 2002).

Autobiographical storytelling, like authorship, is a system of relations: "a joint product of the speaker and the audience" and audience response "influences the way we subsequently remember the told event" (Pasupathi, 2001, p. 651).

Kenneth Gergen (2000) proposes that writing is fundamentally an action within a relationship; it is within relationship that writing gains its meaning and significance, and our manner of writing simultaneously invites certain forms of relationship while discouraging or suppressing others." As a result, written communication "is predicated on what the writer/reader each assumes the other will do/has done" (Nystrand, 1989, p. 75).

Roland Barthes (1997) goes further and asserts that writers have nothing to say that is truly their own. "It is language which speaks, not the author" (p. 143) and writing is merely an opportunity for language to perform the writer, writing and content (p. 143). All text is intertextual.

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Rene Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am.” Mikhail Bakhtin might say, “We speak; therefore we are.” We are dialogical. We are jointly and reciprocally constituted. Yet, you do not account for me and I do not account for you.

This said, I next move on to dialog as an approach to inquiry.

# CHAPTER 7: ON DIALOGICS

## (AS A METHODOLOGICAL STANCE}

*"In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was God. Of course it was."*
~ Carl Frederick, est: Playing the Game the New Way, p. 169

*"Speak English! I don't know the meaning of half those long words, and I don't believe you do either!*
~ Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter III.

*"Bad artists copy. Great artists steal."*
~Pablo Picasso

"*A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence"* ~ Bakhtin, 1984, p. 252

Bakhtin believed, as demonstrated by the quote above, that "two voices is the minimum" for a human *being*.[17] In simple terms, Bakhtin had a kind of "more is better" philosophy: more voices=more truth value. He did not accept the usual notion that when people disagree, someone must be wrong. Nor did he accept the idea that the correct bits of mistaken arguments might be complementarily blended into the real or true answer.

"Polyphonic truth" –a key ethical value for Bakhtin—is not a place of understanding resolved once and for all time; nor does it have much to do with thing like accuracy or ultimate correctness. Unlike the exclusionary sense of monophonic truth, polyphonic truth derives its value from two or more simultaneous voices committed to addressivity: to being engaged with many opposing and logically irreconcilable statements.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the possibilities this outlook lend to inquiry. That is, to look for ways of knowledge-making that favors polyphony and dialog over hegemony and monolog.

## Postmodern Uncertainties about Method

In a bid to be recognized as "scientific" —and, therefore, worthy—by the larger academic community, social studies have reformed their disciplines to imitate the physical sciences. Foremost among these "reforms" has been the objectification of its subject and the adoption methods deemed "appropriate" to positivist physical empiricism. The adoption and defense of such is seen as crucial to protecting discipline from corruption of outside and detrimental influences (Law, 2004, p. 16).

"Social science" has been subsumed by, as C. Wright Mills (1959) called it, *abstracted empiricism*: a hodge-podge of check-the-box surveys, controlled experiments and other tools that define the world, its objects, and its subjects as static objects describable by statistical data and/or psychologisms (Mills, 1959, pp. 55-59). These are touted to somehow "add up" to breakthroughs in grand theory.[18] Mills scoffed at this idea, believing that millions of trivial findings will only "add up" to a very large aggregate of trivial findings. It takes what he called "the sociological imagination" to see how social forces work together as dynamic systems. Mills writes disdainfully of "abstracted empiricism" in chapter 3 (of the same title) in *The Sociological Imagination*, where he accuses sociologists of reducing science to empiricism and reducing sociology to a sad fetish for quantitative research design and statistical analysis, this in an even sadder attempt to insinuate themselves among the

natural sciences (p. 55) where the accolades and the budgets are found (p. 60). (Of course, Mills does not use these exact words; however, I believe this is his intention.)

Even the more participatory research methods cleave participants into *them and us:* the expert-participant defines the situation and places "findings" within an interpretative framework that trumps the views of the subject-participants. The "expert" social scientist renders "observations" meaningful by placing them in a disciplinary hinterland (Law, 2004, pp. 35-38) and performatively transforms them into something they expect to see (Law, 2004, pp. 35-38, p. 143).

Postmodern anthropologists like Renato Rosaldo (2000) find such practice and analysis problematic. Skeptical of claims to research objectivity, Rosaldo gives as much weight to the *doing* of his research and the subjectivities of his fieldwork as he does to observation and interpretation.

Such reflexivity is a form of deconstruction and asks the observer-writer to include commentary on his/her own culture, his/her positioning within the "research" as an investigator within a disciplinary discourse, any doubts or changes of perspective that occurred during the research. In short, an ethic of reflexivity invites the investigator to acknowledge that, however expert, a human being conducted the research. Reflexivity and reflexive meta-commentary does not serve some "higher truth" but merely to disabuse readers of detached omniscience or such a thing as discernible ultimate truth.

I do not desire to study personal narrative writing from a position of the detached "scientific observer" or a linguistic accountant—tallying the incidence of words signifying X, Y or Z and plotting the summations and z-scores of said on graphs and scatter grams. Nor am

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I interested in discovering how many standard deviations my "observations" might be from a distribution of Cincinnatians selected at random. I opt for this project to be a toehold, a starting place and a vantage point from which to perceive personal narrative writing. I want to juxtapose the dialogs and the constructionist considerations about the autonomous individual, the mind, and the author while wondering:

1. "If we examined more closely the writing process and what writers say about it, might it give us an evidential basis for theories more appropriate to CW [Creative Writing] pedagogy?" (Mike Harris, 2009, Abstract)
2. What are the differences between modern humanist and postmodern constructionist notions of persons and authors and persons-as-authors?
3. What do the responses of these nine writers of personal narrative to a series of questions about their writing process and practices suggest about their views on persons and authors and persons-as-authors?
4. Specifically, how much has postmodern and constructionist considerations affected the process and practices of writers of personal narrative?

## Mikhail Bakhtin and Dialogics

I do not suggest that Mikhail Bakhtin was a postmodernist or a social constructionist. He professed to being a devout Orthodox Christian in search of a way to reconcile World and God (Holquist & Liapunov, 1990) and attributed the core of his ideas to Socrates (Honeycutt, 1994). Yet, his dialogics offers a model of how we co-construct ourselves and our (not so much shared but) partially overlapping centrifugally permutated understandings of the world. His view of dialog as always unfinished and "unfinalizable" (Bakhtin, 1984) meshes well

with an aesthetic of fluidity adopted by both postmodernism and social constructionism (Erickson, 1998, pp. 341-42). Yet, this pointing to the creative space *between us* is also reminiscent of philosopher-theologian Martin Buber's "ontology of the between" in his 1923 book *I and Thou* (Buber, 1937). Here, Buber attempted to show that individual consciousness could be explained compellingly *only* within an ontology based on our *I-Thou* and *I-It* (subject-subject or subject-object) relationships with others, the world and God; but not within an account of individual autonomy, independence and isolation (Theunissen, 1984, pp. 271-272).

Self is a space of inter-being. In the essay, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," Bakhtin advocates that an accounting of oneself is impossible without the existence of another (Bakhtin, 1990). Without "other" (as a physical presence or an abstract referential presence or the authoritative other of God), there is no voice but only gesture and sound.

> In this sense one can speak of a human being's absolute need for the other, or any other seeing, remembering, gathering, and underlying self-activity—the only self-activity capable of producing his outwardly finished personality. This outward personality could not exist, if the other did not create it (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 36).

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin transforms a literary critique into a philosophy of language that takes a very different tack from deconstructionists who set out to discredit the ability of language to convey meaning (Clark & Holquist, 1984; Honeycutt, 1994). Bakhtin, in fact, celebrates denotative ambiguity as the generator of *polyphony* (many

voices) and polyphony as the fountain of new ideas (Honeycutt, 1994). He arrives at this conclusion while contrasting the works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

Tolstoy, Bakhtin argues (1984), is a *monologic* author whose fictional characters are no more than extensions of himself. Dostoevsky, by contrast, allows characters to develop "independent" consciousnesses in counterpoint or supplement to his own. Bakhtin describes his philosophy of language and Dostoevsky's style of writing as *dialogic*.

> Dialogic relationships exist among all elements of novelistic structure; that is, they are juxtaposed contrapuntally. And this is so because dialogic relationships are a much broader phenomenon than mere rejoinders in a dialogue, laid out compositionally in the text; they are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life—in general, everything that has meaning and significance. (p.40)

The rationalist tradition in Western philosophy, says Bakhtin (p. 81), engages language and the apparent world monologically. This tradition suspects and often denies anything that will not fit into its unitary, cohesive view of the world (p. 82). Yet, Bakhtin says, "the monologic way…is only one of the possible ways" of "perceiving cognition and truth" and world (p. 81) .

No idea begins or flourishes in "one person's *isolated* individual's consciousness—if it remains there only, it degenerates and dies" (p. 88). An idea begins, develops and "give birth to new ideas only" when energized by "genuine dialogic relationships" that involve "direct living contact" with the "alien thought, a thought embodied in someone else's voices" and the consciousness and worldviews of *other* "expressed in discourse" (p.88). At that point

of contact found *between* voice-consciousness of self and that of others is where the idea is born and lives on (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 88; Honeycutt, 1994).

Bakhtin's dialogics unsettled older paradigms of human communication as analogous to mail packets "relayed by a sender to a particular receiver" with meaning delimited by the symbols in the message; "instead, dialogics sees communication and meaning residing *on the boundaries* of consciousness *between* two people, who use words … socially originated and infused with past and future voices" (Honeycutt, 1994, Chapter 3). (Italics mine.)

## Dialogical Method

Bakhtin's dialogics, grounded in the simple mutuality and reciprocity of everyday interactions between individuals, is not a radically new idea but the result of sustained engagement with and response to "several strands of Western philosophy" (Honeycutt, 1994). Dialogism has far-reaching implications. It implies that what I say can mean and "I can mean what I say but only … at a second remove, in words that I take and give back to the community" (Honeycutt, 1994)—only by virtue of common language and the communal performances of a society of affiliates and only by virtue of the (actual or figurative) company of others (Clark & Holquist, 1984; Honeycutt, 1994). Interacting with others is generative, formative and transformative. Self, "your" self and "my" self, rather than being endogenic, is something that passes between us, an eruption of *you-with-me-ness* or *us-ness* that survives our parting. Reflexivity, that aptitude for experiencing self as an observed object, is generated under the gaze of another human being.

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John Shotter (1999), prominent theorizer and writer in social constructionism, notes that “current styles of writing in the human and behavioral sciences, and in philosophy, have a long history” and

> it is clear that in learning to take up the objective attitude of external observers, we have trained ourselves to attend away from… the spontaneous, responsive, unique, first-time understandings we create and develop between us, in the ceaseless, ongoing stream of life within which we are all embedded. (Shotter, J., 1999, Conference paper.)

We have learned to write in a way which ignores and denies such involvements, Shotter says, and we write in a style he calls “aboutness-writing” (John Shotter, 1999; Shotter & Katz, 1999, p. 2). In a sense, then, what we attend to, what we ignore, and what we write about, is an element of our methodological hinterland (Law, 2004, pp. 32-38; Stewart, 2008, p. 8).

> As an alternative to such a kind of disengaged writing,” Shotter wants to explore…what might be called a dialogical-prospective-relational style of writing (or withness-writing). Rather than the depiction of regularities, central to such a [new] style of writing, is the portrayal of 'striking events' or 'living moments', dialogically shared events which touch us, which matter to us, and which can change us in our lives. It is a style of writing in which we attend to the character of such events from within our ongoing involvements with the others around us. In line with the epigraph quote from Bakhtin (1993) above, I

> want to try to write "participatively," i.e., from within an ongoing involvement within the activities in question, not as a detached outsider to them. (Shotter, J., 1999, Conference paper.)

*Me too!* I want to engage in a similarly participative form of inquiry and adopt dialogicality as a methodological stance. This is easier said than done. The trouble lies in discerning what a dialogical approach looks like in practice. Bakhtin's dialogism has led to widely divergent practices (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2005, p. 634).

"How, then, do we deal with dialogue in practice?" ask Sullivan & McCarthy (2005, p. 634). We do not. Rather, Sullivan says, we feel our way along "based on mutual trust and the capacity to learn, revise and apply what we learn from each other to a topic of common concern" (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2005, p. 624). That is how "we go forward together" in dialogically oriented, unavoidably participatory form of life, where "no audience is permitted and nobody can take a disengaged or privileged perspective" (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2005, p. 634) and, thus, aesthetically more pleasing and ethically more comfortable. I have adopted "a view of dialogue that aims for participation with the other rather than aiming to master the other" (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2005, p. 634). By this, I want to suggest Immanuel Kant's ethic of "acting in such a way as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of anyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means" (Kant, 2005, p. 29).

While it is possible to study writers and writing "scientifically"– in the sense of hypothesis testing, controlled variables, and statistical analysis– doing so seems to me akin to

dissecting a flower and “spinning it down” in a centrifuge to determine why it makes you smile. I do not want to pith writers and pick their bones. Rather, I wish to catch us at doing what we do. I want us to write personal narrative about writing personal narrative. I want to sow and reap writing about writing because it gives us a chance to reflect on the process even while in the midst of performing it—thereby, perhaps, making available to us a different kind and quality of "data" than might result from talking about writing.

I also shun advance assumptions of knowing and understanding “the other” and his/her meaning, for doing so glosses over the disorienting strangeness and difference (John Shotter, 2003; Sullivan & McCarthy, 2005, p. 634) attending authentic dialog. In other words, “content is never simply information to be retrieved or applied to particular situations but a … living engagement with a particular other” (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2005, p. 634) that “entails actively questioning and interrogating the other, asking others to ask questions, feeling the texture of their strangeness through creating it anew in the research process.” A posture of “not-knowing” (Anderson, 1997, p. xii, p. xv, p. 64) positions me as a self in search of “consummation, completion or wholeness” (Baxter, 2004, pp. 186-187) in aesthetic moment (s) with dialogic other(s), rather than a researcher of subjects or an all-knowing expert (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2005).

Living within such a research context creates an opening for a transformative shift from a monological view that the principle goal of research is the research product (Gergen & Gergen, 2003, p. 598) and the experiences and texts of participants (transcribed talk and action) are objects to be gathered and analyzed in a manner befitting of urine specimens. Such a view

> … runs contrary to the hermeneutic traditions of Gadamer and Bakhtin, who argue that the text is a living 'other' that addresses us and requires a creative understanding from us. This suggests that our participation does not stop in the field but carries on with 'characters' in dialogue with us in the text; characters to whom, like Dostoevsky, we may respond in an embodied rather than a detached and analytical sense (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2005, pp. 634-635).

A dialogic context for research creates an opening for dynamic subjectivities that are always open to change and new interpretation. As Kenneth & Mary Gergen (2003) write, it allows us to

> abandon the traditional goal of research as the accumulation of products—static or frozen findings—and replace it with the generation of communicative process, then a chief aim of research becomes that of establishing productive forms of relationship. The researcher ceases to be a passive bystander who generates representational products, but as one who partly constitutes reality and forges generative communicative relationships. (p. 598).

Though it has its own dangers, I use "personal voice" throughout this work to counter the hegemonic disembodied "voice of science" (which I should imagine has much the same daunting timbre as "the voice of God") by taking responsibility for what I put on paper. Such a voice also helps me stay in "reflexive mode" by capturing my emotional, ethical and cognitive responses to the other participants' experience. One such response was my begging

further involvement from the other participants. In this sense, the other participants co-created the “me” in the dialog as much as I co-created the “me” of each of them. In this way, our dialog changed my view of the research as well as the resultant text.

Consequently, I have come to know “the author function” in a more Foucaultian way. As an example, I now find that this dissertation is “mine” only in the limited sense that I wrote it; it is also a “conspiracy” of sorts among the ten of us (author-participants), you-as-reader, myself-as-student-researcher and *all the resource-voices we jointly bring to the endeavor*. As such, this dissertation is the work of millions, its authorship collective and distributive; and its content, its meaning, fluid and contextual.

Joint action constructs and maintains the world, as we know it (Shotter, 1993b) and that makes relationships where the action is (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). When an individual constructs the world, s/he does not construct it de novo from within; but, rather, in conversations (alone and in the presence of others) that depend on a common language and the conventions of describing and explaining (Gergen & Gergen, 2004, pp. 8-9) within his/her “culture” via relational interactions (Gergen & Gergen, 2004, pp. 8-11).

When studying writing and authorship, I do not default to subterranean psychodynamics of the individual (e.g. psychological and phenomenological subjectivism), or to the exigencies of forces in the “outside world” (e.g. sociological and behavioral objectivism). Although these two approaches differ in many particulars, both assume an objective, reasonably stable and independent reality, filled with identifiable “things” (Virgil, 2006, p. 23) that behave with enough regularity that they can be represented and analyzed in

fairly mechanistic terms. I do not consider these approaches “wrong” but limited and impoverished when held out as representative of the possibilities. I default to the “contingent flow of continuous communicative activity between human beings” (Shotter, 1993b, p.179).

It also seems to me that certain strands of postmodern and social constructionist thought—in the interest representing human interaction as the coordination of a repertoire of acts-and-supplements rather than the initiative of individual minds—can exaggerate the conventionality of social life and give the impression that each moment is, if not cliché, certainly a rehash of the already said. If I define “creativity” as innovation, originality, novelty, uniqueness, then creativity does not seem possible within such a world. Here, conversational life seems largely a recycling project (Shotter & Lannamann, 2002). It is a world of the already said, the already lived and, consequently, the already dead. In the words of Ecclesiastes 1:9-10:

> What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, “Look! This is something new!”? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. (Biblica, 1984)

Contrariwise, Bakhtin emphasizes the “first time nature” of each unfolding interactive moment, the unrepeatability of each utterance (John Shotter, 1999). This sense of novelty and genuine creativity in human dialog and Wittgenstein’s (2001) sense that meaning is imparted through usage (Wittgenstein, Anacombe &

Anscombe, 2001, pp. 23, 154-155), adds a generative element to social constructionism.

*Knowledge and Method*

In the physical sciences, depending on how and at what level we enter into relationship with the objects of our study, the universe is mostly solids in spatial relationship or mostly space with far-flung solids, or mostly probabilities of solids and spaces or mostly energies in relationship. Some of these descriptions are contradictory and mutually exclusive and cannot all be true; yet each must be true in certain circumstances. Meaning: We must choose method according to what we want to know, while knowing that method partially creates what we find.

In *Journey to Ixtlan*, Carlos Castaneda says that "reality, or the world we all know, is only a description" (Castaneda, 1972, p. viii) that has been "pounded into you from the moment you were born" (Castaneda, 1972, p. viii). The "reality of our day-to-day life … consists of an endless flow of perceptual interpretations which we have learned to make in common" (Castaneda, 1972, p. ix).

Don Juan (a Yaqui brujo/sorcerer/shaman/medicine man) tells Castaneda: "to arrive at seeing" you must first learn "to stop the world"; that is, you must learn to interrupt the flow of interpretation, "which ordinarily runs uninterruptedly" (Castaneda, 1972, p. xiii). "The precondition for stopping the world is that one has to be convinced; in other words, one has to learn the new description in a total sense … and in that way break the dogmatic certainty, which we all share, that the validity of our perceptions, or our reality of the world,

is not to be questioned" (Castaneda, 1972, p. ix). After stopping the world, the next step is "seeing"— responding to the world outside the description we have been provided and learned (Castaneda, 1972, p. xiv).

In *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Castaneda, 1969, p. 82), Don Juan admonishes Castaneda that any path he chooses "is one of a million paths. Therefore, you must always keep in mind that a path is *only* a path … and there is no affront, to oneself or to others, in dropping it if that is what your heart tells you to do"(Castaneda, 1969, p. 82). (Italics added for emphasis.)

All paths are the same: they lead nowhere. Does this path have heart? If yes, the path is good; if not, it is of no use to you. (Castaneda, 1969, p. 82)

In *A Separate Reality* (Castaneda, 1971), Don Juan says, "the man of knowledge … knows, because he sees, that nothing is more important than anything else" (Castaneda, 1971, p. 85). Knowing this, he chooses to act and then behaves *as if* it matters, all the while knowing that it really doesn't. He "endeavors, and sweats, and puffs, and if one looks at him he is just like any ordinary man, except that the folly of his life is under control" because he knows the only options are muddled folly or "controlled folly" and he behaves accordingly (Castaneda, 1971, p. 85). When he completes an act, he retreats in peace. Whether it worked out or did not, is in no way part of his concern. (Closely paraphrased from Castaneda, 1971, p. 85)

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

### *Dialog as Method*

In 1966, Derrida delivered a paper, *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, at a Johns Hopkins University conference on structuralism, in which he outlined the insufficiency of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic structuralism. The next year he followed up with a book, *Of Grammatology*, in which he intercepted Saussure's division between words and their referents and ran it to the end zone, flatly stating, "There is nothing outside of the text" (Jacques Derrida, 1976, p. 158). With that declaration, Derrida denies the possibility of a knowable reality outside the free play of signifiers or the conditioning of *differance* (Smith, 2005, p. 44). That is, "we have no access to ourselves or to the world which is not subject to the differing and deferring of difference; as such, the world and even consciousness are never simply or fully 'present'" (Smith, 2005, pp. 44-45). Said another way, there is no meaning outside of context (Jacques Derrida & Ferrarsis, 2001, p. 19).

Bakhtin believed Saussurean analysis of language fell short by treating language, a generative and dynamic *process*, as a mechanical *object* that can be dismantled and reassembled without loss. Bakhtin wanted to study dialogic interaction "where discourse lives an authentic life" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 202; Castle, 2007, p. 185). (Italics added for emphasis.)

For Bakhtin, language cannot be analyzed adequately in isolation from its natural "double-voiced" character (or bi-directionality) wherein every utterance is oriented both toward "the referential object of speech" and the speech acts of an-other (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 185; Castle, 2007, p. 185). The proper study of language occurs within the "authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape" (Bakhtin,

1981, p. 272) and "where discourse lives an authentic life" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 202). I offer this analogy: A butter-fly pinned to a corkboard is not the same as a butterfly in the wild; and discourse is language in the wild.

In light of all this, I chose dialog as the method of knowledge creation for this project. Dialog is where the action is. Dialog is where the aliveness is. Dialog is a path with heart, where research about writing ought to be.

## Synopsis and Look Ahead

The purpose of this chapter was to explore the possibilities of a dialogical approach to inquiry and knowledge-making. As predicted by C. Wright Mills, social science continues to emulate the physical sciences. Methods and choice of subject have become more reductive and the sociological imagination has been replaced by abstracted empiricism: a hodge-podge of techniques—surveys, controlled experiments and other tools that define the world and its subjects as static isolated objects that collide and ricochet off each other in the fashion of billiard balls (Mills, 1959, pp. 55-59).

Postmodern social scientists such as Renato Rosaldo (2000) want to know about other ways of life (to the extent possible) from the viewpoint of those living it and afford their interpretations equal footing. I feel a thrill at these words and mutter affirmations, yet find such re-formation easier said than done.

I looked to Bakhtin's dialogics, in this regard, which offers a model of how we co-construct ourselves and our partially overlapping understandings of the world. His view of dialog as always unfinished and "unfinalizable" (Bakhtin, 1984) meshes well with an

aesthetic of fluidity adopted by both postmodernism and social constructionism (Erickson, 1998, pp. 341-42). Bakhtin advocates that an accounting of oneself is impossible without the existence of a co-responding other (Bakhtin 1990, p.144). Without "other" there is no voice but only gesture and sound.

The self that seeks within to know (the self that writes personal narrative) rather than being endogenic, can be understood as something that passes between us, as an eruption of you-with-me suchness that survives our parting. In response to this, I seek a more participatory method of inquiry, a method where "no audience is permitted and nobody can take a disengaged or privileged perspective" (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2005, p. 634), we have to feel our way along "based on mutual trust and the capacity to learn, revise and apply what we learn from each other to a topic of common concern" (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2005, p. 624).

While this feels less "certain" and less in-control than following recipes, it is esthetically more pleasing and ethically more satisfying. I turn to dialog as the method of choice for knowledge creation because it is where the action is, where the aliveness is. It is a path with heart (Castaneda, 1969, p. 82), where research about writing ought to be. In that spirit, I go forward.

Because this work blurs the distinctions of investigation, analysis and results, I have collapsed them under Part 4: *The Inquiry*. Chapter 8 presents *The Writer Dialogs* in their entirety, arranged in a readable format but otherwise unadulterated and unedited. Chapter 9: *Responsive Discussion of Themes* is comprised of highlights from the writer dialogs with reflections on them based on the guiding questions and the literature review. Chapter 10: *Reflections & Regrets* (and things learned along the way) talks about ways the project might

be improved. It talks about reconciling the postmodern with the writing of personal narrative. This is followed by Chapter 11: *Parting Words*, a quirky something that certainly would not be included in a traditional dissertation, but seems more than appropriate to a postmodern work because it talks about being transformed by doing research. It talks about subjective experiences related to the project, the doubly transformative experience of being written while writing, and being aware of being written while writing.

# PART FOUR: THE INQUIRY

## THE WRITER DIALOGS

## RESPONSIVE DISCUSSION OF THEMES

## REFLECTIONS & REGRETS

## PARTING WORDS

# CHAPTER 8: THE WRITER DIALOGS

*"What is the use of a book, without pictures or conversations?"*
~ Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter III.

I am in accord with Sheila McNamee and John Shotter (2004) when they say:

> It seems odd to write about dialog, creativity, and change without attempting to explicitly integrate the conversational partners with whom we are engaged … and our own voices as respondents to each other (p. 91).

In this chapter, I introduce and include the complete text of written dialogs (correspondence) between each of nine other writers and me. They have been arranged in a logical sequence to prevent duplication and to making the reading easier but have not been redacted or changed in any other way.

## Weaving the Written Dialogs

In this section I present each woven dialog/conversation in its entirety: the original written questions, the respondent's written reply, my response to their reply, and their response to my response to their response. As mentioned in the Methods section, the discussions with each participant were originally phased and difficult to follow. I chose weave the back-and-forth into a single flowing dialog for presentation purposes. The wording was not changed in any way, nothing added or deleted. I have coded the dialogs with numbers to help the reader remain aware that the original construction was a back-and-forth correspondence. The large number corresponds to the numbered list of question

clusters used to commence the dialog. The smaller numbers represent the order of the original correspondence.

Below, for example, large numeral 1 indicates the first cluster of questions. Sheila responds. Rodney #2 is my response to her initial responses. Sheila #2 is her response to my response to her initial responses, and so on.

Sheila Bender

1 RODNEY: Why do you write? What is your motive in writing? Is it to influence others? Is it to a share something about yourself with others? If so, say more about why you desire to share life stories with others?

SHEILA: I write to understand why I am feeling as I do and to investigate what hooks me emotionally. I write to explain myself to others and to myself. I write to find lessons and insight in life experience. I write because it is a pleasurable way to process images and dialog and events so that I can see some shape to my life and find meaning and if not resolution, some sort of peace.

As a poet first and then a personal essayist and finally an instructional writer, I see my personal writing as something I offer others from my experience. I think I am interested in moving others but most interested in presenting myself at the deepest levels of my perception. I believe that sharing writing creates an intimacy between the reader and the writer, and between the writer and herself.

RODNEY #2: I am drawn to the response you give when I ask why you write. You said:

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

> "I write to understand why I am feeling as I do and to investigate what hooks me emotionally. I write to explain myself to others and to myself. I write to find lessons and insight in life experience. I write because it is a pleasurable way to process images and dialog and events so that I can see some shape to my life and find meaning and if not resolution, some sort of peace."

I nod in agreement, Sheila, when I read that you write to find lessons and insight in life experience; yet, I wonder if lessons and insights are there to be gleaned or if I am carrying on a conversation with myself—which is to say: carrying on a conversation with all the conversations I've ever had—with the intent of generating lessons and insights into a largely amoral world without direction or purpose. I wonder if sense-making, no matter how contingent, tentative, or marginal, personifying the world so to speak, maybe what writing is about? I'm not sure. I offer this not as an answer to anything, just as a question to live inside.

SHEILA #2: I believe that sense making is what we are built for—we are constantly making sense with whatever we have available. The interesting idea to me is that "making sense" also implies making of our senses—and I try to do this in writing—include the sensory info until it brings forth the insight, self-reflection, third level—not brain and/or heart alone, but something more flowing, more at one, the something we inhabit when all sides of our brain are in sync. I find that state most often through writing.

RODNEY #2**:** "Writing to investigate what hooks me emotionally." I like this idea of writing as inquiry, Sheila; writing to discover rather than to deliver and inform. How does writing accomplish this? Do you attempt writing on a subject and find it does or does not "hook" you? Or do you write until you end up there? And how do you know when you have been "hooked emotionally"? Is this somehow different than being "hooked intellectually" or "finding a really interesting idea"?

SHEILA #2: I know I am hooked emotionally when an image or incident or something someone said triggers a moody feeling in me. I have no idea why what hooked me did so, but I write to find out. If it isn't something that really hooked me, I rarely start the writing.

Of course I write to inform, but in the kind of writing I am talking about, I am writing to discover what it is I want to inform myself (and consequently others) about.

RODNEY #2**:** I write to find out what to write about. That seems related to what you are saying here. I once thought this "method" was a waste of time because I wound up cutting the first two-thirds of the manuscript. As my wife, Kate, sometimes reminds me, "efficiency is not always the goal." The process did produce the last third that I want to keep. Once I accepted the duality that I abhor inefficiency and this is just how I work, I found that the first two-thirds of the manuscript actually were not waste. It was more like seeded sod set aside for future use. I keep first drafts and read them later, often finding I can pull a few paragraphs or a few pages and use them to develop an entirely different story. Time has rolled on. I come to the first drafts with added experience and new perspectives.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

There is a subtle but significant distinction between writing to find an explanation and writing to generate an explanation. In the first case, I am excavating for material. In the latter, I am forming a collage of observations, recollections or conjectures to support my idiosyncratic narratives about who I am and what life is, and so forth. In this case, I go to self-narrative not as miners go to tunnels with pick, shovel and hod; more as potters go to the wheel, wielding extant forces to bring forth meaningful and useful arts and crafts from wet lumps of clay.

SHEILA #2: I'd say the most enjoyable writing for me, or the most important for my sense that I am growing emotionally, is what you call the kind we approach as potters at the wheel. I think that writing is a physical experience and I like the idea of my hands on the wet clay, my foot on a pedal more than I like the idea of swinging a pick axe over my head and into the hard earth. Writing is something yielding when it is going well. I think we have to find a way to drop the axe and get to the potter's wheel to write well, even when writing to inform others about something we already know. When we do that, we find a shape that helps us put our knowledge into a lovely venue for others (a metaphor for shaping our book, perhaps), not a dull, linearly outlined kind of a thing.

RODNEY #2**:** I am intrigued by the idea that you write to "explain myself to others and to myself." Explain in what way and for what purpose? To make sense of yourself? To justify yourself?

Tell me more about seeking "some shape to my life" and finding "meaning and if not resolution, some sort of peace." I react to these words with a sense of longing and sadness. Does this have to do with losing your son in his youth?

Again, I wonder: do we writers discover by finding or by generating? Am I uncovering what is already there or am I creating it as I go along? For readers the difference is hidden and, perhaps, irrelevant. But, for me, as writer, whether I am finding myself or constructing myself seems a distinction of consequence. Based on the "psychological breakthroughs" [19] we've both experienced from writing, I have a sense that the "mechanism" for these breakthroughs is not the unearthing of hidden treasure; it is, rather, our creating new vessels for holding what we already know.

I would respond to Gertrude Stein's famous a rose is a rose is a rose by saying "but is it really?" A rose on a rooftop, in a trash bin, in a vase, a rose on a coffin, a rose with thorns biting at my fingertips, a rose unexplained on the doorstep or with a note, these would not be the same rose—even if it were the same rose. Is water just water? Water in the toilet, water in a teapot, water in an iced glass dripping cold sweat, water in a pool with a dumbass kid intentionally pinning me down, $H_2O$, the closest thing to a universal solvent, water is in each case something different. But is the difference in the meaning something we discover or something we invent?

SHEILA #2: I am not sure about the need to separate finding from constructing a self. Finding sounds better and more in keeping with what I believe—that our essence is with us from birth and we work all our lives to retrieve it, work and communicate from it. However, in doing so, we do build a construction of sorts, I think, to house this essence in the world—our personalities, our writing, our way of working in the world.

There are many "I's" the great thinkers tell us. Who are we at any one moment? We are many people—our ego and id see to that. However, I believe there is a unifying presence, essence, something in us that integrates our selves. When I am writing well, I

am writing from an integrated place. It may have taken pages as you said to get there, but I got there. It is a wonderful feeling. Then next wonderful feeling is from revision when I can make this flow communicable to someone outside of my mind and experience.

RODNEY #2: You see personal writing as “something you can offer others from your experience, a way to share the deepest levels of your perception; sharing writing creates an intimacy between the reader and the writer, and between the writer and herself.” What is it you offer readers through your writing, Sheila? Insights that can be applied? Is it the intimacy itself —a sense of connection or communion? How does sharing writing create a sense of intimacy, do you suppose?

For me, meaning and value are not inherent in writing as words on a page. Meaning and value are inherent in the relationship negotiated between the writer and the reader; therefore, as long as the quality of the writing doesn't actually get in the way, meaning and value is always the natural outcome of storytelling. But this relationship between the writer and the reader is both tentative and tenuous. What the reader “gets” from the words on a page will be not exactly what the writer “got” when s/he wrote them and read them back. I have a melancholic sense that the writerly ideal of writing so well that writer and reader merge into a sort of orgastic mutual understanding is out of the question because meaning is not immutable and integral to words. The meaning of a word, even when I derive it directly from a dictionary definition, depends on its relationship to other words and my relationship to those words through a lifetime of experiences. The prospect that I can and will read words what you have written and entertain the exact same experience of moods, sensations and meanings as you had when

you wrote them is, I am afraid, negligible. I confess to being nostalgic for the days when I believed otherwise.

Just about every first year science class stumbles upon the question: I say I see "blue" and you say "I see blue too" but how do we know that we are seeing the exact same thing rather than two different things that we are calling by the same name? Whenever I see "X" and you see "Y" we both say "blue" and imagine we are having the same experience. I wonder how much of this describes the experience of readers and writers? That is, how much our orientation to life, our experiences, our local culture, all combine to shape what we read and write to the extent that we think we are sharing a common experience while actually the correspondence is only vague and tangential. What is your take on this?

SHEILA #2: I still do believe that I can put experience on the page so that my readers experience what I did—that is my relationship to my readers. That is what I am striving for. If my experience calls up one they've had and they offer their own experience to mingle with the one I have created on the page, the relationship and the intimacy deepen. If I didn't believe this, I would get caught up in second guessing myself and analyzing all that I write and that others write and my interest is in responding, in knowing what I feel and learn from others. I do that best with response, describing what happens inside of me when I read, especially someone else's work.

2 RODNEY: Do your stories have some "truth" to share? If so, do you think this truth is "universal" (that is, that is something true about all people or all times) or do you think this truth is more "local" (that it is something you learned that might be true of some people or sometimes).

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

SHEILA: Yes. Whether they are “universal” and true about all people or all times is hard to answer. I believe that people are most alike in their feelings and least alike in their thinking. Therefore, if your experience can evoke feelings, there is universal connection even if the reader may not have thought as you did or acted as you did. The readers will realize that in other circumstances they may have experienced the same feelings. They will recognize the feelings. "Feelings come first," e. e. cummings wrote. When we move others to feel feelings we have felt, we become intimate, connected. That is the truth that gets shared in personal writing that succeeds.

RODNEY #2: When I ask whether writing is about the universal truths, you respond in terms of feelings. “People are most alike in their feelings, you said, “and least alike in their thinking.” You continue:

> “Therefore, if your experience can evoke feelings, there is universal connection even if the reader may not have thought as you did or acted as you did. When we move others to feelings we have felt, we become intimate, connected. That is the truth that gets shared in personal writing that succeeds.”

SHEILA #2: Creating a sense of intimacy—well that’s what happens when we tell the truth about ourselves. I think the best writing, fiction or nonfiction, is filled with the truth of what it means to be a particular human in a particular world. And when we are truthful and particular, we are also universal. Everyone understands the human predicament, human yearnings and desire, no matter cultural and other differences. You

cannot be in the presence of authenticity and not feel the vulnerable, authentic part of yourself. Hence the intimacy. One man's insides speaking to another man's insides, Wordsworth said of poetry.

RODNEY #2: This response appeals to me, Sheila. Love and belonging are big themes for me. I was brought to tears when Stephen Hawking—the world renowned physicist who has lived with the steady physical decline of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) for over 40 years and can now barely communicate with "the outside world"—told an NPR interviewer that no matter where the disease takes him as long as he can experience being loved, life is still worth living. Victor Hugo said, "The supreme happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved; loved for ourselves, or rather in spite of ourselves."

SHEILA #2: I, too, am brought to tears in the presence of love and the affirmation that this is what is important, central, perhaps even all that life is about—not romantic love for when we are chemically attracted, but bonding love, when we are aware that everything in the universe is truly one and connected. I think the tears are tears of joy and tears of pain from the fact that we lose our way and are raised and influenced by those who have lost theirs. Those of us who have experienced love's awful other side, hatred and manipulation, but not had our urge to love completely snuffed out, may use writing more than anyone to bring the flame forward, build a fire where there was only a spark left.

RODNEY: As someone coming at writing as both a writer and a student of social constructionism, I wonder if the constituents of thoughts and feelings are really that different and whether we can share emotions in any universal way. I have to admit that

part of my motivation for doing this project and dissertation is to iron out some of these problems for myself.

When studying feelings, social constructionists often describe the rich, multi-faceted, culturally local matrix in which feelings are embedded. Since many social constructionists concerned with the emotions are psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists who favor ethnographic research methods, inquiry often begins with the language of emotions and how emotion words are localized in the culture they are studying. Social constructionists pay attention to the context in which people in their native culture can make a valid claim that they or some other person is experiencing the state designated by a particular emotion word. They also wonder about the relationship of emotions to each other, to other mental states and to various sorts of acceptable and unacceptable behavior, about what exemptions or privileges accrue to claims made using emotional language, and how emotions intersect with other aspects of the lives of the people in the same culture.

When this type of research is done well, the resulting accounts —what Geertz (1973) "thick descriptions"—include conceptual tools for understanding observations within the context of the culture in which they occur. What I find is an awesome diversity of patterns of social interaction in which our emotions and emotional language are embedded. Emotions across cultures seem to involve processes of ethical criticism whereby one's feelings and emotional displays are adapted to fit with the local justificatory system. In other words, emotions are “inner speech acts” that take social

account of others; that is, emotions are political acts that position us and our interlocutors in a local system of social life.

This view of inner life suggests that it is not so different from interactions between people out in the world and does not go on wholly inside us as we have been socialized to believe. Emotions originate not at inner center of our being but "out there" in the social milieu, on the boundary of the relational space between us (Shotter, 1997).

If this is the case, then emotions, like thoughts, are made possible by and limited by the culture and language that also makes our selves possible. Even our personal stories are framed by the cultural idea of story. In other words, my story is never my story and no one else's  My story, even as I experience it privately, is both facilitated by and limited by what thoughts are possible in our culture and speakable in our language. Stories that do not derive from conventions of culture and language are invalidated, counting not as stories but as babble and gibberish. On the flip side of that, I'm not sure that my story, my thoughts, even my emotions can be understood in another culture in exactly the same way they are available to someone in my own. If you became convinced of this, Sheila, would it affect your writing or your enthusiasm for writing?

SHEILA #2: I do not think too often of cultural differences as they apply to stories—I love stories from all cultures and although I might not get all the references, they move me. Japanese, Tibetan and Icelandic films have haunted me and strongly moved me. A young writer I selected as a contest winner wrote to be that she believes art crosses borders. I believe it does—borders between people of the same nation and culture and social group and borders between those who feel the other as other. Us and Them. But writing builds a bridge.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?



RODNEY: How did your interests in personal writing evolve? Have you written personal stories for as long as you can remember or was there a specific time when the desire to write personal stories appeared? In short, what is the story behind your story writing?

SHEILA: I was compelled to write and read poems. They seem to me to be highly personal writing, even when poets declare that they are not being autobiographical or confessional. Poetry is an essence felt by or recognized by an individual who creates a vessel for others to have the same experience. I usually feel that poems, including mine, offer a personal view into the universal.

Have you written personal stories for as long as you can remember or was there a specific time when the desire to write personal stories appeared?

I wrote as a child and teen, but the desire to really take poetry writing seriously came about after my daughter was born. I believed strongly that to raise her to be who she was, I would have to learn who I was and poetry was what could teach me that. Writing poetry led to writing personal essays, which I believe are really very close cousins of poetry. They use images and sound and although they do not rely on line breaks, they loop back at the end to the beginning and they offer "earned" insight.

The story behind my writing is that I always felt that poems and fiction were truer than my daily existence. When I need to learn to be true to myself, I turned to poetry and personal essay writing. Now I count on them to keep me true to myself.

RODNEY #2: I am captivated by your anecdote about writing as a child and teen but not taking poetry writing seriously until after your daughter was born. “I believed

strongly that to raise her to be who she was," you say, "I would have to learn who I was and poetry was what could teach me that." You go on to say that poetry writing led to writing personal essays 'which offer the same kind of "earned" insight.' Can you say more about how poetry and personal narrative can teach you "who you are"? How do you know there is a "who you are" to be found? How do you know when you are finding out "who you are" versus, perhaps, being led astray? And what does "earned insight" mean?

Closely related to that, how were/are "poems and fiction ... truer than my daily existence"?

"When I needed to learn to be true to myself," you say, "I turned to poetry and personal essay writing. Now I count on them to keep me true to myself." What/who is this self you are being true to? We use this terminology all the time because it is so integral with our culture but what does it mean? Buddhists suggest that meditation peels away the layers of the falseness we call "self" until eventually there is nothing left. And that nothing, the space for all else, is the true self. From that space, we generate who we are from moment to moment. I tend to believe that is spot on. In this case, what would fidelity to your true self be?

4 RODNEY: How are you drawn to certain story ideas? In other words, where do you think your ideas come from? How do you know that it's a good idea or an idea with potential? Have you noticed that there are certain times or places or circumstances that precede a writing idea?

SHEILA: I am drawn to write when a certain feeling won't leave me or when certain sound, or sight, or piece of dialog I've heard or said sticks around and asks me to write from there. I write to commemorate what I find important--whether that be deaths

or births or weddings or noticing my mom acting old. I have to trust my way into material--when I visited Hiroshima I was very affected, of course, but when I wrote about my time there it was because I had shared that visit with my daughter and realized more about my admiration for her. I felt odd not writing about "humanity" but I didn't have a personal way into the tragedy. My way in was small, but I think it touches people. When my mother-in-law was dying, I found that I wasn't writing for her but for my husband who was with her. Again, I felt like I might be diminishing the significance of the occasion but realized that I could only write from my immediate concern.

RODNEY #2: You say you need to write when “a certain feeling won't leave me or when a certain sound, or sight, or piece of dialog I've heard or said sticks around and asks me to write from there.” How does this “asking” take place? Is it a feeling that if you don’t write about this, it just won’t go away? How is that any different than, say, an annoying tune stuck in your head?

SHEILA #2: I write to commemorate what I find important--whether that be deaths or births or weddings or noticing my mom acting old. I have to trust my way into material. Tell me more about “trusting your way into the material.”

In developing “how an idea becomes a manuscript, you seem to find a difference between “work ideas” and “ideas that won’t let me alone.” Do “ideas that won’t let me alone” have something that distinguishes them from ideas that you work because “I have an article due or someone wants to hear from me”? and something in common with them?

5 RODNEY: How does an idea become a manuscript? Why are you drawn to writing them down? Why can't you just have an idea and leave it at that?

SHEILA: Sometimes I can have an idea and let it go. I get ideas frequently. Sometimes I write from them because I have an article due or someone wants to hear from me. But other times something won't let me alone and demands I sit down and explore why that is so. That's when the writing makes me push all other demands of my life aside and just write until I am satisfied. I have come to count on that happening. In this way, I don't chide myself for "not writing" or for not making time to write when I am busy. I know that the writing will make me sit down eventually and one rich poem or personal essay is more significant to me than measuring myself as prolific writer or not. Something becomes a manuscript when I have a need to discover something I don't believe I can do any other way than by writing to learn what I know.

RODNEY #2: You say you need to write when “a certain feeling won't leave me or when a certain sound, or sight, or piece of dialog I've heard or said sticks around and asks me to write from there.” How does this “asking” take place? Is it a feeling that if you don’t write about this, it just won’t go away? How is that any different than, say, an annoying tune stuck in your head?

SHEILA #2: I write to commemorate what I find important--whether that be deaths or births or weddings or noticing my mom acting old. I have to trust my way into material. Tell me more about “trusting your way into the material.”

RODNEY #2: In developing “how an idea becomes a manuscript, you seem to find a difference between “work ideas” and “ideas that won’t let me alone.” Do “ideas that won’t let me alone” have something that distinguishes them from ideas that you work

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because “I have an article due or someone wants to hear from me”? and something in common with them?

You say that an idea most readily “becomes a manuscript when I have a need to discover something I don't believe I can do any other way than by writing to learn what I know.” I recognize this feeling, though, for me, writing is a dialog. It is talking with myself as a being in relationship to all others. Writing becomes a process of mining and sifting and connecting with all of the conversations I’ve ever had—interpersonally or mediated by books, cinema, theater... — related to the idea in which I am currently interested, including prior conversations with myself generically known as “thinking about it.” Of course, I also consult the myriad conversations called “how to write a personal essay” or “what is acceptable” or “what is publishable” and so on.

> I asked: What happens between "an idea" and "a finished story"? You said: “I start with where I am sitting and what I have been doing and then let the images I've been involved with show up in my writing. From there it seems like they just keep happening and I am not in charge, the words are.”

And three hours later, you notice it’s midnight! This is what Social psychologist Susan K. Perry (1999) calls “writing in flow” and titles her book on the subject. I am not in charge, the conversation is, “the words are.” We become consumed and subsumed by the conversation and, I think, become who we really are—a space for conversation.

SHEILA #2: I trust my way into my material when I feel the flow. When I am not feeling it I keep writing because I know it will happen that I will feel the flow. I immerse myself in the moment that I am pondering whatever it is that brought me to the page. If I stay there with images, comment will arrive. I have to learn the difference between the ego, protective self delivering a comment so I will not get into dangerous emotional territory (unearned insight) and true comment coming from my higher self (earned insight) that has been tracking the charge on images I use.

RODNEY #2: I notice you use the terms “images” and “feelings” often throughout this conversation and use them in similar circumstances. Are these related or even synonymous for you? or are they different things entirely?

SHEILA #2: Images and feelings—they are not synonymous for me—but as William Carlos Williams says in a poem: no intelligence but in things—I take that to mean images and specificity—images convey feeling—if I am using them correctly, I don’t have to name feelings; I have created them on the page.

6 RODNEY: What happens between "an idea" and "a finished story”? (Or, what is your writing and editing process?) For example, when you get an idea, do you write it down and do some sort of concept map or storyboard. Or do you just kind of wait for more ideas to evolve? Once you are convinced that you have the makings of a story, do you map out your story before you start? Or do you kind of "free write" until you have something to work with? Do you write from an outline? Or do you write from a basic concept, and then take care of organizing it later? Do you revise and edit as you write or do you pretty much write a draft, then return to revise and edit?

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SHEILA: I suppose I have approached writing in all of these ways at times. Most often, I think I start with where I am sitting and what I have been doing and then let the images I've been involved with show up in my writing. From there it seems like they just keep happening and I am not in charge, the words are. I know I can fuzz out and lose the trail of words and feelings and then the writing is "lesser" but I keep going because I think that is the only way to find the trail again, or to have it find me. I will show raw material to a writing group or editor because I can work with their response to make myself write more deeply, to get more onto the page, to call myself on the places where I just wrote away from the opportunity to dig deeper.

7 RODNEY: Is your writing and editing process pretty consistent from one story to the next or is it circumstantial?

SHEILA: I think it is consistent.

8 RODNEY: Do your stories turn out pretty much as you conceived them or do they tend to change and evolve as you write them? If they change, why do they change and how do you know the change is for the better?

SHEILA: I don't think I ever know how I think they should turn out.

RODNEY: Interesting. You say you don't think you ever know how your stories should turn out. Well, I always know how mine should turn out. They rarely turn out that way ... but I always start out knowing.

9 RODNEY: I wonder if you have any dialogical or feedback process that you can identify? Do you discuss your story with friends, family, colleagues at various stages of the writing? Do you consult the writing of authors you admire

for inspiration before and during development of a new story? Do you go to the movies or watch certain television shows when you are writing? Don't let any of these questions box you in; I am interested in any habits you may have that help you write.

SHEILA: Yes, I have delineated a process I use and teach called “The Three-Step Response Method.” Rather than go into it here, I'll provide a link to an article about it as I have written extensively about it and using it: http://writingitreal.com/cgi-bin/sec_index.pl?ID=279 process enables almost anyone to be of help to a writer, and it also ensures that the writer is in charge of using the response to fix the writing in his or her own way. It encourages a system in which the writer is interested in learning what happens inside a reader as the reader reads the writing- in-progress and does not have to become defensive to keep “editorial opinions” from overtaking the work. Moreover, it means that the responders don't have any power other than to be truthful in telling the writer what happens inside them as a result of what they are reading—this is can be harder than being the teacher with the red pencil—it requires let go of fixing something and just being honest and able to say what feelings come up! Learning to speak about writing the way I am advising helps the responders become better responders to their own work, too--instead of judging it, they learn to feel their way through revisions. I also make sure whoever is responding begins by letting the writer know memorable phrases and words--no one wants to hear anyone talk about their writing without first knowing that person really heard the writing! I believe as a writer that in the process of drafting we have to abandon the idea that there is bad writing and that we are creating it! I think we have to say instead that “bad writing” is only the opportunity for good writing, and where

the writing is not performing, we have to find the opportunity for good writing, what it is that we are avoiding or overlooking.

RODNEY #2: I am a Master Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) and some aspects of your "Three-Step Response Method" remind me of an explicit presupposition of NLP that the meaning of your communication is the response you get. By finding out “what happens inside a reader as the reader reads the writing” or I might say the meaning that is generated within the dialog on the boundary of the writer and a designated reader, helps the writer understand the (many) possible responses to anything s/he writes. This is bound to improve the responder’s ability to become self-reflexive practitioners in responding to their own work. I would resist the notion, however, that with painstaking and conscientious revision the writer can fine tune writing to produce in the reader the one desired meaning. Because the reader brings to the writing a lifetime of experiences mediated by his/her local culture and linguistic nuance, meaning is always negotiated.

SHEILA #2: I don't mean that by hearing the inner response of readers to work-in-progress writers are beholden to fine tune for the readers. They fine tune for themselves once they have learned from readers more about what ideas and feelings the writing is generating. The writer is the authority (root word author) and knows what is needed for the writing to succeed—the reader has with responses let the writer know where the writing in whatever stage it is in is and  isn't succeeding and sometimes for what reasons. But only the writer can go back and work the words and find out how to stay in flow with them until they create a fully manifested experience for readers as well

as for the writer. The writer must take the info responders have provided and somehow cook with it. In this way the writer both knows and doesn't know the outcome. That is what makes the chemistry or alchemy of writing an interesting experience.

RODNEY #2: When you say you the process of drafting requires us to abandon the idea that there is bad writing, I am reminded of the first time I read Anne Lamott's advice on being willing to write really shitty first drafts. Although it seems too simplistic and offhanded to be worthwhile, cultivating the willingness to write really shitty first drafts has been tremendously helpful to me. I mean, I wrote them before that—lots of them—but I agonized over them and punished myself for them. I shredded them in fits of self-flagellation.

Marc Raibert (1985/1995) of Boston Dynamics Inc., says, "Good writing is bad writing that was rewritten. Almost all good writing starts out bad." It is that willingness to overlook "bad writing" or, as you put it, the willingness to "recognize underperforming writing as an opportunity for good writing" that keeps us working through the really stinky stuff. My writing has offered, at times, unbounded opportunity!

RODNEY: Do you discuss your story with friends, family, colleagues at various stages of the writing?

SHEILA: Yes, I do this with whomever is available—my husband who is a great reader, my writing group when it meets, and a poetry colleague who I email with.

RODNEY: Do you consult the writing of authors you admire for inspiration before and during development of a new story?

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SHEILA: I think it is very important to read others continually to keep the sound of effective writing in your ears and to find a way to clear space for writing and for listening for deep perception.

RODNEY: Do you have any little routines or regimens that help you get going—especially when you're stuck?

SHEILA: I read poetry and essays. I also do something physical like exercise or walk or garden or drive.

RODNEY #2: I also "do something physical" like running or walking to support my writing. I often walk to invite the "internal dialog" and often run to become so absorbed in the immediacy of one-foot-in-front-of-the-other that it will leave me be.

Although you use humanist terminology that locates writing inside the writer's head, I sense that we agree in many respects on the social nature of writing, Sheila. You invite "whomever is available—your husband, writing group, a poetry colleague ..." to be part of your writer dialog. Likewise, you consult others by reading "poetry and essays"..."to keep the sound of effective writing in your ears and to find a way to clear space for writing and for listening for deep perception."



RODNEY: Do you have any internal dialog or feedback process that you can identify? If so, what kinds of inner conversations do you have about your writing? Is it very similar to the ones you have when you cook dinner or make up a shopping list or is it somehow different?

SHEILA: I think I have internalized the three-step response method and do a kind of deep listening to my work as a result. But I have learned not to stop if I think I am not

writing well—it seems better to keep writing and then to return to what I have down after a break. Stopping seems like giving in to the critic who still lurks around saying, "Oh, you're not good enough to write well, to get things down as well as the writers you admire." I think the response method has helped me really here where the writing is honest and true and doing its work and where it is just writing, just something but not the real thing yet.

RODNEY #2: How does one recognize “the real thing” in writing versus, what? Counterfeit? “Copping out”? “Writing away from the opportunity to dig deeper”?

SHEILA #2: I show raw material to a writing group or editor because I can work with their response to make myself write more deeply, to get more onto the page, to call myself on the places where I just wrote away from the opportunity to dig deeper. How does one recognize the real thing? I think it has to do with a deep level of satisfaction—sometimes we arrive at that early in the process, but our writing group isn't as satisfied. Okay, that means the piece is worth working on but hasn't managed yet to full manifest for readers other than ourselves—and therefore, really, not even for ourselves—writing is some kind of two way mirror—when the reader gets it, the writer gets more of it.

11 RODNEY: Does the writing of personal narratives change or influence you in anyway? Do you discover or learn new things in the process of writing a story? Do you "see" or perceive things differently during or after writing a story? Please describe anything of this nature.

SHEILA: I am calmer after writing. I have grown as an individual as a consequence of my writing. I know a lot more and have been able to claim my life, the one I want to live or the one that wants to live through me rather than the one that others

want me to live. I have more energy for the rest of life when I am writing, although immediately after finishing something I can be drained.

RODNEY #2: Tell me more about “claiming my life” and how writing facilitates this.

SHEILA #2: Claiming my life to me means that I am writing from my own experience and reflecting on it, using it to inform myself and others. I am accepting all it has taught me and teaching others. I am feeling more real as a consequence of my communication on the page. I say the unsayable in poetry, in prose. I don't necessarily change on the outside—I still get grumpy at people close to me when they annoy me, I still have laundry to do, I still eat junk food though I read Michael Pollen. I'm me, but the deepest me has found a home (the page) and spoken. I have claimed my life.



RODNEY: I have a final request: That you say something about your experience of participating in this conversation about writing. Was the process useful to you in any way or how might have been more useful? Questions you think pertinent to understanding how writers write. Anything at all that may have occurred to you while engaged in the process or that occurs to you now.

SHEILA: I have enjoyed reading your questions and impressions about the way writing works. I like having more quotes that you have provided that support what I have tried articulating from my experience.

I look forward to seeing the dissertation and hope there may be an article or two you can write from it for Writing It Real and that we talk in the future about book publishing.

Enjoy the process as much as you can while you write. I am excited to read the end result!

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Susan Bono

1 RODNEY: Why do you write? What is your motive in writing? Is it to influence others? Is it to a share something about yourself with others? If so, say more about why you desire to share life stories with others?

SUSAN: Writing is a natural alternative communication mode for me. I can “talk” to one person or many during the course of any day, but written communication allows me to shape my thoughts more consciously to “speak” more wisely.

RODNEY #2: I think I understand and share this relationship to writing with you, Susan. For me, oral communication is too chaotic and messy for “meaning management” and often I later regret that I didn’t think to say something, or that I got sidetracked halfway through and didn’t finish the idea, or the way it came out wasn’t exactly what I intended to say.

I wonder if you are saying that writing gives you the chance, that talking does not, to go back and notice that something was left unsaid or said imprecisely or too vaguely.

That is exactly why I prefer writing. Oh, I enjoy chatting and telling funny stories and all that but when I want to share something that I value as important and worth sharing with extended others, I fear the immediacy and the irreversibility of verbal language will betray me. Of course, I have a similar fear that the permanence and the ultimately non-retractable nature of printed language will betray me. In the final analysis, meaning is in the eye or the ear of the beholder and I can't really control that end of the dialog. The consolation (perhaps the illusion) of writing is that I get a second and third

and fourth chance to tell myself that I have done all I can do from my end of the conversation.

Does that resonate at all with what you said? To make sure we are talking about the same thing, I please elaborate on this experience – and, clarify if you referring to "written communication" with another person or with yourself, or both? And I wonder: How is talking/thinking with another person out loud different from talking with them or yourself silently? Or are you referring only to the writing of personal narrative and essay?

SUSAN #2: You seem to understand precisely what I intended, Rodney, although I have to laugh at my use of "precisely," because I'm forever uncertain about what it is I know and what it is I'm getting at. This causes me to edit and revise almost ANY piece of writing constantly. In writing this paragraph, I've stopped, re-started, reframed several times already! This "hemming and hawing" is a source of deep and abiding consternation for me, although it is the only method that seems to get me anywhere in written communication, letters, emails, essays, journals, even to-do lists!

With a couple of exceptions.

Even though I tend to work with a pretty detailed lesson plan when I give a lecture or workshop, I really enjoy the spontaneity of in-person teaching. One thing missing from written communication is gesture (my hands are always moving when I talk—you'd think I was Italian—don't let the married name fool you—my forefathers and mothers came from England and Germany). There's also audience reaction (I'm always going for a laugh), and interaction (I try to allow for questions and comments as they arise). I approach real-time, in-person performance with the hope that if my words

fail, my sincerity and charm will see me through. I remember when you were working on the staff of “Writer Advice” and suggested I should write up some of my lectures as possible articles. I was flattered and encouraged, but I’ve discovered that while I have little trouble speaking in order to I teach, I can’t seem to translate my spoken presentations into written articles. I think the slight shift in occasion and audience is enough to do me in. So, while I am compulsive about revising my written communications, I enjoy the ephemeral aspects of oral communication. I liked what you said about the non-retractable nature of written discourse. I love shaping my side of the conversation, but there are times I don't want my thoughts to come back to haunt me in black and white!

I must say, too, that I much prefer being face to face with an audience than speaking into a mic in a studio. I can READ into a mic, but I was terrified the few times I've been interviewed on the radio. It was the worst of both worlds—no chance to revise or to hope my winning manner would get me through.

Another exception I can point to in terms of spontaneous written communication is the handwritten postcard or letter. I used to prefer most bluebook exams to take-homes, though I haven’t had to take a major test for a quarter of a century. I enjoy the challenge of a one-shot deal, and while I may make use of a scratch out in a postcard or letter, I love being forced to exercise restraint in this context. I appreciate the boundaries imposed by the postcard—the limited space inspires focus. I sometimes wonder what my writing would be like in a world with no electronic text storage and limited supplies of paper. I think my tendency to revise has been aggravated by the seemingly unlimited ability to do

so. Before I had to re-write or re-type an entire ms. to make a change. That burden helped me bring my revisions to an end.

The other place where I tend to write without much stuttering is in the group free-write setting. I may start with a paragraph or so of waffling, but generally, if there's an assignment given and a timer going and the sound of other pens moving across paper, I will keep going, too. This is not to say I don't revise after I've gone home, but I am freer to keep my inner critic turned off and can even share what I've written in the "what-do-you-expect-in-10-minutes?" spirit of the free-write. The older I get and the longer I write, the more I value those communal writing experiences as a way to keep some spontaneity and freshness in my writing.

SUSAN #2: I don't seek to impress others very often, but I want to connect with them. It is perhaps a desire rooted in insecurity, but my goal is to seek like-minded souls and be acknowledged by them. This acceptance helps me calibrate my own humanness. I am so moved by the stories of others that I am inspired to share my own.

RODNEY #2: I am intrigued, Susan, by your saying that your purpose in writing is to "seek like-minded souls and be acknowledged by them," that this acceptance helps "me calibrate my own humanness." When you say "writing to calibrate my own humanness" I understand you to mean that — because you have found the reading of others' stories a positive contribution to the quality of your life — you write, at least in part, to find out if your life stories have something to contribute to others. Is that really what you mean? Tell me more about seeking "acknowledgement" and "helps me calibrate my own humanness."

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SUSAN #2: I confess to liking the positive attention I get from sharing my work with others. I'm also more dependent than I'd like on outside validation. But TL brings me in contact with so many fine writers who inspire me with the risks they take emotionally and in terms of craft. I have been fortunate to have had editorial relationships in which I can practically feel my writers grow as they dig deeper into their material as a result of my suggestions. These experiences have taught me that when I write about my own life with the intent of sharing it with others, I have to be willing to confront my own bullshit in order to give my readers even a fraction of what the writers I admire give me. I have to strive for compassion, which is something I remember talking about with you in terms of "Baking Powder Biscuits." You wrote about finding compassion in order to tell that story, didn't you? And you referred to the author of "The Passionate, Accurate Story," Carol Bly. For me, an essay requires a reconciliation or a coming-to-terms with the subject under examination. That attempt to understand makes me a better person, I think. I have to try to get beyond the temptation to be petty—I don't claim I manage it, but that's the intention.

I agree with what you say about the impossibility of sharing the same reality, even with "like-minded souls." I guess I've never thought of them as "ALIKE-minded," but folks who share similar values and perspectives. If I were to speak of a woman's right to birth control and abortion, for example, I would not want to be judged morally corrupt by a certain kind of reader, nor would I want another to think I took the act of terminating a pregnancy lightly. My desire would be to touch readers across the spectrum, but know that I am really aiming to be understood by others like myself, who believe in a woman's

right to choose, but who believe this particular freedom has a big emotional price tag. It sounds like I only want to preach to the choir, but I believe my writing has the greatest impact on those who are predisposed to consider my message. I don't relish the idea of winning my case with a hostile audience.

2 RODNEY: Do your stories have some "truth" to share? If so, do you think this truth is "universal" (that is, that it is something true about all people or all times) or do you think this truth is more "local" (that it is something you learned that might be true of some people or sometimes).

SUSAN: I don't presume to believe that my truth would feel "true" to everyone certainly it won't be interesting to everyone! But if I can share the insights I've gained from a particular experience in a way that engages a reader's sympathies and curiosity and allows them to walk a while in my shoes, I just might awaken echoes of similar feelings in them. My personal truth becomes universal when others see my story as a mirror into themselves. It becomes a way for the reader to acknowledge some aspect of their own natures.

RODNEY #2: For me, meaning and value are not inherent in writing as words on a page. Meaning and value are inherent in the relationship negotiated between the writer and the reader; therefore, as long as the quality of the writing doesn't actually get in the way, meaning and value is always the natural outcome of storytelling. What the reader "gets" from the words on a page will not be exactly what the writer "got" when s/he wrote them and read them back. I have a melancholic sense that the writerly ideal of writing so well that writer and reader merge into a sort of orgastic mutual understanding

is out of the question because meaning is not an immutable and integral to words. The meaning of a word, even when I derive it directly from a dictionary definition, depends on its relationship to other words and to your relationship to those words through a lifetime of experiences. The prospect that I can and will read words what you have written and entertain the exact same experience of moods, sensations and meanings as you had when you wrote them is, I am afraid, negligible. I confess to being nostalgic for the days when I believed otherwise.

3 RODNEY: How did your interests in personal writing evolve? Have you written personal stories for as long as you can remember or was there a specific time when the desire to write personal stories appeared? In short, what is the story behind your story writing?

SUSAN: I have always had trouble with digesting statistics and facts. Numbers and dates, abstract rules and concepts do not stick. I've always wanted to know about the world, but hours with a history book or newspaper have never gotten me very far. Starting at about age 10, I tried to read the newspaper regularly, but soon found that I only enjoyed Ann Landers, Erma Bombeck and the occasional human interest story. I needed to see the person behind the news, to have my truths delivered from another sincere but flawed perspective.

Until I was in my twenties, I wasn't aware that I had permission to tell my own story in any other form but poetry, and the occasional informal essay assignment, which always felt confined to the context of school. I found the essays of Joan Didion when I

was in college, but we didn't study essay in the Creative Writing program at San Francisco State in the early 1970s.

It wasn't until I began teaching high school and asking my students to write their own stories that I began to start writing my own. I could be "poetic" in my phrasing, but not be confined to poetry. I could create scene and explore drama without resorting to complete fiction. But I didn't think to start writing essay until after my children were born. Perhaps this had to do with being around other mothers whose need to share insights is strong during those years of young motherhood.

RODNEY #2: I am also drawn to what you said about not really being interested in the personal narrative until you began teaching high school and asking your students to write their own. Then you started to write your own. I would like to hear more about that. What about asking your students to write their stories prompted you to write your own? Was it simply a matter of becoming competent in something you were asking of your students or was something else at work?

SUSAN #2: I should have said I was always interested in personal narrative, but I never encountered any respect for the genre in my creative writing classes in the 1970s. Personal narratives were always the mistreated stepchildren of the expository essay. I always enjoyed writing the "What I Did on My Summer Vacation" essays my entire school career, but my teachers considered them "baby steps" toward "real" writing. The lessons given in the Creative Writing units in high school and later in college classes focused on poetry and short story, and, more rarely, play and screen writing. I wrote analytical essays for literature classes. These could be artfully written, but not in first

person. I started teaching high school English just about the time everyone was getting excited by journaling and freewriting and peer editing—Peter Elbow and his kind. I don't think we'd be inundated with bloggers now if those ideas had not become standard curriculum at all levels by the mid-80s. My kids were dictating stories to their teachers in pre-school in the late 80s. These days children grow up being expected to tell their stories.

And what a great expectation! Not only was I relieved to be teaching a kind of writing even reluctant students enjoyed creating, I was moved by the stories I started reading. And part of my training with the California Writing Project in the late 70s and early 80s had me writing along with my students. By writing and sharing my own stories, I felt like I found my genre. But I still didn't really recognize it as something I could aspire to until after I left teaching to stay home with my kids (mid-80s). I knew I didn't have what it took to be a Joan Didion or a Susan Sontag. But I thought I had a chance in parenting magazines and Sunday supplements. My role model was probably Erma Bombeck. I know there must have been other writers and venues out there, but I never really encountered them.

4 RODNEY: How are you drawn to certain story ideas? In other words, where do you think your ideas come from? How do you know that it's a good idea or an idea with potential? Have you noticed that there are certain times or places or circumstances that precede a writing idea?

SUSAN: I know from reading hundreds of personal narratives that any idea can become a story, but my own ideas for stories tend to come with depressing infrequency. I

admire those who tackle issues of great loss, pain, or taboo. But I am still driven by the yearning to be accepted, so I avoid controversial topics, for the most part. I am often inspired to write about things that happen in solitude, for then it's safe to say it's my story and no one else's. Solitude seems to be an essential element in the experiences I write about, as well as a required condition for writing.

RODNEY #2: As someone who has written and edited (small) magazines, I have seen what others might consider an astonishing number of ideas turned into stories. I'm sure you have too. Even so, can your elaborate on your statement that "any idea can become a story"?

SUSAN #2: I've heard an astonishing number of people say, "I should write memoir. Lots of things have happened to me." As if having experiences is the only requirement of good narrative. While I think it's true that a good (usually eventful) idea can make up for a lot of mediocre writing, it is a writer's ability to get to the heart of even the most ordinary moment that makes for truly satisfying reading. An example I often use is Virginia Woolf's "Death of a Moth." I mean, the plot is something like, "A writer looks up from her work and watches a moth expire on her windowsill." And yet, magic. Or Annie Dillard's "Living like Weasels," in which the narrator surprises a weasel in the woods and they look at each other. You gotta admit, those aren't your most promising story ideas, but a good writer can make an unforgettable story out of them.

RODNEY #3: Those are two of my favorite essays. I notice, on the one hand, you say, "I know from reading hundreds of personal narratives that any idea can become a story" then you go on to say, "my own ideas for stories tend to come with depressing

infrequency. I admire those who tackle issues of great loss, pain, or taboo. But I am still driven by the yearning to be accepted, so I avoid controversial topics, for the most part."

I can't resist the idea that you have me in mind, at least as one example, when your mention stories of great loss, pain or taboo. A large portion of the personal narratives I've shared with you fits that description and you have mentioned how courageous you find this kind of writing. I appreciate the nod of admiration.

Some find this kind of writing self-indulgent and wallowing. It can be. I think it depends on why you write it.

When I was working as a hospital orderly, one of the lowliest jobs available in our society, wiping butts and sopping up vomit for a living, an African-American child told me that I could not possibly understand anything about his life because, being white, I lived "the Hollywood life" of riches and plenty. I began telling these stories to say, hey, I know by lived experience that there are little white boys who grow up dirt poor, go hungry, get beaten and abused, get told they are a waste of ejaculate, and you know what? It was just as painful and debilitating for me as it was for anyone else. I don't write any of it to detract from any other's story or to steal anybody's steam. I just felt the cultural storytellers were leaving something out. Little did I realize when I set out to write these bitter tales that the writing process would transform the events and the circumstances and the me I was writing about; so much, in fact, that I felt the need to re-write the story. It happened again. And again. Each telling seemed just as "real" as the others even while being dramatically different. As I read the "original" version now, it

still sounds "true"; yet, I get the eerie sensation that it was written by and about someone else.

The times are changing for the better in that regard. Tobias Wolf's *This Boy's Life*, Augusten Burroughs Running with Scissors, and Bruce Perry's *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog* jump to mind. Perry's work reminds me that, while victimization and debilitation are important, maybe we also need to work on more stories of transformation and generation.

It sounds as though you are saying that ideas for stories tend to come with "depressing infrequency" because you avoid controversial topics and you avoid controversial topics because you are "still driven by the yearning to be accepted." Does this mean you have a lot of ideas but they are left fallow because you fear that writing about them will render you a pariah in your family or community? Or, related to that, does it mean you believe that few ideas "come to you" because you are waiting for a "safe" topic?

SUSAN #2: Hearing your side of the conversation about being marginalized by another outcast added a new dimension to my response. This "depressing infrequency" has two principle causes, I think. I come from a family that expects me to "make nice." The women, in particular, must strive to be the gracious peacemakers, the civilizing force, the healers. In practice, this often translates to "put up and shut up." The entire family bills itself as honest and forthright, but when my brother was in jail one Thanksgiving several years ago, my parents wanted me to tell any relative who might wonder why he wasn't at the party that he was up at Lake Tahoe with his girlfriend. This

sort of two-faced approach to life has me simultaneously desperate and ashamed to tell the truth. The tender little domestic epiphanies I end up writing about meet my family's approval and don't create conflict in me. I tend to avoid pain. If I can't shut myself down with fear of family censure, I can always let my fears of inadequacy as a writer do the job.

Your experience also reminds me that one must have a need or purpose in telling a story, and frankly, it helps if your perspective is unusual (like yours). I mean really, how many middle-aged white moms are writing their stories? Who CARES? The overworked content requires exceptional writing to make it worth anyone's while. It's kind of like "Death of a Moth." The art is entirely in the telling. This is not to say you can get away with writing your story badly. Tobias Wolf is a wonderful writer. But my sense is that Augusten Burroughs got away with a lot of sloppiness because of the sensational nature of his narrative.

RODNEY #2: The fear of "being derivative" is interesting to me because that's kind of what I wanted my dissertation to be about. I wanted to talk about this sense of solitude and being alone in a room as perhaps mistaken. Of course, I can speak of myself as an organism being alone in the room without another human organism physically present. But, it seems to me that, as a social being, as a writer, I am never alone in my room. To "write alone in your room" is, I think, to live fictively as western civilization's heroic autonomous individual from within whom ideas spring forth ex nihilo by virtue of sometimes dark, sometimes beneficent subterranean processes. This image of writing, of life for that matter, trivializes the colossal impact of cultural heritage, social

surroundings, language and relationships both immediate and symbolic. My room is chock-a-block full with all the conversations I've ever had and all the voices I've ever heard, whether in person or symbolically through contact with books, magazines, newspapers, television, movies, manuscript submissions, the internet....

All of our stories are framed by the cultural idea of story. All of our stories are framed by what it is possible to think about in our culture and possible to speak in our language. Stories that do not derive from conventions of culture and language are not stories but babble and gibberish. In other words, I'm not sure it's ever safe to say "it's my story and no one else's."

RODNEY #2: You remark that, "Solitude seems to be an essential element in the experiences I write about, as well as a required condition for writing." I wonder if the simple absence of distraction explains why solitude is "a required condition for writing" or if you mean something more?

SUSAN #2: You're certainly right about the fact we don't write in a vacuum. We're products of our culture and its conventions! But I don't think it's merely to eliminate distractions that we need solitude to create. Unless you're writing for TV, I can't think of many other times when writing is done collaboratively. While it's true we must rely on conventions of culture and language to avoid creating gibberish, it is also true that all those conventions would simply be present as a stream of babble if it weren't for the individual's efforts to interpret it. Learning can take place in a group, but thinking is a solo activity. If I'm to write anything that makes sense, I have to stand in the stream of history and myth and personal experience and act like a radio tuning into a particular

frequency. My writing serves to amplify that signal. Even if what I create is derivative, it has to come from myself alone.

And while I have to be aware (but not too intimidated!) by what's come before me, and to build my own narratives on that foundation, we are always seeking UNIQUE forms of expression. Otherwise, we'd all have Mona Lisa posters in our living rooms and "Gone With the Wind" on our bookshelves. No, it would be something far older—Shakespeare would have brought an end to the rest of us. Or we wouldn't have books at all, because without the solitary individual dreaming and creating, nothing would be invented. Groups can refine a vision, but I think it always starts at a single source. We build on what has come before, but I wouldn't call it derivation. I'd call it innovation.

RODNEY #2: Tell me more about solitude. You say you are "often inspired to write about things that happen in solitude—for then it's safe to say it's my story and no one else's." (Emphasis on safe is mine.) What do you mean by this and why is it important to you?

SUSAN #2: Anyone who's ever told family stories has faced arguments about the level of agreement concerning the "facts." There's always going to be someone insisting "It didn't happen like that!" When I'm the only witness, it's not so easy for anyone to object. And then there's the question of whose story it really is. I defend anyone's right to tell their side of things, but if I write about my brother's substance abuse and how it affects me, I am then exposing the rest of my family to possible judgment. It may be my story, but it is their privacy I am violating. When I am the only character in my story, my family is less likely to accuse me of exposing them. Of course, if I decided to shoplift or

have an affair and to write about these nefarious activities, I guess I'd be dragging my loved ones into the mud in a different way. So my logic is pretty irrational on this one.

RODNEY #2: You go on to say:

> "If I have a chance to talk to someone about an experience that involves some epiphany on my part, especially if I can get a few laughs out of it, rarely will I try to write about it. It's as if I've satisfied my need to communicate, even if it's a one shot deal and is gone forever. I will write about something if thoughts about it keep occurring to me—a series of related insights that build a momentum compelling enough to avoid an "easy" conversation about it."

I wonder if this might be related to your concern that "it's safe to say it's my story and no one else's"?

SUSAN #2: No, it has more to do with the feeling of exhausting a topic. If I've talked about my fabulous insights, included wild gestures and attempts at charm, then I've gotten whatever I need to get out of the material. I'm basically lazy, and talking is so much easier than writing!

(Plus, speaking my story makes it harder to hold me to it—this does touch on a safety issue—getting it in black and white can be incriminating!)

RODNEY #2: In many of your writings that I've read, I find a feckless woman who, to her own (mock) amazement, is in great demand and stumbles her way through with the help of those who love and appreciate her depth of heart and character. It is a charming persona, largely because your protestations of ineptness (wittingly) ring hollow

and not quite believable. While I find your feigned haplessness charming in its innocuous cunning, I find you always social even when alone.

I hope you've enjoyed reading this as much as I have writing it. I am fond of days not long gone, before e-mails and text messaging took over, when people wrote letters. I used to run out to the mailbox at exactly 10 a.m. every morning, looking forward to a letter from my mother, my grandmother, my sister Mary. If there was nothing in the box, I waited and tapped my toes petulantly until the mail carrier arrived and I walked back slightly hunched against the disappointment if nothing personal arrived. But how my heart lifted if a handwritten letter came! I knew that by the second line or third, their voice would become so clear that I could imagine them sitting in the room with me.

SUSAN #2: Looking at your impression of my persona ~~below~~[†], I have to laugh because my feelings of ineptness may seem a pose to you but it is at the core of my personality. I really am amazed that I manage to do anything—or at least that has been my experience in the past. I suppose it must be hard for many to understand the first-born Good Girl mentality and assume it is a ruse. Frankly, it's starting to bore me as well, which may be another problem I have with my writing—when your sense of self shifts, your writing persona must also.

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[†] I struck out "below" because I switched the order of the entries so that my comments come first, then her response.

So I'm going to enjoy mulling the idea that my haplessness could simply be an old habit of thinking and that some readers might find "its innocuous cunning." Wow! Makes me feel the pissed-off bitch I've been repressing all these years! This could be liberating!

5 RODNEY: How does an idea become a manuscript? Why are you drawn to writing them down? Why can't you just have an idea and leave it at that?

SUSAN: I have many ideas I “leave at that.” In fact, I am famous in my own mind for talking great ideas to death. If I have a chance to talk to someone about an experience that involves some epiphany on my part, especially if I can get a few laughs out of it, rarely will I try to write about it. It’s as if I’ve satisfied my need to communicate, even if it’s a one shot deal and is gone forever. I will write about something if thoughts about it keep occurring to me a series of related insights that build a momentum compelling enough to avoid an “easy” conversation about it.

6 RODNEY: What happens between "an idea" and "a finished story?" (Or, what is your writing and editing process?) For example, when you get an idea, do you write it down and do some sort of concept map or storyboard. Or do you just kind of wait for more ideas to evolve? Once you are convinced that you have the makings of a story, do you map out your story before you start? Or do you kind of "free write" until you have something to work with? Do you write from an outline? Or do you write from a basic concept, then take care of organizing it later? Do you revise and edit as you write or do you pretty much write a draft, then return to revise and edit?

SUSAN: I really admire writers who start with clear ideas of scenes and dramatic flow. I would love to be able to organize or outline ahead of time. I usually just have a

basic concept I want to get across and maybe a few paragraphs of freewriting that came as the idea first hit. If I'm lucky, I freewrite a page or two of a rough draft in a way that captures my initial inspiration and supports the message (or so I hope). Then I really start scrutinizing this fragmented artifact and begin making adjustments. This leads to many small changes that usually come from the top down, meaning I work the first paragraph until I really like it before moving to the next and on and on. I feel like I can't figure out my ending until I understand my beginning. Most of my writing time is spent trying to puzzle out what I'm really trying to say—and that is usually revealed in the first 3 paragraphs.

7 RODNEY: Is your writing and editing process pretty consistent from one story to the next or is it circumstantial?

SUSAN: Sometimes the writing comes feeling more or less as a gift, but that vague idea which leads to free writing and then to prodding and poking from the top down is my general method.

8 RODNEY: Do your stories turn out pretty much as you conceived them or do they tend to change and evolve as you write them? If they change, why do they change and how do you know the change is for the better?

SUSAN: In spite of what I've told you about the way it works for me, I usually begin with the conviction that I have the shape of the piece figured out—a belief that I already have the proper beginning, middle, and end, but naturally, this is a delusion. I don't think in scenes, so my job ends up being remembering and reconstructing forgotten

scenes which illustrate my realizations. Many times I have to keep writing and writing until these clarifying elements appear. They are often a total surprise. I never know for sure if the changes I make are for the better. But when I respond with excitement to a new development, that=s a sign to myself to follow that energy.

9 RODNEY: Do you have any dialogical or feedback process that you can identify? Do you discuss your story with friends, family, colleagues at various stages of the writing? Do you consult the writing of authors you admire for inspiration before and during development of a new story? Do you go to the movies or watch certain television shows when you are writing? Don't let any of these questions box you in; I am interested in any habits you may have that help you write.

SUSAN: I have to be very careful not to discuss my writing with anyone too soon. As I mentioned earlier, I can kill any desire to write simply by talking to others about my insights before I actually do any writing. I'll have a "Why bother?" reaction if I don't have anything more I think I need to discover about the subject. I will often get "lost" in the revision process if I show my drafts before I am more than finished. I won't know where I want to go with the feedback I receive. I usually don't read much while I am writing, as it takes me away from my own groping process too much. I am finding lately that reading poetry or meditating before a writing session can draw me into a state of deeper attentiveness, which allows me to work with greater passion. These poems are usually unrelated to my topic and in a different style than I'd ever use. I don't know why it works—maybe it allows me to "try on" ideas and approaches that are unfamiliar in order to solve problems in my story.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

To be honest, even though I recommend feedback from trusted others and give it often as part of my teaching and editing, I am happiest with the writing I've done entirely on my own. My monthly columns for Searchlights & Signal Flares and the Editor's Notes for the hard copy issues of Tiny Lights are good examples. I am such a fiddler that it feels good to simply write them and let them go. It's kind of like, "Ready or not, here I come!" If you don't like it, too bad. I know this approach may reinforce bad habits and/or keep me from greater understanding, but I spend so much energy trying to please others that it sometimes feels good to just put something out there and move on.

10 RODNEY: Do you have any internal dialog or feedback process that you can identify? If so, what kinds of inner conversations do you have about your writing? Is it very similar to the ones you have when you cook dinner or make up a shopping list or is it somehow different?

SUSAN: I talk to myself all the time, but those are mostly "reality checks" that keep me moving forward with a task. That's me being the taskmaster who cheerleads or bullies my resisting self into complying. But my inner conversations about writing aren't between a boss and a slave. The "doer" who is writing is probably the same one who makes dinner, but she is asking to be guided by that part of herself she is usually trying to boss around. The response time is unpredictable. I may not get answers to questions for hours, days, or even years. I often need to engage in mildly physical activities like sweeping or yard work that allow my controlling mind to quiet and for the answers to rise up from the unconscious without great fanfare.

11 RODNEY: Does the writing of personal narratives change or influence you in anyway? Do you discover or learn new things in the process of writing a story? Do you "see" or perceive things differently during or after writing a story? Please describe anything of this nature.

SUSAN: Because I am always discovering what I really meant to say in the process of writing it down, shaping my story for the page always ends up changing the way I feel about myself. For example, while I was answering the previous question, I finally understood why I can't force myself to write in the same way I can make myself clean the bathroom. I can talk my way through a chore, but I must ask my way through an essay. I got really excited by this insight, and if can I remember this distinction, I might be able to resist the urge to flog myself to the finish line of the next bit of writing I do.

In general, writing personal essay helps me feel stronger and a little more complete as a person. Once I have written about an event in my life, the way I remember that event is forever changed, the way a photograph can erase other memories and even come to stand in for the event itself.

12 RODNEY: Is there anything else you would like to add? Or suggestions you would like to make?

SUSAN: Two notions occurred to me. I think I could have talked about reading aloud in the feedback section, but it felt like those questions were more about others offering guidance. I wonder what would happen if you approached the subject of internal guidance systems more directly, perhaps with a question like, "How do you know when your writing is working?"

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

One way I know if my writing is working is to read it aloud to myself and it sounds right to my ear. I am fortunate to have a work environment that allows me to do this pretty freely, but I read my work out loud at almost every stage of the process. For me sound is inextricably bound to meaning—something has to make sense, but it also has to sound right—syllabic interplay, internal rhyme, flow and pause are all vital to my writing. My ear must be satisfied before I "know" it's right.

When I am editing my own and others' writing, I often look at the text to see the link between the visual symmetry of paragraphs or lines and rightness. Writers can avoid important details by omitting them or burying them among incidental details. Sometimes brevity is intentional and necessary, and that can be "seen" too. So there is a visual element to writing for me. I am very attached to the way text appears on a page.

I'm also interested in what interferes with the writing process. I've mentioned talking an idea to death or showing it too soon. Getting too much feedback can be confusing, too. Rejection is really hard for me. One of the things I've noticed about myself is that ease in writing is usually directly related to the relationship I have with the audience I'm writing for. If I'm writing to a friend or for a situation in which I know I will be accepted without much criticism, my writing flows quite freely. The more I suspect potential negative judgment on the part of the audience, whether it be disappointment or disapproval, the more I clam up. It's very important for me to cultivate a "beginner's mind" to give myself the freedom to make mistakes and to believe I am writing for myself first and foremost. Any time I get into impressing anyone else, I am doomed to fail.

I have long noticed that my most common subject is "writing about not writing." Ludicrous, yes, but it's really just an aspect of craft and process. "Searchlights & Signal Flares" is devoted to it. Obviously, this is an important topic to me, since it occupies so much of my writing time.

So, naturally, I think this project of yours is extremely worthwhile and downright fascinating. My subscription to Sheila Bender's site has expired, so I don't think I can read the interview she did with you, but I could tell she was stimulated by her interactions with you too. One of my favorite books is "Art and Fear" because it reminds me I am not alone with my artistic insecurities, even though I usually proceed as if I am. I am just getting ready to start Robert Olen Butler's "From Where you Dream." I'm forever searching for ways to describe and engage in the writing process. Answering your questions brings some of my own methods to light. So I am grateful for the conversation.

Thanks, Rodney, for including me. I enjoyed this process, even if I dragged my feet!

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Diane Leon-Ferdico

1 RODNEY: Why do you write? What is your motive in writing? Is it to influence others? Is it to a share something about yourself with others? If so, say more about why you desire to share life stories with others?

DIANE: My desire to write comes from my need to not only express what I feel, but the need to share it with others. I am a professional artist, adjunct art professor and writer. I see how important it is to express your feelings especially with my students. The creative spirit is so important. It opens you up. Writing has always been important to me. I have kept a journal since 1983. I started writing personal essays for about the past 6 years. I don't want to influence others except if I give people hope and enthusiasm for life. It is also important people don't feel what they have gone through in life is a solitary experience. We all experience sorrow, hope and things in life that we were not happy with or have lost someone we love.

RODNEY#2: I wonder how much of our feelings and the need to express them are "built-in" and "deep down" versus socially constructed and "out there" in the linguistic space between us. Perhaps they are a kind of prenticed performance in which certain facial expressions, characteristic body postures and gestures, and stylized linguistic forms are pressed into service based on culturally favored notions about emotional life.

DIANE #2: Re: feeling 'built-in" or "out-there" is complex. I think the basic feelings generated by our need for survival, food, clothing and shelter, then love, friendship are the built-in emotions. Those are the ones that go beyond language. It is in

our facial expressions, body postures, etc. How we express anger, happiness, cuddle a child in a gentle way. However the “out-there” feelings I find the most problematic because depending on each person we respond to them in a different way. Look at the fashion and cosmetic industry for example. They make the average woman who is sensitive to her looks very insecure because they create a false ideal. Some of us know better and others will make themselves ill. Society has an enormous affect upon us emotionally and it can make you look at life in another way other than how we were brought up. Society can make people dissatisfied with the hand they were dealt and force people to express themselves in ways they might not be happy with. On the positive side society can give us feelings of hope and through education learn to see and experience what we need and not what others think we need to be happy or fulfilled. The need to write or paint comes from the both of these areas. We have no choice when and where we were born, but at some point the outside world either gives us that light or it can destroy it and make someone worse off. It depends on how strong the person is. Personality also plays a role. It will dictate how you express those feelings built in and out there.

RODNEY#2: Don’t misunderstand. I am experienced in “having” painful emotions and antidepressant medications. So I don’t intend to minimize the impact of labile emotions.

Emotions seem real and natural and uncontrived. We can feel them in our bodies. That may be how the term “feelings” came about. We once thought emotions, especially the troublesome ones, to be supernatural. Later we thought disturbing emotions were the result of moral deficiency and weakness. Now we are convinced they are the result of

biochemical cascades; persons with problematic emotions are thought victims of flawed genes and faulty neurotransmitter uptake mechanisms. But I wonder.

Feelings usually are about something or in reaction to something. Perhaps, feelings are an expression of our ideas about the "something" in question in relation to our ideas about ourselves. Ancients Greeks thought it normal for older men to have sex with adolescent males. The young men were honored to be apprenticed thus. Today, young men undergo therapy and believe themselves permanently traumatized by sex acts once thought privileged. So I wonder.

DIANE #2: Yes, I agree with you that feelings are an expression of our ideas about the "something" in question in relation to our ideas about ourselves. It must be expressed even if it is a painful experience for us to understand ourselves better. It is how we see ourselves in the world and how that world can satisfy what we need.

RODNEY #2: I wonder why the nature of our supposed innate inner feelings as well as their cause seem to shift with the times. Perhaps emotions are not innate except in the most general way and, as John Shotter (1997) says, the contents of our "inner" lives are not so much "inside" us as individuals and not "things" but processes related to our living of our lives, processes that occur not inside but outside the individual organism.

This is not to trivialize difficult emotions or deny the experience of suffering related to them. I just wonder if we are looking in the right place.

DIANE #2: That is a good way to put it. Those basic general emotions for survival are one thing, but as John Shotter says our inner lives actually come from the outside world. It seems the outside world stimulates our emotions in either a good or bad

way. The good or bad is up to the person's beliefs, gender, how they were brought up. Look at all the rules and regulations religions put on us. If we read something someone writes it always comes from their perspective, how they see the world. I also think personality plays a role in how we live and respond to the world around us.

2 RODNEY: Do your stories have some "truth" to share? If so, do you think this truth is "universal" (that is, that is something true about all people or all times) or do you think this truth is more "local" (that it is something you learned that might be true of some people or sometimes).

DIANE: I feel emotions are universal truth. Otherwise how we view the world is constructed by our culture and mores. For example, gender plays a role in this. How we view women and how women experience their life can be different from a man if their society places specific roles and laws upon them. However, all humans experience the same sorrow, pain, suffering, guilt, at different degrees. Even if it is all learned, the emotions stem from something larger that it why we all can relate to myths and soap operas. We all understand what someone goes through no matter what race, gender, age or culture. The universality comes from the emotion more than society. The mores try to mask and control, put us into roles, but ultimately the truth is revealed by what we feel. We learn to play roles, but the truth lies in our emotions.

RODNEY #2: I wonder if emotions and feelings, whether or not grounded in our biological nature, may be in their expression and their objects relationally constructed out of socio-cultural "stuff" like language, stories and social interaction.

DIANE #2: Yes, our basic biological nature is the root, but you are correct our emotions and feelings are constructed out of socio-cultural "stuff" like language, stories

and social interaction. I think some people have a strong innate feeling about their identity for example. All these stories about transgender people. They all feel they are the opposite sex of how they were born. At a certain age they begin to identify with feminine or masculine roles, clothing, the way they act, etc. Society encourages their behavior. For example, society doesn't condone their need to change, but the people who want to live this way dress, makeup, and the way they act from everything around us. They look to products, mannerisms, etc. for women and want to be the same way even if they were born a man. In their case they happen to have been born the wrong sex, but I am sure their feeling to be the 'other' is very strong and to them they would express their feelings and we could understand it. Also a lot of cultures have very strong gender roles and if people don't stick to their norm, it makes life very difficult for them. Their feelings may not coincide with their society.

RODNEY #2: If so, what we express through our emotional stories isn't such internal and deeply personal stuff, though we may experience it as such. Perhaps, we are expressing ourselves and our lives based on more public culture-derived stories about "good" lives, "bad" lives, "sad" and "tragic" lives and so on.

DIANE #2: Yes, I think it goes back to the myths and basic stories that we all can identify with. Certain people live a 'good' life or 'sad' life and they all seem to fall prey to the same 'weaknesses' society maps out. Maybe the person with the 'sad' life would be happy if she/he could have what it takes (according to our culture) with a size 10 dress size, more money in the bank, that face-lift. Somehow when people tell their stories no

matter where they are from we identify because it all comes down to what category unconsciously we have put them or ourselves into.

I think the personality we are born with and really cannot change plays into this. Someone with an outgoing nature could easily live on the fringe of a 'bad' life e.g. drinking, women, as seen by an introverted person. Who looks at that person's lifestyle as being over the top because they cannot get themselves to socialize? Depending upon someone's personality how they determine their emotional stories comes from that source and then is fed based on how they fit into the culture derived stories of good, bad and tragic lives.

RODNEY #2: I am curious: Can I have a tragic life without the cultural wherewithal to express it? What if the only valid option available to me in my situation is to be stoically heroic? Would I be sad and despondent anyway? I don't know. But I'm doubtful.

DIANE #2: I agree, because if it doesn't exist in our culture then we would not know how to express that sorrow. It would not be in us. I don't think you would be a happy person. You would probably have to manifest that tragic life in other ways, e.g. rage, fighting. Another aspect of the stoic hero, but with an edge of darkness. It would have to come out in another way your culture identifies with feelings and emotions. I am sure a culture like that would have warriors. You would probably use the tragic life in that way.

Over the past few years look at how many people have publically revealed personal stories. Twenty years ago and longer it was unheard of for people to express themselves on TV, radio, stories. Now our culture understands these things and it is okay

for someone to share this experience. So, it is very important how we respond and feel according to the culture we are familiar with.

Look at the story about the native peoples in the New World when Columbus came over. I read the native people did not ‘see’ the ships in the water because there was never anything like that in their reality or world so they did not see them. Only the shaman was able to see them. I guess if something is not in your world it cannot be understood.

3 RODNEY: How did your interests in personal writing evolve? Have you written personal stories for as long as you can remember or was there a specific time when the desire to write personal stories appeared? In short, what is the story behind your story writing?

DIANE: I started writing about six years ago when my artist-husband, John lost his job of 22 years after 9/11 in New York City. Besides seeing the event in person and being a native of New York we were devastated. When John lost his job it was like he lost his identity even though he didn’t like his job, it was what he did to pay bills. It was something he thought he would have until he retired. Fortunately, I have done office work besides my painting for decades and quickly put together a resume and looked into how he could get his skills up-to-date. He ended up going to school for autoCAD to learn how to put all his years of drafting skills into this new world of computers. At this time my inner strength focused on my creative energy more than ever. That has been my driving force all my life. I decided to write about how creative people need to balance their life. In other words you really need to learn how to make a living and still create.

Too many stories abound as success defined by the size of a NYC loft, paintings selling for thousands while still getting your MFA; when in reality you have to define your own success and that comes from within. After I had that essay published I realized I wanted to continue to make personal essay writing just as important as my painting. In essence my story is primarily about showing through writing what we go through in life and how important it is to do what you want no matter what. Writing about these issues is a release.

RODNEY #2: Even though John didn't like his job, he lost his identity both as a performer of that job and as someone who guaranteed the bills. I can imagine that the loss of stability and predictability signaled by the 9/11 easily integrated with his sudden shift from provider to dependent, from control to chaos, from known to unknown to create a debilitating internal narrative of catastrophe and helplessness.

DIANE #2: Yes, the situation changed his feelings about everything. The free time he so wanted to paint, now became a form of torture and limbo. His mind was not free to create. He was too consumed with fear and insecurity. I had to be the strong one and not let him see how upset and fearful I was because he would have become worse off. I used my journal to write out my fears and anxiety.

RODNEY #2: I nod in agreement when you say, "Writing about these issues is a release." I have experienced this many times. University of Texas Professor of Psychology James W. Pennebaker and colleagues Spera & Buhrfeind, (1994) conducted a small scale study, in 1994, with high level engineers who unexpectedly lost their jobs after many years of service. He asked participants to write in a journal for about 20 minutes a day. One group was asked to comment on they spent their day. Another was

asked to write their deepest feelings about what happened. The third group was given no instructions other than to keep the diary. The re-employment results were so much better for the expressive writing group (results ranged from shortened time to a new job to improved immune function and lower blood pressure) that the study was terminated early so that all the participants could benefit from the findings.

Interestingly, I think, follow-up studies found that applying the same methods to positive experiences was actually counterproductive and degraded the experience.

My experience has been that in telling and re-telling and editing of stories about traumatic incidents, my perspective changes and my earlier drafts begin to look alien. The "release" for me seems not so much an emotional catharsis as a shift in my relationship to the subject such that my former emotional stance is no longer appropriate.

DIANE #2: Definitely, it changes and it is not the same as the original drafts. My perspective also changes but only in how I want to say it. For me it can be an emotional catharsis and I come to have more understanding of what I went through or what I was feeling. Even re-reading my old journals when I come to parts where I was worried and upset over a close relative's cancer. Reading it is emotional because I know now the person died and at the time of my writing I am so hopeful and praying to God that He could cure her. It still upsets me, but not the same way. I guess that can be a shift in my relationship to the subject, but it still makes me cry, so there is a form of release for me.



RODNEY: How are you drawn to certain story ideas? In other words, where do you think your ideas come from? How do you know that it's a good idea or an idea with potential? Have you noticed that there are certain times or places

or circumstances that precede a writing idea?

DIANE: All my ideas come from basically three areas of my life: my growing up in New York City after my parents divorced; my art; and my passion for Spain. When I read about other situations that are similar to my own often spurs my own response with an essay idea. I never write about something I don't feel passion for. That is why I don't free-lance. It is the same with my painting. I do abstract work. I cannot do anything creative just for the sake of making money. I have a full time administrative job for that. I always write from my gut. If it is a strong feeling I go with that. After that I hope I can find a place to submit so I can share the experience with readers.

RODNEY #2: I share your experience of being "goaded" into writing an essay by reading something (sometimes only tangentially) related to a topic of interest to me. The most obvious example was my 1995 essay, "To Edward Hoagland: The Meaning of Frogs" written in direct response to my reading of Hoagland's essay, "The Courage of Turtles." In it, I playfully banter with Hoagland about the superiority frogs and their more sympathetic character when compared to turtles as a lead-in to discussing the sad decline of frogs as a harbinger of environmental degradation. I'd been mulling over the subject since reading a related National Geographic Kids article in the Sunday paper. Hoagland's essay prompted me to begin by providing a venue for discussing the National Geographic article. The frog as a symbol of kinship to all life was something that evolved as I wrote and edited the piece. The thing is this: Without the *National Geographic* article and *The Courage of Turtles* (Hoagland's essay) this essay could not have happened.

DIANE #2: I think it is wonderful when we read something that spurs a topic and feeling. I can understand how this essay in response to *The Courage of Turtles* inspired

you to write about frogs. As you mentioned, the frog was a symbol of kinship to all life and how that idea evolved as you wrote. You saw a connection and made your comparison. One thing spurred the other. If you hadn't read the turtle essay you would have never done your frog story.



RODNEY: How does an idea become a manuscript? Why are you drawn to writing them down? Why can't you just have an idea and leave it at that?

DIANE: I need to see what I feel come to life. By that I mean I must give a form to my feelings. When I walk into my studio to work I have no concrete idea of what I will paint. It is purely unconscious. As I work from the chaos comes something that color and shape define what I feel. It is completely done by feeling. If and when it feels right it is finished. In my writing I begin by a strong feeling about a past event or something that needs to be resolved inside of me. I just begin to write and then it becomes the essay.

RODNEY #2: As an NLP Practitioner, I am intrigued by your choice of words. "I need to see what I feel come to life. By that I mean I must give a form to my feelings." You need to make feelings visual. It seems apropos that you prefer painting and writing.

I am curious: Do you also enjoy verbal storytelling? Would you enjoy telling a story to small group of people or even a crowd? Would you consider dictating a story into a voice recognition program and having the computer type it out for you? (I have a software program, *Dragon Naturally Speaking*, which can do this.)

DIANE #2: I have told stores informally to children and read essays in front of an audience. I felt it was stressful to read more than tell a story. However, I notice that when

I am telling a story the age, gender tend to alter what and how I tell it. I feel aware that something might upset a younger audience, whereas if I tell the same story to adults I would keep in things not appropriate for children. Telling a story in person tends to censor me because I am too aware of the audience. When I write on the page frees me. If I am writing for teenagers which I often submit essays I am very aware of what I say for that audience. For example, if I was telling a story and I knew the adult audience was of a certain religion and I knew the religion I would be not use certain language in telling my story. If I was telling my story to a group of music industry friends it would be completely different. The same outcome, but told with more slang and language they are accustomed to.

6 RODNEY: What happens between “an idea” and “a finished story.” (Or, what is your writing and editing process?) For example, when you get an idea, do you write it down and do some sort of concept map or storyboard. Or do you just kind of wait for more ideas to evolve? Once you are convinced that you have the makings of a story, do you map out your story before you start? Or do you kind of "free write" until you have something to work with? Do you write from an outline? Or do you write from a basic concept, and then take care of organizing it later? Do you revise and edit as you write or do you pretty much write a draft, then return to revise and edit?

DIANE: I start with a topic about something that moves me. For example, an essay about why Spain is so important to me. I break it down by describing my background growing up in New York City in a cold water flat with the Third Avenue El outside of my window. Why light and space were so non-existent and how as a young, single woman I bought an apartment in Spain with money I earned with the sale of my

paintings. I edit and edit because at first I just write down everything I feel. Only with revising do I get to make sense of it all and give it structure. I also become aware of how this story needs to make sense to the reader and I question message will they come away with. As I revise and edit it all slowly comes together.

RODNEY #2: My question is this: Do we revise to draw sense from it or to bring sense to it? And, in either case, does the process of sense-making change only the manuscript or does it change us as well?

DIANE #2: It works like this for me. First it is to draw sense from it. I look for things that struck an emotional cord. An event that happened. I question why I felt the way I did and often why I still feel the same way. Then I write down without too much thinking what I felt. I describe the events in terms of the year, the day, the weather, what was around me, who was around me, etc. In a way it is reliving the event. If it was a painful event I cry like it was happening again, especially over the loss of loved one, who all suffered terribly. Then as I edit and revise I bring sense to it. Somehow from what I experienced I need to see for myself how through my writing of this event now makes sense on the page and makes sense so I can come to terms with it. It definitely changes me in the form of acceptance. But I always feel emotional.



RODNEY: Is your writing and editing process pretty consistent from one story to the next or is it circumstantial?

DIANE: It is usually the same. I am consistent in my process because it is who I am. In my art and writing I am true to myself. I only take on a story when the feeling strikes on a topic close to my heart.

RODNEY: Granting that you “only take on a story when the feeling strikes on a topic close to my heart” – are you saying there is only one way you could possibly go about writing it up and editing it?

DIANE #2: Even if a publisher gives me a few topics to pick from. I write in the same way from my heart regardless of the topic that is based on a personal story. It I am writing an article then I approach it in a different way through research, etc. Of course as I said before the audience determines the way in which I say it. When I write in my journal that is 100% for myself.

RODNEY #2: I wonder if writers develop a narrative, a little story about writers and writing that becomes kind of "installed" as an internal monologue that says "this is just the way I do it"? And that becomes calcified into "this is the way I must do it"? If so, could a more reflexive writing practice expand our "writer" narrative and, therefore, expand the possibilities for our writing?

DIANE #2: I think we all have our voice and the way we bring it to life. I love reading about the creative process and how other people write and live. I am a night person. I don’t like doing anything creative early in the morning. I read about so many writers who like to get up early, have coffee and start to write. My ideal weekend is work in the studio, paint until 2am, write in the journal, go back into the studio paint and revise again until 3:30am. Sleep, get up at 12noon, write in my journal or start to put down ideas for an essay. The day is all chore related. Only after dinner and dishes do I get back into the creative process. Even when I am home for a break it is the same thing.

RODNEY #2: I guess my question is: Could it be that this “lone wolf” image we have about creative people is actually counterproductive? Might we benefit from

considering and experimenting with the possibility that creative work is if not derivative at least collaborative?

DIANE #2: I have taken online writing classes and have enjoyed the feedback and thought that was very helpful. However, it didn't change how I started my writing. I prefer online classes to going to a classroom. I had enough of classrooms and since I teach I am still in one, but in a different role.

RODNEY #2: Suppose, for example, instead of holing up in a room trying to "create" something out of nothing, we automatically sought out books and movies and seminars or an online discussion boards on the topic of interest? Might this new input generate an expanded internal dialog with what we already know and help us discover (to paraphrase what you said here about painting) that "one essay is really five"?

DIANE #2: I do get inspiration from writing magazines, books and films. I respond to the writing of Sheila Bender's essays each week. I enjoy that very much. But, my writing like my painting process is still "one essay or painting is really five." I find everyone has their own way to construct their writing. It depends on what works for them. Some people write in cafes, on the computer, others sit alone in a room. I write at my desk at work most of the time. I start ideas at home, but always do most of the work at the computer at my office desk. I learn from other people and it makes me aware of different formats people use, I only take what fits into my schedule and works for me. When something is not comfortable for me, I don't' want to waste my time. I am open to ideas, but if someone said, "Why not take a class on a Saturday morning?" which by the way I did for years in getting my degrees, at this point I would decline.

8 RODNEY: Do your stories turn out pretty much as you conceived them or do they tend to change and evolve as you write them? If they change, why do they change and how do you know the change is for the better?

DIANE: My stories seem to evolve. They change because once I see and read what I put on the page generates more ideas and feelings. As I edit, something I originally thought was so important is seen as not being as relevant as I thought. The editing process is very important to me. As the story changes it becomes better to me because I seem to write what is really important and what I changed didn't support that. In the beginning I don't see that. The story must evolve.

RODNEY #2: I am intrigued by what you say about how rereading/editing what you've "put on the page generates more ideas and feelings. As I edit, something I originally thought was so important is seen as not being as relevant as I thought." I wonder if this is because the "new ideas and feelings" transform the meaning of the story for you, thereby pulling the plug on the formerly relevant?

DIANE #2: It is discovering something that happened in the story that either I didn't think about or now remembering the event, I realize this 'new idea' is really something else from the past that is important to the story. It transforms the story because I see the connections of people, place and events that make the story whole.

RODNEY #2: Perhaps as we edit, we generate new meaning for the story as a whole, changing our relationship to its details. As the meaning of the story changes, we continue eliminate or change what no longer supports the story. "In the beginning [we] don't see" the irrelevant material, as you say, because just as "the story must evolve" we must evolve with it.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

DIANE #2: Yes, the story evolves and I evolve with it.

RODNEY #2: The humanist model of humans being says that we are this stable essence evolving toward its innate potential. What if, instead, we are essentially unstable and our potential depends on externals to evolve? What if who we are is a conversation? In a sense, we would not be exactly the same person when we look back at the first draft. That might be why we are surprised to find so much apparently "irrelevant" material.

DIANE #2: If we were unstable and our potential depended upon externals to evolve I don't think we would be as full a human being. I think we need the basic roots of some innate feelings that begin to develop as we develop. If we only depended upon the external it would leave too much to culture, status. I am always amazed at how people from terrible backgrounds, no solid family, or education. They socially lack so much, but yet as they develop in adulthood they have something inside of them that makes them a success. Other people are born with all the external trappings and become a mess. Somehow the external influence ruined them and crushed their stable essence. That's why I wouldn't want to depend on external influences to give me my potential.

As far as 'who we are in a conversation' that would make us live always in the moment of that conversation. Everything we looked back to would seem 'irrelevant.' I think if we were a conversation, we would need our memory to hold on to what we considered the 'essence' of ourselves in order to have some substance and experience.



RODNEY: Don't let any of these questions box you in; I am interested in any habits you may have that help you write. Do you have any dialogical or feedback process that you can identify? Do you discuss your story with friends,

family, colleagues at various stages of the writing? Do you consult the writing of authors you admire for inspiration before and during development of a new story? Do you go to the movies or watch certain television shows when you are writing?

DIANE: When I write, it is solitary. Even with my painting, my artist/husband gives me feedback as understands my process of change. One painting is really 5. I keep changing until it feels right. When I tell him I am finished with the painting that's it. He sees the changes. With the writing process the changes come each time I sit down to write.

RODNEY #2: I'm glad you brought this up because that's kind of what I wanted my dissertation to be about. I wanted to talk about this sense of solitude and this being alone in a room as perhaps mistaken.

Everyone I've talked with says writing is a solitary pursuit. And I understand that. Except for marketing communications and corporate writing, which is almost always collaborative these days, I too sit "alone" in my office and write.

I am speaking here of myself being "alone in the room" in the limited sense that there is no other human organism physically present. But, it seems to me that, as a social being and writer, I am never truly alone in my room.

DIANE #2: when I write I am physically alone in my office, but my door is open and I see students, staff; the phone rings, etc. so I am not truly alone.

RODNEY #2: To "write alone in your room" is, I think, to live fancifully as western civilization's iconic hero, the autonomous individual, from within whom ideas spring forth ex nihilo by virtue of benevolent, sinister or benign – but always idiosyncratic—subterranean processes. This image of writing, of life for that matter,

trivializes the immense (both capacitating and delimiting) impact of culture, heritage, social surroundings, language and relationships both immediate and symbolic.

Our stories are framed by the cultural idea of story. They are bounded by what it is possible to “think about” in our culture and possible to speak about in our language. Stories that do not derive from the conventions of culture and language are not received as stories but as babble and gibberish. In other words, I'm not sure it's ever safe to say, “It's my story and no one else's.”

I wonder: Is that why so many of us prefer to work “in silence" and in sequester? I don't want to say "alone" because we bring a lifetime of voices with us wherever we go. When I sit at my desk, my room is chock-a-block full with all the conversations I've ever had and all the voices I’ve ever heard.

DIANE #2: Yes, I agree. Alone really means holding in our head all that has come before us. Also, think about how when we sit and write and think about things what happens when someone interrupts us with bad news, by phone or in person, how everything changes. Whatever I was thinking at that moment is no longer important. Or if I am aggravated by something, that too changes how I say something. Often times, I put away my writing because something has changed my train of thought and I am someone else at that moment. I can’t reflect upon the past because the current situation needs attention.

RODNEY #2: There is an ongoing internal commentary that our culture describe as “my thoughts.” On lucky days, if I “listen” very carefully, I can discern a polyphony of voices; occasionally I even recognize some of them. “My thoughts” turn out to be the

voices and the sayings of my parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, teachers, draft board members, bosses, adversaries, sexual predators, memorable narrators and characters from books, magazines, newspapers, television, movies, the Internet ...

That is my experience anyway. And I sometimes wonder if, lacking a hearing trumpet for internal conversation, we need that ambient hush to better tune-in and amplify those omnipresent background voices that normally go unwitnessed amid competition from the environment.

DIANE #2: The voices can only come to me if I am concentrated alone. Then all the past is my choice of event, age, place, etc. I find a clash between the internal dialog and the external interruptions. That is why everything I do is in segments. Especially for my painting. I don't like having to work knowing in one hour I have to stop to start dinner. I'd rather get the chores out of the way and know I have 5 hours of uninterrupted work. That is why I never wanted children. I would be very upset if John would be able to paint and I had to do not only chores, but the non-stop work and attention a child deserves and needs. I know myself very well and having John in my life is all I ever wanted.

I need the quiet time to reflect on things and it settles me. I find it difficult to switch gears very quickly and so serious work that will satisfy me.

10 RODNEY: Do you have any internal dialog or feedback process that you can identify? If so, what kinds of inner conversations do you have about your writing? Is it very similar to the ones you have when you cook dinner or make up a shopping list or is it somehow different?

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

DIANE: My internal dialog questions why I am writing on this topic to begin with. I need to validate for myself why this is important. The topic becomes an internal dialog and somehow the more I write about it, it resolves itself. I see many topics in women's magazine that just don't mean that much to me. If it doesn't resonate in my soul I don't want to write about it. It is very different than my cooking or shopping list. Writing the essays sticks with me and I think about it constantly. I make notes in bed, I take a note pad when I do laundry because just sitting there my mind wonders and I get ideas how to change and edit what I am feeling in the piece. It is a strong emotion when I write very different to the chores I do at home.

RODNEY #2: So, I think what I am hearing from you is that the difference is meaning making. Perhaps writing a shopping list, cooking dinner, doing chores are things to get out of the way for you? Writing the essay involves "validating for me why this is important" and becoming kind of obsessed with it and "thinking about it constantly" even while doing other things until "it resolves itself." One statement really strikes me.

You say that eventually you "get ideas how to change and edit what I am feeling in the piece." I wonder if you also are changing and editing what you are feeling internally, so that you and the story are evolving together in a generative meaning-making process?

DIANE #2: Yes, Rodney, I sit and think about what I am working on, or re-reading what I have started and immediately I see what I want to delete or revise. Reading it validates what I originally felt while writing it and then it moves on to another

level. I am changing internally because reading what I wrote does ‘validate myself’ and it makes me understand myself and what I went through at the time of the story. It also makes me ask myself if I have changed from the time of the event and how. I go through internal questions and flashbacks about growing up. It is a very important process because it is between my self of the past and present. I can decide how I want to tell the story and what I want to say. Ultimately, I feel I must always tell the truth in how I felt. So many things in life can influence you, but how I handle the writing of that truth is my personality and the outside influences. How and why they did influence me and how I responded to it.

11 RODNEY: Does the writing of personal narratives change or influence you in anyway? Do you discover or learn new things in the process of writing a story? Do you "see" or perceive things differently during or after writing a story? Please describe anything of this nature.

DIANE: The writing does influence me. I do learn new things and by reading other essays I discover how important this form really is. I also receive e-mails from people who read the published ones and they all say it helps them and encourages them in their own life. When I am writing my story it seems to make me understand what I went through better. It gives me closure that seems to be what I experience. Even if it is a story that was positive just writing about it makes me understand who I am and what I have been through. After the story, especially if it has been published and shared with others is another sense of closure.

RODNEY #2: Like you, Diane, I’ve found that “writing does influence me” and sometimes in astounding and powerful ways. When I am writing my story, especially

when I am editing and rewriting it, I explore possible points of view starting from the premise perspective that my default explanation is designed to dovetail with my "life narrative" – a story designed to serve some "political" purpose. (By "political" I mean a view of personal power.) Although I'm not sure "writing about it makes me understand what I went through better" in the sense of getting at some final "Truth" of the matter– I do think it helps me generate new or additional meanings for what I went through.

DIANE #2: Yes, I feel the same way. Sometimes I take the other person's view point and question myself why they acted or did what they did. Then I question my own response and why I acted the way I did. Did I have a choice? Was I selfish or too hard on people? I really think about the whole situation. But, it is the final 'Truth' that counts. It is definitely understanding new or additional meanings of what happened. It really helps resolve the whole event. I think we write personal essays because I know in my heart other people have gone through something similar and if it helps me it will help others. It is the need to share and communicate the things that are inside of us.



RODNEY: Is there anything else you would like to add? Or suggestions you would like to make?

DIANE: Thinking about universal truths and personal essays is similar to the way I look at painting. We all come from various backgrounds, but somehow through the creative process how we express ourselves bridge those gaps. Even when we see things distinctly different than our own culture e.g. African art (I did my master's thesis on Nigerian art) we can identify some emotion. It moves us even if we don't completely understand why. In a museum the piece is completely taken out of

context. In their society it was used for ritual or social purposes, but the impact is the same. We innately have a feeling towards it. It moves us. The same with writing no matter what the story is the feeling we get is the same. We understand what someone has gone through regardless of what culture or time they have lived in. Some stories reveal how the social structure made that person into a monster or saint. But, we are moved by what they do and how they react. It all comes down to emotions.

RODNEY #2: Each time I read your response, Diane, I come up with a different meaning. When you say that "somehow through the creative process how we express ourselves bridge those gaps" are you saying that your stories have a single universal message that will make sense to and pertain to both college students at University of Portland and the Yanomami tribal people in the Amazon? Or are you saying that there is a connection, that we make contact, though the exact interpretation will vary.

DIANE #2: What I mean is there is power through the creative process. It can be ineffable and come to us with feelings we cannot express but we feel it regardless of the culture we come from. We are all connected by human emotions. I may get a strong feeling from looking at an African mask. It may not be the same emotion the indigenous person felt who created it or how it is used in their culture, but it moves me. I am sure my abstract work would have no impression upon them accept they might like some of the colors. Since this form of expression is not used in those cultures to the degree that we use abstract painting as a means of expressing memory, ideas, etc. But they might 'feel' a color that has a meaning for them in their culture.

With writing we share the emotion of the piece and whoever reads it will respond according to his/her own background, culture, gender. Some stories gravitate to people

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because they share what someone has gone through or even if they have never had anything to do with the type of experience you had, they read it to share it for the first time. For example, I have not climbed any mountain, let alone Mount Everest, but the story of how someone survived is fascinating to me because I could never do that and I want to know how someone had the inner and physical ability to do it. Personal stories connect us in a special way and are very important.

RODNEY #2: I prefer connecting through stories on the page (as opposed to oral stories) because there is the illusion of control over timing, rhythm, timbre, and message. I say "illusion" because such a notion omits consideration of the reader. There is no way to insure, in fact it is unlikely, that the reader "gets" exactly what I intend because the reader brings to the text an idiosyncratic matrix of experience and meaning. Each reader, in the presence of the same page of words, generates content fairly eccentric from what I meant to say.

I noticed this for the first time when I received a call from the editor of the arts section of a Santa Barbara (California) newspaper saying she was thrilled to read my poems and wanted to publish one in particular. As she began discussing the poem, she used words that reassured me that she "got" the message I was sending in the poem. She wouldn't change a word, she said. It was just perfect in every detail. (Wow! Words like that can make you high!) As she reveled in nuances of meaning she “got” from my poem, however, I realized that her words were actually the product of a "spin" on life that I'd never even entertained let alone intended to communicate. And the words she chose to

"punch" in her reading of my poem were less important in mine. She loved *her* my poem a lot more than *my* my poem.

I ask myself: If meaning is not inherent in the words, if it is generated by each reader, so that the meaning of "your" words is a sort of amalgam of your's and the reader's personal/cultural narrative, what is the point of writing?

DIANE #2: I think the point of writing is that our words reveal what we experienced and we cannot expect anyone to ever understand the intimate feeling we had in writing an event in our life for strangers to 'get.' Everyone will bring their own emotions into the work. I am used to that, especially with my abstract painting. People tell me they see a mountain, face, energy, etc. That's fine even if I don't see that myself. All I know is I created the work and it resolved MY FEELINGS. The same with my writing. I write about what I know and have experienced. When someone else reads it and expressed their feelings most of the time they do get it and bring their own personal/cultural baggage into their response, but that is part of it. That's why we communicate. We give them our story and from there it is now up to them to get what they can from it. Meaning will always change. Look at philosophy. All those brilliant minds all after the ultimate "Truth." You take what helps you and that's it. We cannot please the world. Our writing is personal but with universal implications. We all have known sadness, tragedy, and love on some level. Our stories touch on some of those aspects of life and when people read our words it resonates in them. They think about their own life.

I think we need to keep writing.

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RODNEY #2: Please write something on your experience of participating in this conversation about writing. Was the process useful to you in any way and how might have been more useful?

DIANE #2: Rodney, this has been a very insightful process because I can see how inner feelings and external forces play an important role. I think is up to each individual to balance them. It is a process of understanding and personality. Some things are easier for someone and they are more open to ideas. Others can understand but because of their personality it prevents them from taking action. I never thought that much about the cultural role making such an impact. I always thought it came from our inner feelings, but it has opened my mind. I loved that question about, "Can I have a tragic life without the cultural wherewithal to express it? What if the only option available to me in my situation is to be stoically heroic? Would I be sad? That was so powerful. It made me realize how culture can dictate your fate in a way and how you are permitted to express it. Your mask would be everything because that is all you would know.

I would like more discussion on the choices writers make with regards to what they write about and how that parallels a path of decisions they have made in their life. For example, when I look back at my life now at 62 years old I can see the choices I made all lead to where I am now. My stories might have been different if I made other choices. I find the question of choice, fate very interesting and how that is reflected in the creative process. What comes out of us, what we accumulate in life and how that manifests into the subject matter we write about.

RODNEY #2: Questions you think pertinent to understanding how writers write.

DIANE #2: I always want to know about a writer's background: age, gender, where they grew-up. Also, the family status, did they have siblings. This information forms a more complete understanding of who is writing and why they write.

How they begin a story, do they outline, or write like mad for two hours without censoring themselves? Do they sit with a pad or at the computer. Do they write in silence or with music, TV in the background. Are they married or with a partner? Do they have children or grandchildren around, pets? These might not seem important to some people, but I love knowing all these things. How do they deal with rejection? Also, do most writers think of writing as a labor of love or a job? As much as it is a challenge to face the blank page, how do they think about it and see themselves? Those that need a regular job, how much time do they devote to writing?

RODNEY #2: Anything at all that you thought about while engaged in the process or that occurs to you now.

DIANE #2: I think more about how understanding your life, what you write and why give me more of a sense of inner peace or motivation to write more. What is really driving me to write my stories? If I didn't get a sense of release would I still be motivated? That is something I question.

RODNEY #2: This is probably all you will hear from me on this (unless you volunteer more!) until I have something written up to submit. Then I plan to have all the research participants take a last look and comment on what I've written before I submit it.

Thanks again. I do appreciate what you've done!

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Brian Doyle

1 RODNEY: Why do you write? What is your motive in writing? Is it to influence others? Is it to a share something about yourself with others? If so, say more about why you desire to share life stories with others?

BRIAN: Well, the flip answer is because I cannot not write, it's a benign neurosis, I am American of Irish extraction and Catholic to boot and so utterly addled with story and magic and voices and myth and symbol and tall tale telling, but I suppose, poking a little deeper, I have a terrific inchoate drive to catch stories and hand them around like food. I really want to connect in some substantive way either hilarious or haunting or both. I don't know why I am so interested and addicted to connecting. Perhaps shyness, deep down. I dunno. For all that I have come to like speaking in public, I would rather connect with stories on the page. They seem deeper and bonier to me somehow and they enter hearts more thoroughly. Plus I am sure this is what I am supposed to do. I am that rare soul who knows what he is here for. In only have the one skill and I love it. Lucky man that way.

RODNEY #2: I once believed I could not *not* write. Years of hunger and overdue notices convinced me otherwise. I feel it easier to write when the towing insurance takes care of delivering the car when it breaks down and find the need to write far more compelling after a nice dinner in a warm house. Not too much dinner, of course, or too warm a house. But moderation in survivalist compulsions does seem to give liberty to the impulse to write.

Being reared in a tradition of storytelling certainly helps. There are, however, many more Irish-American Catholic non-writers than writers. My grandfather was a great storyteller but poorly educated and kept to the aural/oral method. I don't think I ever saw him write anything longer than a shopping list or a permission slip for school. One of my earliest "needs" to write was a feeling that his stories would be lost when he died. I wrote them down to keep them alive. I even got some of them published as a character piece called something about a New England Wit-cracker. I now consider the value of his stories derived largely from my love for him. Perhaps, I hoped that – by keeping his stories alive – Gramps would never be utterly gone.

So, I wonder if holding a storyteller or storytellers in high esteem helps generate this "need" to tell stories. Also, do you think there are many writers, particularly essay writers, who go through life without a lick of curiosity about the meaning of things? It almost goes without saying, doesn't it, that essayists are curious about or have notions about meaning? Do you think this curiosity or these notions are antecedent to the "need" to express them?

BRIAN #2: I think so – we need lodestars, compass points.

RODNEY #2: You go on to say, "I am sure this I am supposed to do. I am that rare soul who knows what he is here for." Do you take writing to be a divine calling for you? A ministry, so to speak?

BRIAN #2: I dislike heavy words. I think I am doing what I am supposed to do, is the best way to say it.

RODNEY #2: I wondered: If meaning is not inherent in the words, if it is generated by each reader, so that the meaning of "your" words is a sort of

amalgamate of your's and the reader's personal/cultural narrative, what is the point of writing?

BRIAN #2: Only to connect.

RODNEY #2: I prefer "connecting" through "stories on the page" as well. The appeal for me, though, is the illusion of control over timing, rhythm, timbre, and message. I say "illusion" because such a notion omits consideration of the reader. There is no way to insure, in fact it is unlikely, that the reader "gets" exactly what I intend because readers brings to the text idiosyncratic matrices of experience and meaning. Each reader, in the presence of the same page of words, generates content fairly eccentric from what I meant to say.

I noticed this for the first time when I received a call from the editor of the arts section of a Santa Barbara (California) newspaper saying she was thrilled to read my poems and wanted to publish one in particular. As she began discussing the poem, she used words that reassured me that she "got" the message I was sending in the poem. *She wouldn't change a word, she said. It was just perfect in every detail.* (Wow! Words like that can make you high.) As she reveled in nuances of meaning, however, I realized that her words were actually the product of a "spin" on life that I'd never even <u>entertained</u> let alone <u>intended</u> to communicate. And the words she chose to "punch" in her reading were less important in mine. She loved *her* my poem a lot more than my poem.

RODNEY #2: I like your expression “catch stories and hand them around like food.” Two of my favorite pleasures are sharing stories I have written and sharing meals I have cooked. And I experience the two similarly.

In another vein, I know you find writing a spiritual practice and I wonder if you intended the “loaves and fishes” metaphor that I brought to my reading of it.

BRIAN #2: Sort of

2 RODNEY: Do your stories have some “truth” to share? If so, do you think this truth is “universal” (that is, that is something true about all people or all times) or do you think this truth is more “local” (that it is something you learned that might be true of some people or sometimes).

BRIAN: True for everyone ever – love in its complex mysteries and inarticulate joys, grace under duress, laughter as prayer, attentiveness as prayer.

RODNEY #2: Are you saying that your stories have a single universal message that will make sense to and pertain to both college students at University of Portland and the Yanomami tribal people in the Amazon?

BRIAN #2: Yup, within reason culturally, of course. A lot of reading is context, but great writing, even translated and stripped of context, especially when it’s story, connects. See African writers, Borges, Laxness, etc.

3 RODNEY: How did your interests in personal writing evolve? Have you written personal stories for as long as you can remember or was there a specific time when the desire to write personal stories appeared? In short, what is the story behind your story writing?

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BRIAN #2: Hmm. My dad was a newspaperman and is a lovely writer still, a better clearer writer than me, and clearly his influence – smell stories, catch them, write them down, shape them as best you can to be eaten easily by others, move on, go catch more, be generous and open catching and telling them – tells; and I suppose like many if not all writers there were many years when I was young and struggling to learn to write that I wished powerfully to discover through writing who I was and what I thought and felt. I vividly remember writing a short story at age 11 and being THRILLED to have made something that to me had mystery and strength. It wasn't much of a story but it was alluring enough to catch me for life.

RODNEY #2: So, I hear you saying you were reared in a writing discourse. Someone you loved and admired lived from the proposition that writing is important and valuable.

I nod in agreement, Brian, when I read "there were many years when I was young and struggling to learn to write that I wished powerfully to discover through writing who I was and what I thought and felt." Many writers think, along the humanist tradition that— as Mridu, another participant in this study, puts it–"in the process of finding stories, sometimes, we find ourselves." Yet, I wonder if the "self" we "find" in the process of finding stories exists independently and prior to the stories we tell. I wonder if, in the finding and telling of stories– that is, in the "internal conversations" we have about all of the events and conversations we've ever experienced– we <u>invent</u> our selves.

Or, more to the point, I wonder if we are invented by the stories we tell and the stories we are told. This would be consistent with writers feeling changed by writing (telling) stories about themselves. The dominant western concept is that life is about finding yourself, that there is a sort of homunculian self to be discovered, nurtured and brought to maturity.

BRIAN #2: Oh, yes!

RODNEY #2: I wonder if it is more a process of bringing forth, generating, synthesizing, installing, a self from the possibilities that exist within the cultural conversations available.

BRIAN #2: Yup. We are verbs.

4 RODNEY: How are you drawn to certain story ideas? In other words, where do you think your ideas come from? How do you know that it's a good idea or an idea with potential? Have you noticed that there are certain times or places or circumstances that precede a writing idea?

BRIAN: Mostly what I seem to do in recent years is listen and try to see the ocean of stories of grace under my nose. I sound them out for humor and bone, I guess, is the best way I can explain it. I am sort of set on a default setting for odd stories.

RODNEY #2: Do you think this "ocean of stories of grace" would exist *as such* if you weren't "listening and trying to see" them.

BRIAN #2: Sure.

RODNEY #2: If you weren't looking for them, would they exist? Said another way, Brian, do you think you're looking for them generates them?

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BRIAN #2: No.

RODNEY #2: By this, I don't suggest that you instantiate (hocus pocus) events and people that wouldn't otherwise exist. But, does your biased vigilance create the possibility for given "facts" to become construed as a story illustrative of grace?

BRIAN #2: Hmm, put that way, yes. Well said.

RODNEY #2: At the risk of becoming pedantic, consider a group of party goers "remembering" a particular party. A bartender remembers the most popular drinks and the quality of the liquor provided and perhaps extrapolates from these the quality of the party, its hosts and its attendees. A hair designer regales us with the good and the absurd coifs at the affair and, perhaps, what that says about how "in" or "out" of it these partygoers were. The "bar maid" recalls the recalls the "regular guys" and the "stuffed shirts" and the "jerks" that perhaps met her expectations or surprised them. Each of these partygoers can relate not only their observations about the party but probably holds these observations in the framework a larger meaning or "truth" about life. Is it possible that looking for stories of grace not so much teases the story <u>from</u> the facts but imposes story <u>upon</u> the facts and then the facts kind of naturally align themselves to the story?

BRIAN #2: Sure – but I'd argue just as cheerfully that the story is right there waiting for the teller.

RODNEY #2: For my part, I think this is what writers do. I don't think we can avoid it. And I'm not sure avoiding is desirable even if we could.

5 RODNEY: How does an idea become a manuscript? Why are you drawn to writing them down? Why can't you just have an idea and leave it at that?

BRIAN: Because to have an idea and not write it down seems lazy and irresponsible to me. You owe the universe the writing down. If it doesn't get there, if it doesn't shape itself, fine, but at least sit your ass in the chair and try it. I do feel like those of us – and I think it's most if not all of us – attuned to story and who like to shape and play with words and lines should do so. Use the gift. Not using it if you have it, that's a sin. It's like being able to play an instrument and not doing so. That's nuts.

RODNEY #2: Do you mean this literally?

BRIAN #2: Yup.

RODNEY #2: Do you think we are under a moral obligation to use our abilities (writing) rather than bury them (perhaps in the sense of the Parable of the Talents in the Gospel of Matthew 25:14-30)?

BRIAN #2: Yup.

RODNEY #2: Einstein had a genius that lead to hundreds of thousands of people being consumed by atomic flame or deformed and poisoned by miasmic air, land and water. Nietzsche had a gift that inspired the extermination of 42,000,000 people found wanting by the self-proclaimed Ubermenschen of the Third Reich. If a fortune teller could tell people exactly how long they will live and how they will die, would s/he be obliged to use this gift? If a gifted writer pleased many but writing sent them into long spells of depression, would it be a sin to (say) pull coffee, an activity at which s/he is comfortably mediocre? Matthew 5:14-16 notwithstanding, I

wonder if we sometimes light a candle only to find that putting it under a bushel is the wisest course.

6 RODNEY: What happens between “an idea” and “a finished story?” (Or, what is your writing and editing process?) For example, when you get an idea, do you write it down and do some sort of concept map or storyboard. Or do you just kind of wait for more ideas to evolve? Once you are convinced that you have the makings of a story, do you map out your story before you start? Or do you kind of "free write" until you have something to work with? Do you write from an outline? Or do you write from a basic concept, then take care of organizing it later? Do you revise and edit as you write or do you pretty much write a draft, then return to revise and edit?

BRIAN: I write in bursts and then tinker and tinker listening for bone and swing. I never ever ever think of theme or ending or structure – this is why a novel has been hard for me because you do actually have to have an idea of the plot. All my fiction has been short bursts, moments. Writing years and lives is very hard for me. As for when I know it’s done, I think the only thing experience gives you is a deeper sense of your own instrument, so I sort of feel a piece is done or not done without being able to explain it very well. Which is why I don’t teach writing at all.

RODNEY #2: I have no idea what “bone and swing” means but it sounds like something strikes you and you have a conversation about it on paper, and then decide how to organize what you have into something presentable. Does that sound about right or do you mean something else?

BRIAN #2: I sort of listen for the music and salt. I want my stuff to be real and to feel like talk.

7 RODNEY: Is your writing and editing process pretty consistent from one story to the next or is it circumstantial?

BRIAN: Pretty much the same – I write in white heat and then sort of fiddle with it and see if it's an essay or a poem or a story. Short stories, I notice, tend to be made when the idea won't be an essay or a poem. Odd.

RODNEY #2: I wonder, do writers develop a narrative, a little story, about writers and writing that becomes kind of "installed" as internal monologue that says, "This is just the way I do it"? And that becomes calcified into "this is the way I must do it"? If so, could a more reflexive writing practice expand our "writer" narrative and, therefore, expand the possibilities for our writing?

We might think that writers are the most inward, and, therefore, most reflexive, of people. Yet, being reflective about life does not necessarily make us more reflexive practitioners of writing.

BRIAN #2: Sure, I guess so. I don't think about the practice much. I think about starting and then the learned craft and fun take over.

8 RODNEY: Do your stories turn out pretty much as you conceived them or do they tend to change and evolve as you write them? If they change, why do they change and how do you know the change is for the better?

BRIAN: O, change and evolve. Definitely. I am often startled by what happens when I write. Which is one of the deep joys of the craft, eh? I like that they change—much more energy. I draw a clear line between stuff I write on assignment,

for magazines, those are articles, and they go where they are told to go, whereas essays and poems go wherever they damn well please, which is fun.

RODNEY: I too "am often startled by what happens when I write" but I am at times annoyed by this notion that writing does whatever it wants – as if "Writing" is some sort of spectral being that takes possession of us and works through us against our wills. Yet, I find just as absurd the idea that we create ex nihilo and in a vacuum by autonomous brute will. Could it be that while we write what we thought would be our story, we become engaged with larger conversations, both current and erstwhile, that influence us even as we write? So that by the time we are finished with the first draft, we have changed and our relationship to the story has changed; so the "point" of the story has changed as well?

BRIAN: Sure – that's a lot of the fun of it, isn't it?

9 RODNEY: Do you have any dialogical or feedback process that you can identify? Do you discuss your story with friends, family, colleagues at various stages of the writing? Do you consult the writing of authors you admire for inspiration before and during development of a new story? Do you go to the movies or watch certain television shows when you are writing? Don't let any of these questions box you in; I am interested in any habits you may have that help you write.

BRIAN: Hmm. I show everything I write to my wife Mary, who is a brilliant soul who couldn't care less about literary stuff. She just likes good stories. She's a real good sounding board, because if she's not gripped by the story line then I didn't

do a good enough job and back to work I go. I also often read a piece aloud to listen for song and fat. It's not necessarily the case that a piece good on the page is good in the air but it's often an instructive exercise. I avoid reading my favorite writers when writing because I am afraid of their powerful masterful voices mucking up my stuttering. I write in silence so the stuff can come out shyly by itself. I cannot imagine writing with music on or people talking. I tend to write in the morning when most awake and energetic, riffing off the little notes I make during the rest of the day and night. I never write at home where there are too many kids whom I love and would rather be with them than write.

RODNEY #2: I am at a loss with "song and fat" as much as with "bone and swing" but I get the idea that you have conversations about the writing, either with Mary or with an internal representation of her. I imagine there is an ongoing internal commentary and, if you "listen" carefully, you can even make out different voices and startle yourself by occasionally recognizing who they are. Sometimes your father, sometimes Mary, sometimes a colleague or a college professor, or (egad!) other writers' voices that support, that critique, that criticize. That is my experience. I wonder: Are those voices also with us when we write? Is that why so many of us prefer to "work in silence" and in sequester? I don't want to say "alone" because I think we bring a lifetime of voices with us wherever we go. And I sometimes wonder if, lacking a hearing trumpet for internal conversation, we need the ambient silence to pump up the volume and vitality of those omnipresent background voices that normally go unnoticed due to competition.

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BRIAN #2: I think the silent part is where you begin to maybe think and feel, which are the foods of writing, eh?

10 RODNEY: Do you have any internal dialog or feedback process that you can identify? If so, what kinds of inner conversations do you have about your writing? Is it very similar to the ones you have when you cook dinner or make up a shopping list or is it somehow different?

BRIAN: I suppose my interior rules are write down every scrap of energy the piece has in it, and then go over it again and again and again cleaning, listening for music, cutting fat, making it as lean and direct as possible. I am very leery of sermon, homily, lecture, article, opinion, editorializing, etc.

RODNEY #2: Not an Ayn Rand fan, then?

BRIAN #2: Detest.

RODNEY #2: How do you “write down every scrap of energy the piece has in it”? What would be involved in that? Does the energy that’s “in it” include energy you bring <u>to</u> it?

BRIAN #2: I dunno – I just work on it until it feels done.

RODNEY #2: The man ran back into the burning building to save his dog but the building collapsed and both the man and dog are dead. Is this guy a hero? A humanitarian? Or a dumb ass?

BRIAN #2: Hero.

RODNEY #2: I take this shortish answer to mean: "Hero. Only because that's the way *I* see it." Is that an accurate representation of your thinking?

BRIAN #2: Um, no. It seems to me he is a hero no matter if you or I think he's a dolt, a fool, a nut, a hero, or an idiot. He runs to save a life. That he loses his, or the life he went to save is snuffed out, is immaterial to the act of running to save a life. To run to save a life is heroic. I cannot see any other way to describe it. This is what is great about men in war, and why wars keep happening; if we were all sensible and reasonable in calculating life and odds, we would never defend each other from danger, which would be good, in that wars would never get off the ground, and bad, in that no one, like the firemen who ran into the burning towers, would ever be heroic.

RODNEY #2: Doesn't the story acquire energy by generating a meaning for it? So might it be valid to say you write down every scrap of energy you can bring to it?

11 RODNEY: Does the writing of personal narratives change or influence you in anyway? Do you discover or learn new things in the process of writing a story? Do you "see" or perceive things differently during or after writing a story? Please describe anything of this nature.

BRIAN: O yes – I cannot imagine not being a writer and not having this chance for extra eyes and ears. Listening to and catching stories opens my heart hugely and has made me a far humbler man than I would have been, I think. Good pieces are like children, they elevate you by reducing your arrogance. And way down deep you have a good feeling that you caught a shred of the Mystery and brought it up to the public eye and said Look, check this out, man, here's some courage and grace and pain and hilarity, or here's some brooding bastard evil, check this out, now what?

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RODNEY #2: So, when you say being a writer is having “this chance for extra eyes and ears” are you saying that your writing gives voice to the stories of others? That working with many voices through story is an expansive experience?

BRIAN #2: Absolutely. Which leads to the moral jungle of borrowing or stealing stories.



RODNEY: Is there anything else you would like to add? Or suggestions you would like to make?

BRIAN: I do think writing is a form of prayer. A powerful one. Great writing enters the heart and never leaves. Creates new chambers in there. That’s glorious and mysterious. It’s a cool craft. Also there’s a great carpentering joy in writing, in MAKING A THING.

RODNEY #2: I find resonance in your observation that there's a great carpentering joy in writing, in making a thing. It is a cool craft. And, if you’d ever seen my carpentry, you would know why I stick to writing and hire out the bookcases. Perhaps more than any other craft, writing depends on the participation of the observer. If I craft a bookcase, it likely will be received as such anywhere that bookcases are found. Observers may differ on whether it is a very desirable bookcase or a very functional one; but most will agree that it is a case for storing books. When one writes a story, the reader to a large extent determines whether it is entertainment, education or fish wrap.

BRIAN #2: P.S. And finally I think writers are in a real sense seanachies, storytellers appointed by the community, sentinels, outliers, witnesses, sayers,

speakers for the living and the dead, voices for all – I feel like writers are sensitive beings for a reason, and so I feel a sort of communal responsibility and joy in what I do when it is done well – less so from my ego, which is healthy, and more a sort of simple joy that I did the only job I can do, not too badly, and it's an important job for all of us. We need an annie dillard, a barry lopez, a peter matthiessen, a Cynthia Ozick, to keep pointing to who we are at our best, who we are at our worst, what we still can be.

RODNEY #2: When you say writers are "storytellers appointed by community," I am reminded how much the writer depends on the reader and on his/her own cultural and historical location. Are writers ever revolutionary? Or are they simply dispensers of hegemonic allegory?

BRIAN #2: Sure – think how many writers willingly or unwillingly became voices for communities and energies and movements and zeitgeists. Can't have a rebellion without a storyteller.

RODNEY #2: I have a final request: That you write something on your experience of participating in this conversation about writing. Was the process useful to you in any way or how might have been more useful? Questions you think pertinent to understanding how writers write. Anything at all that may have occurred to you while engaged in the process or that occurs to you now.

This is probably all you will hear from me on this (unless you volunteer more!) until I have something written up to submit. Then I plan to have all the participants take a last look at what I've written before I submit it.

Thanks again. I do appreciate what you've done.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

BRIAN #2: It was useful to me to ponder, even briefly, the reasons for my own absorption in writing and how it matters and affects and darts and arrows and heals and startles readers. I suppose I agree with my late friend the novelist George Higgins, who called writing a benign neurosis, and I am not very interested in why I write; I am very interested indeed in how fine writing and stories connect and wake and heal human beings, and this conversation made me dig a little deeper into something that I think matters enormously in the human shuffle. Without great storytellers and artists I think we are bereft of scouts for what we might grow to be. I am not great, but I play a part, as do you, in a motley army that has a great role to play in shoving the universe forward two whole inches.

RODNEY #2: Although some of the questions/comments were related to why you write, I was more interested in how you go about it. This, I thought, might be useful to others.

BRIAN #2: Well – I don't have an articulate answer. I listen a lot, and then just start lots of little lines and ideas and see what happens. Some of them grow into things, and some of the things look like essays or poems or monologues.

Don Edgers

DON: I'll get started with the "Pilot Interview" Questions first question, then will continue as time allows. I'm working with the marketing people at Arcadia Publishing who've also sent me questionnaires for my upcoming book, Fox Island, Washington which is due out on March 12. In other words, I've got many balls in the air.

1 RODNEY: What is your motive in writing? Is it to influence others? Is it to a share something about yourself with others? If so, please say more about why you desire to share life stories with others?

DON: All of the following:

a. Self-gratification

b. To be noticed (ego massage)

c. A reminder of the past (a monument)

d. I have to (responsibility)

e. I can (skill, freedom to, it's legal)

f. Reputation

g. Enjoyment

h. Challenge

i. Keeps me out of trouble and off the street

j. Safety valve

Gratification: In the 68 years of my lifetime I have felt the urge to: work at any job, fish, sing, travel, grow a garden, build structures, read and write. In my retirement years I sense gratification by reading and writing.

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To be noticed: In the film, *Why Man Creates*, the concluding image is of graffiti on a brick of a building that says, “I am.” I taught a class to teachers called *Keys to Motivation*. One of the keys is positive feedback, or to be noticed. It feels good to have a paper put up on a classroom wall or refrigerator for others to notice, or to receive a trophy, medal or certificate for some accomplishment. When something I write is published the same feeling of being noticed comes across.

A reminder of the past: I particularly enjoy biographies, memoirs, and histories. I like to write about people, places and things in my past. I only kept diaries (sporadically) in the 1950s and 1960s, but many things were excluded, so I wrote books that filled in the gaps, or stories based loosely on past events. My family and others now have something to read about events and people in my past. My “monuments” are in historical museums, the Library of Congress and other libraries, on-line archives, people’s bookshelves and coffee tables throughout the world.

I have to: If I don’t write, I’m afraid my brain will build up plaque or explode. Writing is like a safety valve. Although I’m primarily a(n) historical memoirist (2002, 2007) and have a pictorial history book coming out in 2008, the stories or chapter introductions are essays with historical significance. I feel an obligation to share what life and society was like on an historically interesting and significant piece of land in Puget Sound. I lived in the house built by the founder of the first community on Fox Island, and I knew most of the descendants of the original pioneers. I’m the last living writer who lived on the island and saw the long-lost structures and changes from yesteryear. To not

share my memories would surely be a sin and a shame, and I would be exceedingly unhappy if I was sent to hell for my omission.

I can: I learned the skills necessary to write, and continue to try to keep those skills through practice.

In our American society we have the freedom to write practically anything we want to without the fear of being censored.

It's not illegal to express our opinions.

Reputation: I am known as a storyteller who has vivid memories of an interesting life, in interesting places during an interesting time. First, I started publishing stories, then books. I can't stop now! How did you find out about me?

Enjoyment: I'm not into athletics, though I do exercise and walk almost every day. When I can travel, I do, but even then I write up my travel experiences on epinions.com. My wife crochets and does Sudoku number puzzles for enjoyment. I write or read.

Challenge: I like to see what comes to mind and goes to my fingertips on a keyboard when I see a writing contest or a topic on www.tiny-lights.com.

Keeps me out of trouble and off the street: There's no telling what I might do if I didn't spend some of my free time at the keyboard of my computer.

Safety valve: I believe pressure on my brain is relieved and brain plaque is prevented when I write. I have the feeling that writing keeps me from disturbing others in public if I were to talk to myself out loud.

RODNEY #2: "Just imagine… writing as little as 15 minutes a day could reduce brain plaque by as much as 50% and prevent new plaque from forming! So order your

copy of *Writing the Daze Away* and we'll include a free *Plaque Attack*™ mouse pad at no extra charge! But wait … that's not all!" I can see a spot for this on Fox between the ads for weight loss and Smiling Bob's natural male enhancement.

I am also known as a good storyteller who has vivid memories of an interesting life, in interesting places during an interesting times – that is, unless my wife is around. Then it turns out my recollections are less attributable to vivid memory than to vivid imagination. Since I depend on her to remind me to go to bed, eat breakfast and take a bath, I'm in no position to argue.

RODNEY #2: If a gifted writer pleased many but writing sent him/her into long spells of depression, would it be a sin to (say) pull coffee, an activity at which s/he is comfortably mediocre? I wonder if we sometimes light a candle only to find that putting it under a bushel (Matthew 5:14-16) is the wisest course.

DON #2: About your depressed author – I don't know if you have a particular author in mind for this question; however, if a gifted writer spent long spells being depressed because of writing, how could it be considered a sin to do anything else? I think you have me classified as some sort of religious zealot when it comes to writing. My statement: "To not share my memories would surely be a sin and a shame, and I would be exceedingly unhappy if I was sent to hell for my omission." was used as a hyperbole.

I recently applied for a job as a part-time job as a checker at a grocery store that's opening nearby. I haven't been gainfully employed for over 10 years, but thought it might be a kick to work part-time and do something I've always wanted to do and earn a few

extra bucks in order to take a long ocean voyage. When filling out the application, I listed my last employment as Arcadia Publishing as an author. When I went in for the interview, the manager said, "I've really been looking forward to interviewing you!" When I asked why, he said, "I took a year off from my last job to write." He would have hired me for any job on the spot to have me in his employ and to pump me for information on publishing."

I told you I'm going to CA to gather material for my next book. Well, the store's opening this weekend and I'll be gone during its grand opening. He told me to call him as soon as I get back. We'll see.

RODNEY #2: Why do you suppose so many of us (artistic types, I mean) feel that we <u>must</u> (write, paint) because we can? You mentioned your Bible being annotated in the margins, so I will frame the question from that standpoint. Do you think we are under a moral <u>obligation</u> to use our abilities (writing) rather than bury them (perhaps in the sense of the Parable of the Talents in the Gospel of Matthew 25:14-30)? Einstein had a genius that lead to hundreds of thousands of people being consumed by atomic flame or deformed and poisoned by miasmic air, land and water. Nietzsche had a gift that inspired the extermination of 42,000,000 people found wanting by the self-proclaimed Ubermenschen of the Third Reich. If a fortune teller could tell people exactly how long they will live and how they will die, would s/he be obliged to use this gift?

DON: I think you misinterpret my statements or feeling about "so many of us (artistic types, I mean) feel that we must (write, paint) because we can?" The reason I write historically-oriented material is because (as stated on the back cover of Fox Island) "Author Don Edgers is the third generation of his family to live on Fox Island, growing

up in Sylvan on a waterfront farm and house constructed in 1890. He had a front row seat to Fox Island's cultural and historical metamorphosis." In this case I feel I have an obligation to preserve history because of where and when I lived AND I can write. I don't consider myself under a moral obligation to write because of any Biblical urging i.e. bury them (perhaps in the sense of the Parable of the Talents in the Gospel of Matthew 25:14-30). I certainly don't feel that either Einstein or Nietzsche was compelled to write what they did because they felt a moral obligation to write because they could. What they wrote was probably motivated for recognition in their social or academic circles. Alfred Nobel knew his invention had the possibility of causing massive destruction, but felt a moral obligation to reward those who strived to improve life world-wide in various endeavors to receive rewards for their efforts.

(That's all the time I have right now, but will continue tomorrow.)

(The book event went very well last night and prepped the attendees to attend a book signing on Saturday. Let me tell you, having a publisher do publicity and scheduling of book signings and giving the author marketing tools is a real switch from what I've previously done to sell my books!)

DON #2: I've got a few book promotion things coming up (tonight, for example) and after a book signing on Sat. I'm traveling to CA to stay with a high school friend and also meet with another of our classmates in order to socialize as well as gather material for my next book about the military high school we attended in the 50's. After returning, another book signing. It's so cool to be doing these activities. I would have to be an idiot to not write!

2 RODNEY: Do your stories have some "truth" to share? If so, do you think this truth is "universal" (that is, that is something true about all people or all times) or do you think this truth is more "local" (that it is something you learned that might be true of some people or sometimes).

DON: I originally started writing my stories about what it felt like to be a kid during a dysfunctional time in history (WWII) because nobody else spent much time talking about civilian life. There were all these war stories, or Japanese internment camp stories, but other than a smattering of books, movies and stories, the history of the time got tucked into diaries or letters or were relegated to oral presentations. On Fox Island, a monthly paper needed some stories about the area, so I started submitting stories from its past in a Mark Twainish-type of way. I enjoyed Will Rogers method of expressing his little homilies, so loosely imitated his style of philosophizing. The "truths" in my stories deal with growing up and coming of age. I'm not a deep thinker, but I enjoy sociology and psychology. My stories boil down to: There are different strokes for different folks.

RODNEY #2: I was never good at grammar or dissecting sentences with the objective of identifying their gross and microscopic anatomy. As the instructor drew her centipedes I drifted into the open arms of escapist reverie.

As a "Sweathog" before Kotter, I felt woefully unprepared when I made the unforeseen decision to go to college. It seemed to me the only way I could ever do an acceptable job of writing while woefully ignorant of sentence anatomy was to model universally acclaimed writing. If I just asked myself how they put things together and created my own version of it, I might just get by. This method actually worked quite well in the limited sense that my knack for putting sentences together improved dramatically.

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I was shocked to find such writing unappreciated. I finally realized that the world (and certainly my college English professor) was not awaiting a 20th century William Shakespeare, another Henry James or Mark Twain. Either no one had ever stated it explicitly or I was daydreaming when they said that writing is masterful *within its social and historical context*. It is not writing suitable for all times. Who knew?

DON #2: I really enjoyed your "Sweathog before Kotter" analogy.

3 RODNEY: How did your interests in personal writing evolve? Have you written personal stories for as long as you can remember or was there a specific time when the desire to write personal stories appeared? In short, what is the story behind your story writing?

DON: I attended a military high school in Wisconsin for four years (1953-1957) and we were required to send a graded and corrected letter home every week. During this exercise, I learned how to organize, edit and express myself. Eventually, I joined the US Army, spending over two years in Japan. I got involved with teaching English conversation to Japanese medical and medical technology students, so learned how to develop lesson plans. I became a public high school teacher and got pretty good at writing compositions and eventually a Master's thesis. I wrote essays for my high school's literary magazine and also wrote essays for literary contests. I took several writing classes and got a certificate for completing the Writer's Digest School for writing nonfiction.

RODNEY #2: Are you saying that the requirement to write began your interest in writing? Or simply that the disciplined writing of the military high school improved your

skills? Perhaps, the improved skills opened more opportunities for writing and this, in turn, increased interest?

DON #2: The disciplined writing improved my skills and I was able to develop my own style of writing. I had a history professor who had written several books tell my wife (who happened to be the college president's secretary) that he always looked forward to reading my tests and papers because I made them interesting to read. This feedback made me want to write the "historical tomes" which I have ended up doing.

4 RODNEY: How are you drawn to certain story ideas? In other words, where do you think your ideas come from? How do you know that it's a good idea or an idea with potential? Have you noticed that there are certain times or places or circumstances that precede a writing idea?

DON: As a speech teacher for 30 years I discovered when listening to student speeches, I could match my experiences with theirs. There used to be a radio show on called "Can you top this?" I found my answer was, "YES!" I write lists of possible topics. When I read writer magazines, I either hi-lite or write in the margins. I also take notes during lectures or during church. My Bible has many margin notes or lists on the sermon notes sheet. My learning style is audio, so what people say transforms personal experiences or to relevant things I have read, seen or heard. I am interested in many subjects, but I really get off on real people and their stories. Eccentrics, which I sense you are, get my attention, too.

RODNEY #2: (!!!) Wikipedia says "eccentricity refers to unusual or odd behavior on the part of an individual. This behavior would typically be perceived as unusual or unnecessary, without being demonstrably maladaptive. Eccentricity is contrasted with

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"normal" behavior, the nearly universal means by which individuals in society solve given problems and pursue certain priorities in everyday life.

“Eccentrics” are people who consistently display benignly eccentric behavior.

You may find this incredulous but I’ve never before been told I’m an eccentric. Perhaps it is said but only in hushed tones. How would I know? And how would I react? Would I behave differently? Probably not, as I’ve always been of the opinion that I am the standard and most people are just a bit off.

DON #2: The American Heritage Dictionary says “ec•cen•tric (Â¹k-sÂµn”trÂ¹k, Âµk-) adj. 1. Departing from a recognized, conventional, or established norm or pattern.” The reason I classify you in this category is because of your bio in Tiny Lights “--- three goats in Astoria, Oregon. He is a Master Hypnotist, Master Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Reiki Master and professional writer. He is working on a Ph.D. in Social and Behavioral Science. The tentative title for his dissertation is Personifying the World: A Social Study of Personal Writing Practice. His research concerns whether there are useful ways to consider the practice of personal writing as a social rather than a strictly individual activity.” Name ONE other person who could claim a similar bio! If the foo shits, wear it, and be proud.

RODNEY #2: Dueling dictionaries, eh? Well, OK. You got me there; but I’ve never thought of myself as *eccentric*? Hmmm.

My interest in personal essay comes from an a few storytellers in my life who answered a plea for advice with a story. Van Andrews, in the style of Northern Exposure

character Ed Chigliac, quoted scenes from movies or stage plays. As in: "This reminds me of the scene from *Just a Gigolo* when Marlene Dietrich says…"

DON #2: I really like this example. This also reminds me of my dentist from Fox Island (a childhood friend and brother of my first real girlfriend) who, like you, marches to the beat of another drummer. One of his hobbies was (and still is) acting in movies, TV programs and commercials. He played Patient #9 (who died while waiting in the waiting room) on an episode of "Northern Exposure." I wrote an essay on my friend (who showed up at a book promotion for Fox Island two nights ago) titled "That's no stranger, that's my dentist." Chigliac was a wonderful character.

RODNEY #2: Harry Moss, an old friend, quoted characters from his life. As in: "You may remember that I've told you about John Pilabos and Pilabos Potatoes? Well, one day John Pilabos decided he'd…" Elwood "Chumps" Conn, another friend, responded to my fits of depression by offering up hysterically funny talks filled with cynical hyperbole, leaving me to find analogy or metaphor.

I'm not sure how Van or Harry or Elwood came upon their way of addressing issues but I was intrigued by their offer of story in lieu of advice. And I found them very effective.

Storytelling allows the teller to distance him/herself from conclusions that might be derived from the story. Geoffrey Chaucer of *Canterbury Tales* used this method to disclaim randy and heretical tales by reminding the reader that he is merely reporting on stories told to him by someone else no matter how horrid or upsetting he might find them. Further, advice-giving offers a packaged top-down remedy, whereas storytelling

obligates the listener to participate in the meaning making process. That is the appeal of personal essay for me—both in the reading and the writing of it.

DON #2: Thanks for the insightful observation. I read these in high school, and never gave them another thought. This is a great technique to be used in storytelling and writing.

5 RODNEY: How does an idea become a manuscript? Why are you drawn to writing them down? Why can't you just have an idea and leave it at that?

DON: Sometimes an idea germinates. I have friends who say, I had a similar idea on what you wrote and was going to write about it. Good intensions pave the road to hell. My response to them is, “So, why the hell didn’t you do it?” If a topic is posted on tiny-lights.com, I treat it like a dare, and get in my two bits.

RODNEY #2: What happens between “an idea” and “a finished story?” (Or, what is your writing and editing process?) For example, when you get an idea, do you write it down and do some sort of concept map or storyboard. Or do you just kind of wait for more ideas to evolve? Once you are convinced that you have the makings of a story, do you map out your story before you start? Or do you kind of "free write" until you have something to work with? Do you write from an outline? Or do you write from a basic concept, then take care of organizing it later? Do you revise and edit as you write or do you pretty much write a draft, then return to revise and edit?

DON #2: I work from a list of topics (key words) write a rough draft, revise, more editing, final draft.

RODNEY #2: That's pretty much the way I do it to, although the list of keywords/topics tends to change as I go along. Some things are added, others eliminated. On occasion I will generate so much new material that I actually start another outline for later use.

RODNEY #2: Going back to the conversation about "writing because we must" and Brain Plaque Theory notwithstanding, why do you suppose we are compelled to write it up and they are not? If writing were compelling per se, everyone who had an idea that would be compelled to write it up. But they are not. Is it "constitutional" in the sense of inborn traits? I have the prejudice that there is something social going on.

DON #2: If it's not because of the way we're brought up, or because we discovered we are good at it, it must be because of genes. I've known extremely talented artists who have simply ignored their gift and gone into some sort of "grunt" or unrelated occupation. You may be right in saying "something social (is) going on."

7 RODNEY: Is your writing and editing process pretty consistent from one story to the next or is it circumstantial?

DON: It is pretty consistent, although I don't follow any particular formula. Mostly, I do what feels right. This wasn't the case with my first book, though. My mentor, a retired university professor (English and journalism) and author, had me rewrite large segments and basically re taught me how to write. He finished an epic historical western while working with me, and showed me the way through publishing. His book was *Little Coyote* by Charles Keim.

RODNEY #2: I wonder, do writers develop a little story about writers and writing that becomes kind of "installed" as internal monologue that says, "This is just the way I

do it”? And that becomes calcified into “this is the way I must do it”? If so, could a more reflexive writing practice expand our “writer” narrative and, therefore, expand the possibilities for our writing?

We might think that writers are the most inward and therefore most reflexive of people. Yet, I’m not sure being reflective about life necessarily makes us more reflexive writers.

DON #2: I don’t think e.e. cummings would buy into your theory, but editors or those who correct our text definitely make a lasting impression (on me) and I feel that if I want to appeal to the majority, maybe I should listen to those who are supposedly in the “know.” As I wrote in one of my Tiny Lights essays about Emily Dickenson, Look at Emily Dickinson. Only 10 of her poems were published during her lifetime—out of more than 1,700 poems. If she had made an effort to use punctuation, capitals and listen to her editor, she may have experienced much more success in her 56 years. Unfortunately for her, she didn't strive toward perfection, and became a closet poet—letting her adherents "fix up" most of her output after her death.

(I’m not sure if I’ve captured the essence of what you are saying, but this is what I have to say. Supper awaits, and my appetite is gnawing at my innards, so I’ll end this session. Back later.)

You brought up “internal monologue” which made me think of the influence of “external dialogue” or the influence of our audiences’ comments or encouragement on us (as storytellers) to write up what we said in conversation, lecture or speech. I was asked six times to give commencement addresses, I suppose because the students liked the way

I communicated (being a speech teacher might've helped, also). I mostly try to write the way I talk, but on occasion I wander into another realm, especially in academic circles.

8 RODNEY: Do your stories turn out pretty much as you conceived them or do they tend to change and evolve as you write them? If they change, why do they change and how do you know the change is for the better?

DON: It seems to vary, depending on moon phases or maybe the geographical locations where I am. If I write at home on the computer I can cut and paste. If I'm traveling or at a coffee shop or food court, I write in notebooks or scraps of paper (I once wrote a movie script on napkins while discussing scenes with an actor/camera man. It got filmed and taught both of us how to make sound 16mm movies). My master's thesis was a sound 16mm film on methods of film animation, *An Animation Sampler*. It was used by five Washington County school districts.

If they change, they change because my wife (editor #1) says they are too wordy, unclear, or off track.

RODNEY: I tend to agree with Brian, one of the other participants, when he says: "I am often startled by what happens when I write" but I am at times annoyed by the "writerisms" about writing doing whatever it wants – as if "Writing" is some sort of spectral being that possesses us and works us against our wills.

Yet, I find just as absurd the idea that we in a vacuum by autonomous brute will. Could it be that while we write what we thought would be our story, we become engaged with larger conversations that influence us even as we write—so that by the time we are finished with the first draft, we have changed and our relationship to the story has changed and the "point" of the story has changed as well?

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I've found that computers and word processing have changed the way I write. Because I can cut and paste, I can trust my writing process more and don't spend as much time on planning and outlining as I used to. In the old days, sloppy planning meant "cutting and pasting" in the literal sense—with scissors and cellophane tape—then retyping the entire manuscript. The time put into a writing plan was well spent but today, it's pretty marginal in a matter of preference.

9 RODNEY: Do you have any dialogical or feedback process that you can identify? Do you discuss your story with friends, family, colleagues at various stages of the writing? Do you consult the writing of authors you admire for inspiration before and during development of a new story? Do you go to the movies or watch certain television shows when you are writing? Don't any of these questions box you in; I am interested in any habits you may have that help you write.

DON: Sometimes my writing seems to be almost automatic. Words just flow from my mind to my fingers.

I do find that when I read books or articles by my favorite authors that I jot down notes or highlight sections of writing that get my creativity flowing. I attend a church with an especially inspiring and educated pastor who uses the heck out of the Bible. He forces me closely examine relevant gems throughout scriptures that seem to relate to various secular writing projects.

In-depth TV interviews with writers tend to ring a bell with me. I also find that historical or travel programs arouse my interest. I have written a few travel reports for epinions.com for several years (over 12,000 hits since 1999) and occasionally I get reader

feedback. I got a phone call from a reader of my first book yesterday, telling how much they loved my book and were reading it again and wanting to know whether or not I had written other books.

I do not know why, but when I go to a shopping mall coffee shop, the old creative juices kick in. Maybe caffeine gets my brain on-track to write.

Sometimes past experiences that I forgot just jump into my consciousness.

I wake up some mornings with a story ready to go. Perhaps the sardines I have eaten before hitting the sack cause my brain to release ideas upon awakening.

RODNEY #2: Me too! Coffee shops and pizza joints. While a lot of people seek "peace and quiet" when writing, I actually come up with my best ideas amidst hubbub. Like you, I find that reading books or articles or interviews on television or radio tend to jumpstart an otherwise brain-dead day. What I find particularly helpful is conversation of any sort on a related topic, no matter how tangentially related. Even if I conclude that the content is malarkey, the stimulation is beneficial.

10 RODNEY: Do you have any internal dialog or feedback process that you can identify? If so, what kinds of inner conversations do you have about your writing? Is it very similar to the ones you have when you cook dinner or make up a shopping list or is it somehow different?

DON: As I said above, sometimes I have past experiences come into my consciousness while I'm writing. My mind reacts to certain words, sights, smells and sounds (especially music).

RODNEY #2: I have a pretty evident internal dialogue and feedback process. I even talk aloud to myself when I get stuck. I go out on the Fort-to-Sea Trail and have

conversations with myself, partly internal and partly aloud, because sometimes hearing a statement said out loud brings clarity of meaning that is missed when “said” silently. Occasionally I have looked up to find a walker or hiker looking at me askance.

And I pester people with what I’m thinking. My wife says to me: “I have nothing to offer you. I don’t even know what you’re talking about.” But that’s okay even if it was true; but it’s not. Everyone has something to offer.

DON #2: My feedback is like mental Post-Its that I sort of fill in throughout my days. My wife claims I need a hearing aid (which may be true), but I’m probably in a different universe and thinking about what I’m going to write. This is especially true while watching TV. I may be present physically, but if I’m not into the program, I’m doing a Walter Mitty routine.

11 RODNEY: Does the writing of personal narratives change or influence *you* in anyway? Do you discover or learn new things in the process of writing a story? Do you "see" or perceive things differently during or after writing a story? Please describe anything of this nature.

DON: While writing my pictorial history book, I discovered during my research some very interesting information that solved some mysteries or filled in pieces of a historical jigsaw puzzle and I was able to correct incorrect historical facts.

RODNEY #2: I have some problem with “historical facts” in preferred to call them historical records or historical artifacts. What we often call “historical facts” are more closely associated with historical accounts—what we “make of” the artifacts and records.

I've found that writing does influence me and sometimes in astounding and powerful ways. When I am writing my story, especially when I am editing and rewriting it, I explore possible points of view starting from the premise that my default explanation is biased by my need for it to dovetail with my "life narrative" – a story we design to serve some "political" purpose. (By "political" I mean a view of our personal power and value.) Although I'm not sure writing about it makes me better understand what I went through in the sense of getting at some final and objective "Truth" of the matter; but I do think it helps me generate new or additional meanings for what I went through.

DON #2: OK, Rodney. I'll back off from the word "facts" because of your "problem." The fact is I discovered a descendant's accounts didn't match the written records. I relied on the descendant's misinformation and wrote it down as gospel—which I discovered was errant. Now I have to go back and correct the error by reprinting a book.

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RODNEY: Is there anything else you would like to add? Or suggestions you would like to make?

DON: Suggestions for writers, as follows:

- ✓ Learn, examine and practice the rules of writing, then write. (Let the pen meet the paper).
- ✓ Be realistic in your expectations of being a successful writer. When all the planets are in alignment, your vibrations of your hook and pitch match those of an agent or editor, you have a good chance of getting published.
- ✓ Persist. As they say in lottery circles, you cannot win if you do not enter.
- ✓ Listen to the suggestions of those in the know.

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The MPH at the end of your name is kind of confusing. If it is to get attention, you might precede it with a number like 100 and eliminate the spaces between the letters i.e., 100 MPH or leave it like you have it and put the year you got the degree (if it is one).

RODNEY: MPH stands for Master of Public Health (in Health Education). Putting the year after the degree appellation is a British practice; it isn't really done in the United States. Earlier practice was to put a period between the initials (M.P.H., Ph.D.) but the more common practice these days is to eliminate the periods (MPH, PhD); some even put the period only at the end (MPH., PhD.).

DON #2: Well, RODNEY, this has been interesting. I hope my feedback has been helpful. Good luck with your quest.

I recall in the Tiny Lights essay you wrote concerning the topic of "What do you get out of writer's magazines? You wrote, "Very little." I wrote a tongue-in-cheek response, but actually I get lots of good information and I especially enjoy the interviews in all three magazines I subscribe to. When I see book titles that grab my attention, I see if my library has them, or I go to amazon.com (where I sell used books) and buy them at a deep discount.

I saw an interview with John Grisham on one of the Public TV stations last night (the Charlie Rose show) that fit in with your Pilot Interview Questions. I also read in *Creative Nonfiction* an essay by Terry Tempest Williams titled *Why I Write* that you might find to be right up your alley.

I noticed in the Mar. 2008, The Writer, a blurb in "15 years ago" from an article by David Ritz titled "Aim for intimacy when conducting an interview." It deals with what

you've done with your Pilot Interview. I'm off to CA to interview some friends which I hope will be useful in my next tome dealing with a military high school.

Don Edgers – MEd

RODNEY #2: Thanks for those tips. I found all of them. (And don't think I didn't notice the MEd allusion to our MPH discussion!)

Mridu Khullar

Mridu never responded to the second round. After some prompting, she sent an e-mail declining further participation, saying “I am moving to Africa, and that's keeping me very occupied at present.” I felt it was important to include my response even so.

1 RODNEY: Why do you write? Is it to influence others? Is it to a share something about yourself with others? If so, why do you desire to share life stories with others?

MRIDU: All of these reasons, I guess.

2 RODNEY: Do you feel the “truth” you share in your stories is “universal” or “local” in terms of their validity and applicability?

MRIDU: The truth is always universal. Circumstances may differ, cultures may differ, languages may differ—but the feelings are the same all around the world. We're all the same.

3 RODNEY: How did your interests in personal writing evolve? Have you written personal stories for as long as you can remember or was there a specific time when the desire to write personal stories appeared? What is the story behind your story writing?

MRIDU: I, like most writers, didn't set out to be an essayist. But in the process of finding stories, sometimes, we find ourselves.

RODNEY #2: I nod in agreement, Mridu, when I read that you write that “in the process of finding stories, sometimes, we find ourselves” yet, I wonder if the “self” we “find” in the process of finding stories exists independently of the stories we tell. I

wonder if, in the finding and telling of stories, that is, in carrying on internal conversations about all of the events and all of the conversations I've ever had, I invent myself. Or, more to the point, I wonder if I am invented by the stories I tell and the stories I am told. This would help to explain why many people feel changed by writing (telling) stories about themselves. The dominant western concept is that life is about finding yourself, that there is a self to be discovered, nurtured and brought to fruition. I wonder if life is about creating yourself, about bringing forth a self from the narrative possibilities available to you.

MRIDU #2: There were so many unique stories from my childhood, from my upbringing, from my culture, that I wanted to share with the world. My personal stories are a result of wanting to share those parts of me with people.

RODNEY #2: I would like to hear more about "unique stories from my childhood, from my upbringing, from my culture, that I wanted to share with the world." I assume when you say unique stories, you mean stories that illustrate difference between this culture and your primary culture. Is that right? Is that what you mean? I also would like to hear more about your "wanting to share those parts of me with people."

MRIDU: (No response.)

RODNEY #2: I get the sense that you write to share your culture, to "explain yourself" and make yourself interesting, and to differentiate yourself as a cultural being while creating a bond of commonality with your readers. I think this is true of all writers but I wonder if it has increased salience for persons who have a primary culture outside the mainstream. I would appreciate your response to this.

MRIDU: (No response.)

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MRIDU #2: I've been journaling for several years now, and my friends and acquaintances would often get long e-mails and letters. Those were forms of story-telling, too, and in that respect, yes; I guess we're always telling our stories.

RODNEY #2: I've never kept a diary or journal. I do have some experience with letters-as-storytelling. I remember fondly the days not long gone, the days just before e-mails and text messaging took over, when people wrote long chatty letters. As a child, I ran to the mailbox at exactly 10 a.m. every morning, looking forward to a letter from my mother, my grandmother, my sister Mary. If there was nothing in the box, I waited and tapped my toes petulantly until the mail carrier arrived. I walked slowly back, slightly hunched against the disappointment if nothing personal arrived. But how my heart lifted if a handwritten letter came!

I knew that by the second line or third, their voice would become so clear that I could imagine them sitting in the room with me. I would respond to letters in great detail. In the process of responding to news and concerns expressed in their letters, I spinoff my view of me and my world as it related to their letter. It was not unusual for my letters to run 15-20 pages!

I used letter storytelling to convince my grandparents to rescue me from a very violent and abusive family situation. My situation was so bad that I became convinced that I would never survive into adulthood if I wasn't somehow removed from it. To my astonishment and relief, my stories and my grandparents' goodwill combined to have me sequestered at their rustic cabin in rural New Hampshire from age 12 until I graduated

from high school. That was the beginning of my understanding of the power of words to change the course of events and to generate new possibilities.

Tell me more about what you mean by “journaling” and how it ties into the “long e-mails and letters” that you believe are “forms of story-telling too”.

MRIDU: (No response.)

4 RODNEY: How are you drawn to certain story ideas? In other words, where do think your ideas come from? How do you know it’s a good idea? Have you noticed that there are certain times or places or circumstances that precede a writing idea?

MRIDU: Who knows? Sometimes a random sentence will come into my head and I'll play with it. Sometimes a full-formed story can't wait to get out of my head onto paper. Sometimes, I dream of something that may have happened earlier and that sparks ideas. But there's no process to it, really. Someone might mention their kid's lunchbox, and I'll be reminded of my own lunchbox—things like that.

RODNEY #2: “Who knows?” At first I took this as a flip answer and was a bit annoyed; but the more I ruminated on it, the more sensible it seemed as an answer to a question that is essentially impossible to answer.

Then you said “sometimes a random sentence will come into my head.”

Tell me about that. Specifically, in which sense do you mean random. Do you mean:

- proceeding, made, or occurring without definite aim, reason, or pattern?
- a process of selection in which each item has an equal probability of being chosen?
- in a completely haphazard way?

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This is an important distinction for me because I wonder if we say “random sentences” or “random ideas” when we really mean something more like “rhizomatic” or “tangential”? By that I mean, divergent or digressive, as in moving from one subject to another that is connected by meaning rather than logic. Meaning sparks an association with related dialogs and internal conversations. Perhaps what seems to be random is really part of an ongoing internal conversation? Does this “ring a bell” or make sense to you?

MRIDU: (No response.)

5 RODNEY: How did that interest become a manuscript? Why are you drawn to committing them to the page? In other words, what makes you write them down?

MRIDU: Sometimes, half-written pieces sit in the computer for years. Sometimes they come fully formed. I can't really say what makes me write them down. I take them as far as I can, and then see where they can go.

RODNEY #2: You say that “a fully-formed story sometimes can't wait to get out of my head onto paper.” I have heard this from other writers and even had a similar experience a few times myself. Michelangelo is purported to have said that his statue of David was always in the block of marble, he just had to chip away the excess that wasn’t David. I like that story for its inspirational value. I wonder, though, about its lesson. Was David always in the block of marble or was David always in the block of marble when Michelangelo (and the entire historical and cultural dialog carried by Michelangelo) was

present to witness it? I think the latter. This, for me, is an example of what I call "personifying the world" or making the world more human by telling stories about it.

So, when you say a fully-formed story sometimes can't wait to get out of your head onto paper, I wonder if you mean that you simply transcribe the entire story verbatim as though channeling it from the spirit world? Or do you mean that you have the whole concept but there is still a lot of hard writing and editing ahead to make it intelligible?

MRIDU: (No response.)

RODNEY #2: You also say that you sometimes dream of something that may have happened earlier and that sparks ideas. But there's no process to it, really. Someone might mention their kid's lunch box, and I'll be reminded of my own lunch box—things like that.

You insist "there's no process to it, really" but that is a process, isn't it? You seem to be saying that you associate ideas and conversations until you hit on a combination or a different twist or a tangent that might make an interesting story? What if I rephrase the question and asked: What are some of the ways stories come about for you?

MRIDU: (No response.)

6 RODNEY: What is your writing and editing process? For example, do you map out your story before you start? Do you write from an outline? Do you revise and edit as you write or do you write a draft, then return to revise and edit?

MRIDU: I don't really have a process. Sometimes, I'll map out the story and make thorough outlines. Sometimes, it just flows uninterrupted, and my first draft may be final

draft. Sometimes, I might have two half-written pieces lying around and I might notice a common theme in them and put them together.

7 RODNEY: Is your writing and editing process always the same or is it situational?

MRIDU: Definitely situational.

8 RODNEY: Do your stories turn out pretty much as you conceived them or do they change and evolve as you write them?

MRIDU: They almost always change.

9 RODNEY: Do you have a certain dialogical process that you can identify? e.g. do you discuss your story with friends, family, colleagues; do you consult the writing of authors who admire for inspiration before and during development of a new story; do you go to the movies or watch certain television shows in your writing?

MRIDU: No response.

10 Do you have any internal dialog or feedback process that you can identify? If so, what kinds of inner conversations do you have about your writing? Is it very similar to the ones you have when you cook dinner or make up a shopping list or is it somehow different?

MRIDU: No response.

11 RODNEY: Does the writing of personal narratives change or influence you in anyway?

MRIDU: Absolutely. Putting words on paper, especially if they're

about feelings, emotions and incidents that have happened to make you more connected to them. You're able to see them in a more coherent form, if you will. They're no longer random thoughts, but meaningful events tied together.

12 RODNEY: Is there anything else you would like to add? Or suggestions you would like to make?

MRIDU: Let me know if you need anything else.

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Charles Markee

If you find this interesting, respond as you are moved. I have no sense that you are obligated to answer but would appreciate it if you did. Just let me know so that I can plan accordingly. If you do choose to continue, which I certainly hope you will, I am going to ask that you use this opportunity to really look deeply into what writing is about, what it means to you, and how you go about it.

I want to emphasize that I am not looking for any particular ("right" or "wrong") responses. I am putting some ideas out there for your consideration. Although they are in reply to your responses on the questionnaire, these assertions are intended to be places to stand inside or things to consider rather than answers– and *I want whatever you have to offer* in response.

1 RODNEY: Why do you write? What is your motive in writing? Is it to influence others? Is it to a share something about yourself with others? If so, say more about why you desire to share life stories with others?

CHARLES: I feel I was born with a talent for writing, a talent that was subverted in order to earn a living and support my family. Now, retired from 41 years in a technology industry, specifically related to computers, I'm free to convert an avocation into a vocation. The motivation to write has not always been there for me in a continuous way. My sense of accomplishment at creating a story worth reading bubbled up unexpectedly during the course of my life. Praise for my technical writing surprised and pleased me, although it was very constrained writing. Some life experiences with my children found their way into short essays that my peers asked me to provide them as

copies. The fact that people found value in my writing was a greater reward than a paycheck or a promotion in my field of technical management. Today, when I write a personal essay, I do it to provide humor or a lesson in life to the reading public or to document what I deem as a significant event to pass on to my children. This bubbling up has been true of my fiction as well as my non-fiction.

RODNEY #2: Is a person "born with a talent for writing" in the genetic sense that one is born with blue eyes or hemophilia or Huntington's disease? In other words, would we expect that there being four siblings, one of you might have the talent for writing and the other three not or vice versa depending on whether writing is carried dominantly and recessively? Or perhaps one of you is born a terrible writer and another is born talented while the other two are fair-to-middling? Of course, I am being naughty because I wonder how writing, something that is not a human universal but a taught skill, might be inherited.

CHARLES #2: I believe there is a genetic bias, i.e. we don't arrive in this world a totally blank piece of paper. There are predispositions or predilections that we have the opportunity to exploit or to fight depending upon what happens to us environmentally. Of course, this is a belief system I hold and not a verified fact. I don't think it can be verified and one could challenge it and claim writing is all taught, but I would venture that the some percentage of the seeds would fall on unfertile ground and no amount of teaching would create a successful writer. Similarly, some of those seeds would thrive to the surprise of all.

RODNEY #2: I am pleased to hear that you have the opportunity to turn creative writing into vocation. I have never managed to do so.

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CHARLES #2: No fruition yet. It's a work-in-progress for me. I believe I'm close to a marketable work. I feel some pressure about this because at 73 I probably have, at most, 20 years of writing ahead of me.

RODNEY #2: I've made a decent income as a business and a marcom (marketing communications) writer. I've managed to bill out around $75,000 in a calendar year while working a pretty modest schedule with little overhead or expense. I'm pretty sure if I went at it full tilt I could earn twice that. Truth is: I am not enthusiastic about product puffery or about deliberately attempting to instill in potential customers a sense of disappointment and dissatisfaction with the perfectly good product they already have. And I've found corporate writing is only a little about writing. It is a lot about treading lightly on the delicate toes and egos of the overlords of petty fiefdoms. Writing is the easy part. The tricky part is not innocently saying something during a phone conversation that will trigger retribution months, even years down the road.

CHARLES: #2: Been there, done that! I agree; it was awful. I love my retired freedom and doing what I want.

2 RODNEY: Do your stories have some "truth" to share? If so, do you think this truth is "universal" (that is, that it is something true about all people or all times) or do you think this truth is more "local" (that it is something you learned that might be true of some people or sometimes).

CHARLES: I guess I would call my "truths" a genre of similarity in experiences, i.e. the facts may be different, but the underlying psychology strikes a chord of recognition in people who are thoughtful about such events. To the extent that "truth"

exists within a framework of culture, those who might be influenced must be like-minded. The conservative patriarchal head of a Southern family might not consider my "lesson" from my liberal perspective as being appropriate or useful. That said, I would still strive to influence him.

RODNEY #2: I submit that human beings share such experiences as birth, death, hunger, thirst, sexual intercourse … but do they experience them in the same way?

We personal essay writers like to think that somehow through the creative process we can bridge the gaps and reach the "core" of our shared humanity. But can we, really? Can a single universal message make sense to and pertain to both college students at University of Portland and the Yanomami tribal people in the Amazon? And will that "sense" be shared in more than a superficial way? Or must we settle for a connection, a contact, though the exact interpretation will vary.

CHARLES #2: I don't aspire to reach everyone. In terms of our planet, I'm aiming for a miniscule subset of readers. Furthermore, I don't presume to speak the philosophical language of tribal peoples such that they would understand what I was saying.

RODNEY: #2 I prefer connecting through stories on the page (as opposed to oral stories) because there is the illusion of control over timing, rhythm, timbre, and message. I say "illusion" because such a notion omits consideration of the reader. There is no way to insure, in fact it is unlikely, that the reader "gets" exactly what I intend for the reader because the reader brings to the text an idiosyncratic matrix of experience, understanding and meaning. Each reader, in the presence of the same page of words, generates content fairly eccentric from what I meant to say.

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CHARLES #2: Absolutely true! Isn't it a lovely fact that we are all different and therefore interesting?

RODNEY #2: I noticed this for the first time when I received a call from the editor of the arts section of a Santa Barbara (California) newspaper saying she was thrilled to read my poems and wanted to publish one in particular. As she began discussing the poem, she used words that reassured me that she "got" the message I was sending in the poem. She wouldn't change a word, she said. It was just perfect in every detail. (Wow! Words like that can make you high!) As she reveled in nuances of meaning she "got" from my poem, however, I realized that her words were actually the product of a "spin" on life that I'd never even entertained let alone intended to communicate. And the words she chose to "punch" in her reading of my poem were less important in mine. She loved her my poem a lot more than my my poem.

"I ask myself": If meaning is not inherent in the words, if it is generated by each reader, so that the meaning of "your" words is a sort of amalgam of your's and the reader's personal/cultural narrative, what is the point of writing?

CHARLES #2: The level of control you allude to is not necessary for me, nor does it seem a useful goal. The point of writing is to communicate and in that communication begin to explore the elusive meaning of life. (This seems a little lofty, but I'm going to go with it.) Thoughts evolve for me as I put words down. It's a process of discovery for me to do it and I want it to be a process of discovery for my reader. In order for that to happen, she (the reader) has to be free to "spin" her own effect. In particular, a poem, being a metaphor, is wide open to creating feelings in the reader that may not have

the faintest relationship to the author's thoughts. My wife and I have talked about this process in painting. She looks at a plein aire scene, a feeling is created, she transfer the scene with her embedded feelings onto the canvas. A stranger sees this and the scene sparks feelings that the painter can't know. But it's done, committed irrevocably. The interpretation of that scene is a gift to the stranger, completely out of the control of the painter. The painter learns something every time she does this. The stranger learns something. I learn something every time I write an essay. It's my gift to myself and my gift to the reader. I do this because I'm curious (and a little driven). I want to know the meaning of life. It's my only tool for finding it.

RODNEY #2: I wonder if "underlying psychology" may constructed out of socio-cultural "stuff" such as language, cultural narratives and "facts of life" learned through social interaction. If so, what we express through our emotional stories may not be such internal and deeply personal stuff in the individualist sense, though we may have learned to experience it as such. Perhaps, we are expressing ourselves and our lives based on more public and culture-derived stories about "good" lives, "bad" lives, "sad" and "tragic" lives and so on.

CHARLES #2: Yes, I suppose, since we live in the world, our thinking and in particular, our communication is contaminated by it. I'm neither a great intellect nor a very great thinker, so I accept the prejudices that have formed me. I don't spend any time trying to understand why because I'm busily engaged in the here and now: doing, relating and changing my life when I'm up to it. This response just popped out. I read your previous paragraph a couple of times and didn't get a clear understanding of it.

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RODNEY #2: I am curious: Can I have a tragic life without the cultural wherewithal to express it? What if the only valid option available to me in my situation is the heroic stoicism? Would I be sad and despondent anyway but just hide it under a mask of heroic stoicism or would I *be* heroically stoic? I don't know. But I'm doubtful.

CHARLES #2: In order to have a tragic life, you have to know you have a tragic life. If the life you have is the only life available to you and you have never seen anything else, you'll conclude it's a normal life. You won't exhibit either kind of stoicism since you won't know what it is. Given a frame of reference in which you know about a life that is better, you then have the opportunity to "express" not having that life. Whether you know you are sad and despondent is problematic and would depend upon your attitude toward the life you now know you don't have. I guess I don't like this example. Too many things are not defined.

RODNEY #2: Consider the experience of "loss" for someone who believes in free will, personal autonomy and responsibility and compare that to someone who believes that all happens is by the will and plan of God and therefore is the right thing to happen. Now, if I write a story designed to illustrate loss and grief in a war torn country, will our two readers share the same "truth" when they engage in a sense making process after finishing the story?

CHARLES #2: If your story about the war relates only the facts without any intended "spin" to trigger the beliefs of these two characters, then they could both identify with "grief" since it is a universal human emotion. I believe that grief as a response to "loss" is a kind of "truth." What they do with that identification is shaped by

all the cultural and environmental and belief systems you have mentioned, so, even though their "grief" is an identical internal feeling associated with loss, all external signs may be diametrically different. The problem with this analysis is that it requires a case in which the information that triggers the internal feeling of loss must arrive uncontaminated by their cultural biases. Since no two people are identical in this respect, an identical feeling of loss is probably impossible.

Another quirky thing about this example is the ability of people to simultaneously hold two diametrically opposed ideas, e.g. Catholicism preaches concurrent free will and predestination. Although this requires a suspension of logical thought, some very smart people hold to it.

3 RODNEY: How did your interests in personal writing evolve? Have you written personal stories for as long as you can remember or was there a specific time when the desire to write personal stories appeared? In short, what is the story behind your story writing?

CHARLES: My initial stories were event driven. My first recollection was of creating a family newsletter when I was about 10-years-old. In college I wrote a short essay on my family. When one of my sons had a fatal accident on a motorcycle, I expressed my grief in a short essay that friends gave to their sons to discourage their interest in motorcycles. As president of the IEEE Engineering Management Society in Silicon Valley, I wrote personal essays about my experiences in management. First retired, I began an autobiography in vignette format for my children. Now, I write short personal essays as an exercise for a writing group and occasionally these grow into a

piece that I submit to a contest, e.g. Tiny-Lights, Susan Bono's literary magazine. In overview, personal essay has been the entrée into my current career in writing.

RODNEY #2: You say your "initial stories were event driven." But, as I read your explication of this, I wonder if your initial stories were *meaning* driven. Were you merely cataloging an event or saying "can you get some sense of what this meant to me"?

CHARLES #2: Hmmm. This doesn't' feel like an important point. The event occurred first, then the essay conveyed the event with its meaning. Maybe to be very clear … My experience was event driven and the essay was meaning driven.



RODNEY: How are you drawn to certain story ideas? In other words, where do you think your ideas come from? How do you know that it's a good idea or an idea with potential? Have you noticed that there are certain times or places or circumstances that precede a writing idea?

CHARLES: Initially, I believe if a story is interesting to me it may have general interest. Obviously, I'm not always right, but that's where I start. The stories blossom from events, past or present. They can be a mental image, a memory, or an exchange with someone. One of my writing groups rotates responsibility for assignments. These assignments frequently spark a writing idea. The most fertile place for new ideas for me comes from walking along my county road, hiking around a nearby lake or standing in the shower after a workout at the club.

RODNEY #2: My best place is my daily 5-mile run through the woods. My sense is that this works because external conversation is absent. If we are "made for" anything, we are made to talk. And when audible external conversation is absent, we keep the

conversation going but (usually) silently, though I sometimes talk out loud while running in the woods to keep the "line of thought" focused. Buddhist "mindfulness training" and zazen sitting in Zen is based on recognition of our ongoing yakkity yak.

The question for me, in my research is: Is any of this really unique talk, originating from within me or is it something I learned while living in certain times and places?

CHARLES: That's the great question, isn't it? Are we unique? Do we have unique thoughts? With all the lives that have ever existed on earth, can we have a unique thought or have they all been thought? I believe we have three kinds of thought: reverie, problem solving and creative. Reverie is not too interesting, although theoretically there could be a unique reverie thought. Problem solving offers a chance for proof, since our progress as a society offers new problems and therefore the opportunity for new thoughts. Creative thoughts are another opportunity for unique thoughts and we know that some have ventured into new and unique areas, Einstein for example. Unfortunately, on your 6-mile run, your thoughts don't come with tags to identify their origins. Even a completely unique thought could have its source in your experience at a time or in a place of your past. Where does your running "stream of consciousness" talk take you? Is there ever talk that is completely new, that you've never heard before, that you recognize as alien? That might be proof.

5 RODNEY: How does an idea become a manuscript? Why are you drawn to writing them down? Why can't you just have an idea and leave it at that?

CHARLES: I can't explain this, but I can describe it. An idea creates a pressure, a nagging need to get it down on paper … well, really into a computer file. It's

like I'm always thinking about turning events into a story. A chat at dinner and I think, "Can that be a story?" Story ideas churn through my head and when one of them seems like drama, it takes on a life of its own, a cruel taskmaster, unrelenting in reminding me, "You're not writing!" When I watch a movie, I have to analyze it and turn it into a written critique to send out to my friends. If I get stuck, I become a grumpy introvert until the problem is resolved. Writing stuff is my own friendly OCD.

RODNEY #2: Being saturated by a discourse can lead to OCD-ish behavior. When I went to cosmetology school with my first wife and then owned a shop with her, I couldn't meet someone without scrutinizing their haircut and their makeup. I had all I could do to restrain myself from mussing it up while telling them this is all wrong for you; just sit down and let me fix it. When I was a dinner cook, I analyzed every meal, trying to figure out how the flavors and textures were achieved and how I could reproduce it or improve upon it. When I was a health behaviorist at Physician's Weight Loss, I obsessively analyzed what people ate and said about eating, especially if they were very fat or very thin. I wanted to say: "Just listen to yourself and look at what you're eating for cryin' out loud. This is *not* an unfortunate spin on the genetic roulette wheel. First you starve yourself until you can't take it any longer, then you pork out on McDonald's fat fest; then you starve again. This never works. You get fatter and fatter but you do this over and over and over again." Now, I didn't actually *say* this because it would be construed as cruel. But being surrounded by people weighing 500-800 pounds and being responsible for education and counseling that would support them in joining

me among the ranks of the normally overweight, I became obsessed with people's eating habits and their conversations about eating.

Through these many ways of earning a living, I've always been a writer. I see/hear story/movie ideas everywhere I go. Unfortunately, many of my stories are unacceptable, not because the writing is bad—I often get rejection letters that praise the writing—but my stories are outside the mainstream experience. Sometimes I'm even told it's a great story but the readership won't like it. I still feel compelled to write them.

CHARLES #2: The story about a storywriter who can't stop writing about all his experiences (and destroys all his relationships) might just be a publishable (and funny) novel or short story. I'm not sure what you mean by "outside the mainstream experience," but it sounds to me like exactly what might interest an agent.

6 RODNEY: What happens between "an idea" and "a finished story." (Or, what is your writing and editing process?) For example, when you get an idea, do you write it down and do some sort of concept map or storyboard. Or do you just kind of wait for more ideas to evolve? Once you are convinced that you have the makings of a story, do you map out your story before you start? Or do you kind of "free write" until you have something to work with? Do you write from an outline? Or do you write from a basic concept, then take care of organizing it later? Do you revise and edit as you write or do you pretty much write a draft, then return to revise and edit?

CHARLES: Once I get an idea, then automatically, I begin formatting it into a story arc. Is there a beginning and an end? How does it move? What do the characters do? Are they interesting? Is what they do interesting? For short pieces, the prep work is all mental. I have the whole thing in my head when I sit down at the keyboard. For a

larger piece I may only know the beginning and simply begin writing a first draft. When it gets muddy, I stop and work the story from a different perspective, using clusters, lists, reading hard copy, reading out loud, reading to my wife, whatever works. Or I leave it and come back to it later. For a really long piece with a lot of complication, I'll start with a skeleton outline.

Editing is a big subject and 90% of the work on any major piece. I use an iterative process. Going over what I've written the day before, puts me back into the piece and I can continue. The "going over' includes rewrites. How much I "go over" depends on the size of the piece. For a novel, I create a detailed outline by chapter, piece it all together (usually about 6' long) and use it as a guide for change to the entire novel (so far, my novels have been fiction, but I would use the same technique for non-fiction).

RODNEY #2: 90%? Wow. I really don’t know how much of my time is spent on the editing because I tend to write a few paragraphs then I’ll catch something that needs to be “fixed” and will work on it. Never worked that way until I get a word processor. That definitely changed the way I go about things. I used to write out the whole story then go back and do a major overhaul. I think that’s because in the old days, any editing was a major undertaking.

CHARLES #2: Before I became really serious about writing for publication, I used a typewriter. All my technical writing was done on a typewriter and usually in one pass (after a scribbled outline with pencil or pen), with minor corrections using “white out” until the IBM Selectric® came along with its delete capability. Since the advent of the PC, circa 1980, I’ve used a computer based editor of some sort. I can’t imagine any

other method. I know people (published authors) who write things out long hand and then transcribe. Geez! It's so damn slow!

7 RODNEY: Is your writing and editing process pretty consistent from one story to the next or is it circumstantial?

CHARLES: As I've mentioned before, it's definitely related to the size of the piece. In that sense, it's circumstantial. It's also circumstantial if I feel the content is sensitive, e.g. a personal experience that includes other family members. Then I would place more emphasis on multiple readers and their input.

RODNEY #2: Tell me more about "multiple readers and their input" – how does that play out? What kind of input do you seek, and how do you use it? Do you consider this a "fact checking" procedure? Or is it a matter of checking how individuals are going to react to what is said?

CHARLES #2: Yes, both facts and reactions are important. I evaluate my readers. Some are copy edit nit pickers, some reach for the emotional core of the piece, some focus on the interactive dialogue and some worry about the character's feelings. I weight their input according to my judgment about their ability to read and critique. Checking facts is really my job although I've had readers pick up some things that I missed. Recently I referred to a demolition derby in a 1940s setting when the first derby occurred in the 1950s. Someone caught it. But those are not as important as the feedback I get from good writers. They recognize the dream state (created by fiction) and what will knock a reader out of it. I value those inputs.

Sometimes I'm amazed by what a reader will divine from something that I've written. It may be a minor twist of meaning that they give the piece, something I never

intended. Usually reordering the words or choosing different words will fix the problem. Other times, what I had intended never got in the story and the reader went off in the wrong direction, for example, in the novel I'm currently writing, it was clear from the start that the protagonist was a boy, however it never got into the story as a fact until the middle of the first chapter. That was a long time to leave the reader in limbo about whether the character was a boy or a girl. The fix was easy, but in many, many readings, I never noticed it.

8 RODNEY: Do your stories turn out pretty much as you conceived them or do they tend to change and evolve as you write them? If they change, why do they change and how do you know the change is for the better?

CHARLES: Writing a personal essay can be a memory enhancer. When that happens, details crawl up to the surface for your use if you want them. Whether these details make the piece better or worse is a function of the detail. Extraneous information detracts from the message, while pertinent facts will not only make the piece more real, but may also increase its emotional and dramatic impact.

RODNEY #2: I always know how mine should turn out. They rarely turn out that way ... but I start out knowing! Although you use "modernist" terminology that locates writing inside the writer's head, I sense that we agree in many respects on the social nature of writing. You invite whomever is available—your wife, writing group, friends and family members by reading or presenting to others.

I might go a step further. My experience has been that in telling and re-telling and editing of stories about traumatic incidents, my perspective changes and my earlier drafts

begin to look alien. This suggests to me that writing a personal essay is not simply a memory enhancer but is a memory generator and a memory styler. The "release" I sometimes experience from writing personal essay seems not so much an emotional *catharsis* as a shift in *relationship* to the subject such that my former emotional stance is no longer appropriate.

University of Texas Professor of Psychology James W. Pennebaker and colleagues Spera & Buhrfeind, (1994) conducted a small scale study, in 1994, with high level engineers who unexpectedly lost their jobs after many years of service. He asked participants to write in a journal for about 20 minutes a day. One group was asked to comment on they spent their day. Another was asked to write their deepest feelings about what happened. The third group was given no instructions other than to keep the diary. The re-employment results were so much better for the expressive writing group (results ranged from shortened time to a new job to improved immune function and lower blood pressure) that the study was terminated early so that all the participants could benefit from the findings. Interestingly, I think, follow-up studies found that applying the same methods to positive experiences was actually counterproductive and degraded the experience.

CHARLES #2: As an interesting aside, I participated in Meyer Freidman's Type A study of 3,000 men past 55 who were type A personalities. I was in the study group of 1,500 that received psychological counseling intervention. He had already shown a relationship between stress and cardiac disease. Now he wanted to evaluate a means of reducing the stress. The process changed my life.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Although I didn’t undergo a transformation to becoming a type B, I was able to identify factors in my personality that created both time urgency and anger. That knowledge alone made a difference.

In your example above, I wonder whether applying expressive writing to positive experiences degraded the experience or the perception of the experience. That this would happen seems counter-intuitive. Possibly the subjects wanted to retain the good feelings from the experience and writing about it forced them to really analyze what happened and conclude that the experience was not what they had originally perceived. For a writer that would be equivalent to enabling his negative internal critic, not a good thing to do.

9 RODNEY: Do you have any dialogical or feedback process that you can identify? Do you discuss your story with friends, family, colleagues at various stages of the writing? Do you consult the writing of authors you admire for inspiration before and during development of a new story? Do you go to the movies or watch certain television shows when you are writing? Don't let any of these questions box you in; I am interested in any habits you may have that help you write.

CHARLES: I read out loud to one of my writing groups and I submit text files to two other peer writing groups. We respond to each other by return email with attachments using Microsoft's tracking tools, comment entry tools and by meeting monthly to discuss overview feedback. I also have a paid editor for my fiction novel. I attend conferences with professional editor feedback on samples of writing (again for my fiction).

10 RODNEY: Do you have any internal dialog or feedback process that you can identify? If so, what kinds of inner conversations do you have about your writing? Is it very similar to the ones you have when you cook dinner or make up a shopping list or is it somehow different?

CHARLES: My initial feedback on any writing is from myself, re-reading, reading out loud and reading from printed hardcopy. Some writing I put away for an extended period, e.g. months, before I take it out and see it with new eyes. If I'm rereading a large work, I'll make concurrent lists of things not to forget or I'll read on the computer and insert comments in the text to remind myself to review something that is not relevant immediately. That's kind-of-a list. The only "cook book" things I do related to computer tools, like "search & replace" or search for misspellings or excessive use of forms of the verb "to be."

RODNEY #2: I think a lot of us do that: put away the writing for days, weeks or even months, hoping to return to it with "new eyes." I know I do. And it is the standard advice given by creativity experts. Sometimes, I'll be running in the woods and the new way of seeing it comes to me. I say it to myself several times in hopes that I don't forget it before I get back home.

I wonder: Where do these "new eyes" come from? I know a typical humanist response is that the material is being worked on by our subconscious mind. That seems more a matter of faith, however; something akin to attributing it to God. Being a Master Hypnotist and a Master Practitioner of NLP, I guess I am supposed to believe in such things but I remain skeptical. No one has ever seen a subconscious mind. It's an article of faith we've inherited from Freud's Trinity.

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It seems more likely to me that we engage in further conversation and growing experience—whether through direct interaction with other people or through mediated interaction via newspapers, magazines, books, radio, television, theater and so on—and this conversation alters the way we are prepared to interact with the manuscript when we return to it.

CHARLES: I agree.

RODNEY #2: I'm inclined toward the idea that mind is a superfluous humanist construct that adds an air of autonomy to social creatures with elaborate brains and languages. Our subconscious minds may be synaptic linkages facilitated by subvocal conversation.

Or not.

CHARLES #2: Hmm. Maybe someday we'll be able to watch the subconscious working with a CAT scan or MRI. In the meantime, it's a handy label for processes for which we have symptomatic evidence of existence but not much else. I spent several years collecting dreams. I made an effort to write them down as soon as I woke, which wasn't always easy. I collected well over 500 that I transcribed into computer files and I found a loose relationship to the previous day's events, but no great eureka. It was an attempt to catch my subconscious at work. I had one significant dream that helped me decide between two available technical management positions when I was working at NASA/Ames. The two potential bosses were an Indian man and a woman in charge of software development. I dreamt that I was chased by a female vampire, dressed in white

with an Egyptian dagger in her hand. The next day I chose the position working for the Indian man. It’s my only hard evidence that the subconscious is doing stuff.

11 RODNEY: Does the writing of personal narratives change or influence you in anyway? Do you discover or learn new things in the process of writing a story? Do you "see" or perceive things differently during or after writing a story? Please describe anything of this nature.

CHARLES #2: Retrospection is a change process. The change may be inconsequential, but it's still a change. I've said before that the process can bring up related or ancillary memories and those may be sad or enjoyable. If they were mistakes and I learned from them, then the change would have been positive. No specific piece of writing pops into my mind as a catalyst of change for me; however the process of writing over these past few years has softened my opinion of my parents and made me more tolerant of my children. By recreating events in my own life from the past, I'm able to see myself not so different from them and making mistakes of my own creation. Writing can be therapy and as I've said, I expressed grief over my son's death by writing. It was not the only case of working through a difficult time by documenting the facts and sealing them away in the bowels of my computer.

RODNEY #2: Retrospection *can* be a change process if we "return" to "memories" with the "new eyes" that you mentioned earlier. Some people returning to old memories is about picking at scabs and sustaining monologs of blame.

CHARLES: We have no choice but to return with new eyes. The old eyes are gone. Those who need to spend time on blame will do it with the past or the present, whatever is available for their industry.

RODNEY: Is there anything else you would like to add? Or suggestions you would like to make?

CHARLES: I did my best to keep the focus of my answers on writing personal essays. However my primary focus at the moment and for the last few years has been on writing fiction for middle-grade children, specifically ages 11-15. I still do personal essays, but infrequently. It was on the basis of those, I felt my participation was valid. There's also the fact that much of what you have asked pertains to writing of any kind.

I did want you to know that I have gradually moved away from personal essay as I became enamored with writing fantasy-adventure stories. Of possible interest to you is the fact that a deeply personal theme rises out of these stories for me. They extend my life from an essay of fact into an adventure of fantasy that I would live if it were available. I can be the hero on paper that I never was in life (except for raising a family, etc. etc.). When my 12-year-old protagonist, Maria, in my first novel lost her friend to kidney disease, I could identify with her and grieve again for my lost son, placing that hurt further behind me. A personal essay lies beneath the surface in every fiction story.

RODNEY #2: It seems to me that all stories are personal stories and all personal stories are tribal. While your foray into the fantasy-adventure genre may seem light years away from “an essay of fact” I am finding that “facts” are hard to come by. I would be inclined to say that you are moving from stories grounded in experience to stories freed from the limitations of everyday life.

When you say working in this genre allows you to be "the hero on paper that I never was in life" I submit to you that paper heroes are easier to come by because they are, after all, only paper. And I am not sure that one is ever in a position to judge whether s/he was heroic in life. If heroes must have super powers, then you are probably right. You never were and never will be a hero because you are not faster than a speeding bullet and you cannot leap tall buildings in a single bound. And you could not stop the progress of kidney disease by sheer love and will. But I don't think that merits the "etc. etc." at the end of "except for raising a family." That is no small thing. Doing what needs to be done when you've really had quite enough because you know people are depending on you, trudging on when you feel like curling up in a ball and waiting for death to claim you, that to me is heroic—not the paper kind, not the cinematic kind, but the flesh and blood kind. The you and me kind.

CHARLES #2: Thanks for that recognition. It's interesting that one of my sons calls me his hero. I took my three middle children to raise them when I was a single dad after my first wife systematically threw them out. He was one of those three. With the exception of the boy who died at age 19, the other nine children are all in the world pursuing their middle years and in some cases, raising their own children. Two of the children were "unadoptables" that my first wife and I adopted. They have both succeeded beyond my wildest dreams. And although only two of my children graduated from college, we now have granddaughters matriculating at BYU, UC Davis, Golden Gate College and San Jose State University, all over-achievers. It is rewarding at times to remind myself about life achievements.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

I'd like to receive a copy of your thesis or a summary of it when you have completed it. Thank you. Charles.

Sue William Silverman

1 RODNEY: Why do you write? What is your motive in writing? Is it to influence others? Is it to a share something about yourself with others? If so, say more about why you desire to share life stories with others?

SUE: Initially, I began to write to figure out who I was—not that I fully understood even that at the time. In part because I was sexually molested by my father growing up—and, in part, because public education doesn't teach us to discover who we are or how to think—I felt truly lost by my mid-twenties. That's when I began to write. Over the course of about ten years (and several "bad" novels), I began to learn how to think, how to discover words that represented me (or my thoughts). Then, when I switched to creative nonfiction, self-awareness really blossomed. *These are my metaphors. These are the words that represent my experience.*

Now, I'd say that writing memoir or personal narrative is a way to discover an organization to my life, how events connect. Writing organizes life, gives it a structure, a shape, one that's unseen or unknown in real life. When I finish an essay or a book I can hold all the pages in my hands—now they are *outside* of me—and look at them, and think: Yes, this is my story; I see it now.

Yes, another part of writing is to share the story, then, with others. Perhaps because I grew up in silence and lies (since I never told anyone, as a child, that my father was sexually molesting me), it does mean a lot that my voice is now heard. Having someone hear your voice is very life affirming. I receive many emails from women (and men, too) who thank me for telling their story, too. You know, they've had similar

experiences, but, because they don't write, or don't have that kind of language, they feel affirmed because of my words. This is very empowering.

RODNEY #2: I have some understanding of this. I was molested by several people when I was a kid. Luckily, it was episodic and not ongoing. It seems likely to me that duration makes a big difference in the effects of sexual predation.

I have to admit that once I was old enough to experience orgasm, I enjoyed that part of the experience. Still, being fondled by my sister's boyfriend or the older boy next door or masturbated by my grandfather while I pretended to remain asleep was pretty creepy.

Ironically, the expectation that boys can take care of themselves can render them utterly powerless. Girls are "allowed" to makes claims of victimhood but I'm not sure boys are. In the not-so-happy days of the 1950s, I would have anticipated more ridicule and suspicion than sympathy if such a "secret" got out. I never told *anyone*.

I bring this up is because I believe we become what we write and we write what we become. I like what you say about writing memoir or personal narrative as "a way to discover an organization to my life, how events connect" although I resonate more with your later statement that "writing organizes life, gives it a structure, a shape, one that's unseen or unknown in real life."

I just wonder if writing facilitates the *discovery* of an organization to life (or how events connect) in the sense that these existed *prior to* the writing or if, contrariwise, the writing *generates* a transformative organization of events and feelings and *creates*

meaning and value where none (or infinitude) existed prior. In short, I wonder if the *sense-making process* is one of uncovering, discovering and recovering or one of creation, generation and invention. The result might seem the same but the "personal" is thus relocated from the internal to the communal—or, perhaps, somewhere between.

Likewise, I wonder if we "discover who we are or how to think" at all. My favorite coffee mug says "LIFE IS NOT ABOUT FINDING YOURSELF. LIFE IS ABOUT CREATING YOURSELF." While I am generally not a fan of bumper sticker philosophy, I sense that this is right. But I wonder if we create "who we are" and "what we think" by tunneling in or funneling in. Perhaps, we are co-created through an ongoing conversational dance and maybe that process brings with it certain shifts that change what we already know by placing it and how we know it into a new context. Our modern traditions educate us to experience such transformations in knowledge as welling up from within ourselves—something to be mined or plumbed through introspection—when, possibly, they are changes in internal dialog brought about by relational exposure to other possibilities for meaning and making sense.

What say you?

SUE #2: I guess I'll just stick with my original answer. That's the one that fits me and my experience the best.

2 RODNEY: Do your stories have some "truth" to share? If so, do you think this truth is "universal" (that is, that is something true about all people or all times) or do you think this truth is more "local" (that it is something you learned that might be true of some people or sometimes).

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

SUE: Oh, I think all good (literary) writing is truth-based and, thus, universal, that our themes are universal. I write about loss, alienation, identity—themes to which most anyone might relate. Even as I tell my own personal stories others, I believe, can relate to them, even if they haven't experienced the same exact history.

For example, in my memoir *Love Sick,* I write about how, in college, I had an affair with a married man old enough to be my father. At some point in the relationship, I took—or he gave me—this maroon cashmere scarf he always wore. Why did I want it? Because, in my sexual addiction (not that I knew it at the time), I didn't know how to love him; in addition, because he was married, I could never really have him, nor could he really love me. In short, I couldn't have the man; all I could have was his scarf. *Only* through the writing process, however, did I come to understand that to me the scarf was a metaphor both for comfort and, ironically, for alienation (because I couldn't have the man).

Now, of course, no one else probably has a maroon scarf that is equally metaphoric. Nevertheless, most everyone can, I dare say, relate to the universal themes of comfort and alienation. So that's how others would "enter" my story, relate to my story: through metaphor. In this way, I feel, my story is universal.

RODNEY #2: I have to tell you that I have a problem with vocabularies of addiction. I know these help some people change their narrative of compulsion but they also strap people with an Orwellian doublespeak of power through helplessness and victory through defeat. This is the same kind of "mindfuck" (see Wikipedia and Urban Dictionary) that allows such relational atrocities as "I molest you because I love you."

and “If you loved me, you would do this demeaning thing for me.” When you see the power gradient behind such positioning language, you say “No, ass, if you loved *me*, you wouldn’t ask this.” Instead, we learn to equate feverish secretive groping with the love, acceptance and belonging.

I oppose the language of addiction because it closes the door on alternative analysis and alternative efforts at sense-making. Even though Kate (dear wife) is a physician (and a darn good one from what I hear), I find the current territorial expansion of (bio)medicine and psychology alarming. If this trend continues, every socially problematic aspect of life will find its way into the DSM—a product less of science than turf politics—and it will be labeled a disease du jour to be “treated” by the drug currently under patent.

Notice that the addiction metaphor pins the tail on one donkey by ignoring such issues as the power relationships and relative deprivations that, perhaps not coincidentally, find problems being visited upon certain categories of people more than others. Of course, the next level of obfuscation is that those certain groups (race, gender) share (genetic) “predispositions” that “explain” their disproportionate affliction. See how this makes no demands on anyone but “the afflicted”? Isn’t that convenient for everyone else?

I’ve had problems with compulsive behavior, including sporadic drug and alcohol issues. (Believe it or not, a three-pack per day cigarette habit was the hardest for me to quit.) To understand these problems, I have examined the compelling stories of need that I’ve adopted—stories that position me as the effect of powerful causes. To deal with these problems, I began telling compelling stories of triumph and abstinence. And I quit.

This makes it sound easier than it was but the point for me is that calling them a compulsion or an addiction gives it way more power than they deserve.

When Kate goes out of town for an extended period, I sometimes go to the store and get a few beers. Sometimes, a bottle of wine. I drink it and I'm fine. I do not run out and buy more. This tells me that I could go back to having a drink or two on special occasions but not go back to drinking on a daily basis because, for whatever reason, I find it too easy to rely on chemistry to handle my moods and bolster my ego. I think this is more at issue than the addictive qualities of alcohol.

I know Kate buys into the (quasi)medical rhetoric on addiction and she would freak if I went back to drinking so I don't. And I don't "sneak" drinks on a regular basis because building up a "closet drinker" narrative is scarier than the alcohol itself. (No stories endure like secret stories.) But I am very skeptical about what is "real" and "true" in the pharmacologically driven medical world and I have to work it out for my own satisfaction.

Cigarettes still frighten me. I've never been able to manage them. Even after these 15 years, I occasionally have *The Dream* in which I take "just one puff" and become flush with dread and horror knowing that I am hooked again.

Regardless of whatever chemically addicting qualities tobacco may have, I have built a long and powerful story of weakness and victimization around it, so I leave it alone.

SUE #2: I'm afraid I find your response limiting, in that it feels to me as if you are trying to convince me of your ideas, as opposed to allowing me to respond to your questionnaire with my own. But perhaps I'm misinterpreting.

RODNEY #2: OK. Metaphor. Our connection to one another. I imagine that the more closely our communities of discourse align, the better metaphors do their job. I'm not sure there is ever a one-to-one correspondence, however, between the revelation of the writer and the construal of the reader. My doubts arise because I am not sure if metaphor *finds* connections for us or provides a clearing for us to invent them. The former assumes that connections are already there waiting to be found while the latter supposes that connections are "always there" only as linguistic possibility but are eccentric to the prior experience of each interlocutor.

Metaphor is certainly a conduit for meaning and emotion. The scarf metaphor works for me, certainly. Yet, I wonder if metaphor is more local and contextual than universal. I wonder: how many strands of socio-cultural contingency are required to make a metaphor work? Would the maroon scarf (or a local counterpart) work in a culture that is less ownership-oriented, for example? Where relationships were less ownership-oriented?

SUE #2: From my perspective it *would* work as long as the reader has ever felt alienation, loss, comfort—all the things that the maroon scarf represents. I guess it wouldn't work for someone who has never felt alienation, etc. The metaphor has nothing to do with ownership.

RODNEY: How did your interests in personal writing evolve? Have you written personal stories for as long as you can remember or was there a specific time when the desire to write personal stories appeared? In short, what is the story behind your story writing?

SUE: I began as a fiction writer because no one, back in the late 1980s when I got my MFA degree, ever mentioned the word "nonfiction." No one was writing it back then; no one was reading it. It was a kind of lost genre. It was actually my therapist who finally suggested I write my own story, this, after several failed autobiographical novels.

RODNEY #2: University of Texas Professor of Psychology James W. Pennebaker and colleagues Spera & Buhrfeind, (1994) conducted a small scale study, in 1994, with high level engineers who unexpectedly lost their jobs after many years of service. He asked participants to write in a journal for about 20 minutes a day. One group was asked to comment on they spent their day. Another was asked to write their deepest feelings about what happened. The third group was given no instructions other than to keep the diary. The re-employment results were so much better for the expressive writing group (results ranged from shortened time to a new job to improved immune function and lower blood pressure) that the study was terminated early so that all the participants could benefit from the findings. Interestingly, I think, follow-up studies tried applying the same methods to enhance positive experiences and found it was counterproductive and actually degraded the experience.

My experience has been that in telling and re-telling, editing and rewriting of what I call "life-noire" stories, my perspective changes and my earlier drafts begin to

look foreign, in the manner of those old school papers I might dig up on a rainy day. They make me smile in nostalgic appreciation and I have to resist patting myself on my little head. Writers often describe a “release” in writing life-noire; for me, the emotional catharsis is only a temporary relief unless it is accompanied by a transformative shift in my relationship to the subject such that my former emotional stance is no longer appropriate. I can remember and appreciate how I felt but it is no longer the only possibility open to me. This happens when I have made sense of events or situations in a way that leaves plausible room for love, compassion and belonging.

I remember while writing one essay in particular that tears streamed down my face as I wrote the last few paragraphs. I was feeling love and compassion for myself as a little boy—maybe for the first time—and some bitterness and resentment toward my extremely violent parents, especially my stepmother who beat me almost daily, sometimes knocking me unconscious. The last time I rewrote the essay, tears streamed down my face again but this time the last few paragraphs had changed to show some compassion for my stepmother. The funny thing is: Ever since that rewrite, my “feelings” have changed to reflect the new possibility contained in those last few paragraphs.

I haven’t gotten there with my father yet. The guy hated me since I was a toddler. The last time he mentioned my name, he told my sister he’d kill me if he ever saw me again. Fortunately, we lived on opposite coasts and he killed himself first. Sadly, I think, he is not missed.

I have no clue why he hated me so much. It might be stuff left over from his relationship with my biological mother, who, while he was off to war in Korea, took me

to the baby sitter and never came back. (My grandparents took me after that.) But I think it is more likely that 1) I had an "older" brother who died at 18 months old; 2) my father was disappointed that I wasn't the macho man he wanted in a son; 3) my father harbored fantasies that Buddy (first son) was the son he wanted (he should have lived and I should have died); and 4) he sensed that I decided at a very early age that he was a dumbass.

I am getting older (58) and I'd like to work this out before I die. Not that I think about it every day but it's there. And I am convinced of this much: narrative is responsible for the way I feel now and narrative is the way beyond it.

SUE #2: I'm so sad that you had such a sad and lonely childhood.

For me, I don't write so much for my own catharsis. According to the Greeks, a play (memoir, essay, etc.) should be written in order to provide a catharsis for the listener (reader). I'm differentiating between journal writing and the kind of writing I'm doing ("professional").

4 RODNEY: How are you drawn to certain story ideas? In other words, where do you think your ideas come from? How do you know that it's a good idea or an idea with potential? Have you noticed that there are certain times or places or circumstances that precede a writing idea?

SUE: Well, my first memoir, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You,* was about growing up in an incestuous family—what I'd more or less been trying to tell as fiction. And my therapist is the one who suggested I write this story. While writing it, however, I really didn't mention anything about the sex addiction because I felt so

much shame around that. Finally, though, after I "survived" the publication of the first book, and felt bolder, I overcame the shame of writing about sex addiction—or the shame of going public about it. That's when I began to write *Love Sick.* So, in part, for me, writing personal narrative has to do with *courage*. I am drawn to certain stories as I have the courage to write them. That's one way I come to writing.

Now, I'm working on a collection of personal essays that have to do with the idea of identity. Well, I didn't know this at first, of course. Initially, I just kept thinking of different episodes, times in my life, that I hadn't addressed in either memoir…and, after all, there is more to me (more stories) than those having to do with incest and sex addiction. So, okay, this collection about identity—very broadly defined—is evolving.

Where do the ideas come from? To a large extent, I have no idea. Well, okay, creativity is difficult to pin down. Maybe an idea emerges with a word or a tiny image…and then you just see where it goes. Usually, when I think I know what an essay is about it turns out to be about something else altogether. One essay I wanted to write was supposed to be about this high school romance I had, a "sweet little high school romance" essay. After writing two dark memoirs, I thought a light-hearted little romance was in order. Not to be. After a gazillion failed drafts, it turned out to be more about my grandmother (who knows where she came from!) and less about this young man I loved. So, another dark story!

But, then, there are simply events that must be explored. For example, growing up I had a crush on Pat Boone. Why would a Jewish girl, who was a Democrat and, well, an atheist, have a crush on a right-wing Republican? Or, while living in Rome, Georgia, and

working in a library, why did I become a whistle blower when asbestos was discovered in the library? I had to write to find out.

RODNEY #2: I resonate with what you say about writing personal narrative has to do with courage. I, too, "am drawn to certain stories as I have the courage to write them." It sometimes takes a great deal of courage to grapple with issues you may not feel ready or strong enough to take on. This reminds me about the old Volkswagen Bug—we sometimes have to reach down and find that reserve knob to keep going.

Too, "confessional" narrative has consequences, not all of them good. Judgments are made not just about the merit of craft and worthiness of story but about *you* as a human being. We use words and scaffolding to position ourselves in a certain way but the reader is free to position us in some fetid way that suits his/her own story and positioning needs.

Your comments about essays careening to "the dark side" remind me of how often I hearken to the darkness while trying to write to the light. I think (though I don't "know") that this may be a problem of anyone with a "mind map" and a "personal history" built around powerlessness and double-dealing. Those of us who have constructed such histories, such maps, listen for the other shoe to drop. We hold our breaths *knowing* that snallygasters *do* spring from closets. We squint against the veil of apparent munificence for signs of an impending metamorphosis. And this stance, this position, overshadows all. Until we can finagle a new position, innocence and romance

are lost to us. Until then, most of the stories we tell, no matter how well they start, wind up as another illustration our life-noire metanarrative.

It took me a long to appreciate that I didn't have to give up "the way I see it" to see it some other way. I didn't want to give up "the way I see it" because, although it was somewhat astringent and certainly not healing, it was *buffering*. "The way I see it" made it *not my fault*. Giving up "the way I see it" might—not so much make it my fault but—threaten a lifelong irreproachable fury and sadness justified by a stance of "it was not my fault." It might threaten the curse and the safety-net of lowered expectations offered to avowed victims and the accolades we're given when we manage to do anything at all. So I have an investment in being ruined for life.

Writing that alternative ending to my essay let me see-hear-feel that there are other vantages, meanings, versions of a single story. That really a single story does not exist except as a particular telling constructed from virtually infinite possibilities.

SUE #2: I'm not sure I understand your question. But if you're saying that a single story can be told different ways—yes. In this essay collection I'm working on, while the "back" story (sometimes overtly stated, sometimes not) that hovers behind everything is the fact that my father hurt me as a child—I can't after all escape from my life—nevertheless, the essays in this collection are much more ironic than either of my memoirs. They have a totally different tone and voice.

5 RODNEY: How does an idea become a manuscript? Why are you drawn to writing them down? Why can't you just have an idea and leave it at that?

SUE: Because I don't know what I think until I write it. Ideas are all vague and

abstract. I need to discover the metaphor and the sensory details of the experience, which can only be discovered as I write.

RODNEY #2: Are you saying that the possibilities for story do not lie in facts—though facts may be the bone of story as stone underlies sculpture, or in ideas—but in the telling and the re-telling (reading).

SUE #2: Possibilities for stories lie in facts. The fact that my father molested me ultimately resulted in a memoir. But I didn't fully understand what it meant to me—nor did I understand the metaphors of the experience—until I wrote it. Same for *Love Sick.* The fact that I struggled with sexual addiction is a fact, a fact that ultimately resulted in a book. But, again, I didn't fully understand the language, the metaphors of this experience until I wrote it.

6 RODNEY: What happens between "an idea" and "a finished story?" (Or, what is your writing and editing process?) For example, when you get an idea, do you write it down and do some sort of concept map or storyboard. Or do you just kind of wait for more ideas to evolve? Once you are convinced that you have the makings of a story, do you map out your story before you start? Or do you kind of "free write" until you have something to work with? Do you write from an outline? Or do you write from a basic concept, and then take care of organizing it later? Do you revise and edit as you write or do you pretty much write a draft, then return to revise and edit?

SUE: No outlines. No story boards. No mapping out. No waiting around for ideas to evolve one after the other. I can only discover the story as I write it, one word at a

time, one draft at a time. Sometimes the story is there, more or less, in the first draft. *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* took only 3 months to write, whereas my second memoir, *Love Sick*, took five years to write.

After I have a draft, then I keep editing it, revising it, starting over, editing, revising, on and on and on….

7 RODNEY: Is your writing and editing process pretty consistent from one story to the next or is it circumstantial?

SUE: Fairly consistent. I write a rough draft. Print it out. Sit in a chair with a pencil and edit it on the hard page. Put those changes into the computer. Print it out. Sit in a chair with a pencil and edit it on the hard page. Put those changes into the computer….on and on. At some point, I show the version to Marc, my partner, who will offer feedback, which will either consist of "small" things or else, conceptually, I'm off in left field so I throw away everything and totally begin again.

RODNEY #2: That's how I write! For something like this dissertation, I might work up a rough outline and print it out so I can have something to reign me in a little. Honestly, though, I end up changing the outline as I go along. The outline still serves a purpose though. If I didn't have one, the dissertation would end up 1,000 pages! I tend to see everything as very interconnected, so I have a hard time leaving anything out.

I "print it out, edit it on the hard page in pencil, enter the changes into the computer, print it out ... on and on" as you do; but I pre-edit a lot too. I envy your ability to write a draft through and then return and edit it later." I have a sense that this is how it "should" be done but a sentence crops up in my peripheral vision and it won't go away.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

"That's not *exactly* what I wanted to say," a little voice nags. "The next few sentences would make more sense if I changed it." And I am *compelled* to fix it– *now*.

I am aghast when our dear friend feels compelled to line up the striations of our rainbow wood salt & pepper shakers. She cannot tolerate them sitting there with the top and bottom colors misaligned. I cluck, tsk, and tut-tut. But, there I am– fixing sentences midstream. Even as I am writing this to you, I am doing it! Sigh.

This method "works" for me but it doesn't seem very efficient and I am very big on efficiency. (My wife makes the outlandish claim that efficiency has its place but does not trump all other values!) But I seem torn between efficiency and a peevish perfectionism.

I wonder: Roughly what portion of the total time spent on a project do you use for editing and polishing? (Equal time writing and editing, for example. Or, two thirds of the time is spent on editing and polishing.)

SUE #2: More time editing, revising. I'm not good at numbers and percentages, but definitely more time revising than writing.

8 RODNEY: Do your stories turn out pretty much as you conceived them or do they tend to change and evolve as you write them? If they change, why do they change and how do you know the change is for the better?

SUE: I don't do a whole lot of "conceiving" ahead of time because I feel that to do so is to stifle the writing (like that high-school romance essay. I tried to force that essay, whereas the essay really wanted to be about my grandmother). So, instead, I like to

follow the words, as if I'm listening to a whisper, and see where the words lead me. That said, with *Love Sick*, for example, I pretty much knew that the structure would be around 28 days I spent in rehab. And the book ended up that way.

I'd say there's more mystery in terms of these essays. Every time I preconceive, I get in trouble, whereas if I begin with some small image or a vague idea (Pat Boone; asbestos in the library) and just let it flow, then the piece better evolves.

Why do they change? Good question. I mean, that really is a good question. I'm not sure I know…except, clearly, the original idea wasn't what I was meant to write. I guess they change because the words want me to know X about an experience as opposed to Y. That the experience was about X, not Y, as originally conceived. Now, sometimes, say, a third draft is worse than the second draft. It doesn't always go in one clear direction. Sometimes, as I try to find my way, I'll make an essay worse before, slowly, it begins to coalesce into a whole. How do I know the change is for the better? It's like an "a-ha!" moment. It just feels right.

RODNEY #2: Well, I always know how mine will turn out. They rarely turn out that way ... but I start out knowing! People say they are "thinking out loud" when they are talking their way through a problem. That's what writing is for me. Rather than writing what I want to say, I write to find out what I want to say.

I once thought this "method" was a waste of time because I wound up cutting the first two-thirds of the manuscript. Kate again insists that efficiency is not always the highest goal. The process does produce the last third that I want to keep. Once I accepted the duality that I abhor inefficiency and this works for me, I found that the first two-thirds

of the manuscript actually is not waste. It is more like seeded sod that I can set aside for future use. I keep first drafts and read them later, often finding I can pull out a few paragraphs or a few pages and use them to develop an entirely different story. Time has rolled on. I come to the first drafts with added experience and new eyes.

I tend to think that, unless you work slavishly with a theme and an outline—as in the classic "introduction, thesis, three main points, and conclusion"—you are really wading through a pool of virtually endless connections that can be made from the initial "vague idea" that prompted you to write. (I say *virtually* endless because possibility seems necessarily limited by the linguistic devices available to us.) I'm not sure if "the experience was about X, not Y, as originally conceived" in some essential sense, but perhaps X is the thread of possibility you find most interesting or meaningful. That is to say, you might have picked up a different thread within the same story and followed it in ways just as appealing and evocative. I wonder if a particular strand is plucked from the virtually infinite web of possibility because it promises the occasion to transform ambiguity and confusion into conviction and comprehension. In other words, we reject those avenues that are not ecological to constructive congruence.

Does this make any sense? If so, what do you think?

SUE #2: Sorry, I'm not at all an academic! I try to keep things simple and not over think. So…I may not be a good responder for your questionnaire because of this, but, there you have it!

9 RODNEY: Do you have any dialogical or feedback process that you can identify? Do you discuss your story with friends, family, colleagues at various stages of the writing? Do you consult the writing of authors you admire for inspiration before and during development of a new story? Do you go to the movies or watch certain television shows when you are writing? Don't let any of these questions box you in; I am interested in any habits you may have that help you write.

SUE: I only show my work to Marc, my partner, who is the world's best editor. Well, he's a wonderful editor for me, anyway. I don't "do" anything else (movies, etc.) *just for the sake of writing.* I do, however, read a lot of poetry when I write and sometimes discover a word—just a single word!—that will open up new worlds for me.

RODNEY #2: Yes! It is the same with me except when I am stuck, I will intentionally strike up a conversation or read a book or watch a movie that is (often very tangentially) relevant and, as you say, sometimes "just a single word" as you say or phrase will grab and off I go. I don't think *what* the activity is really matters much, so long as there a little nudges and I can get traction again. (Can you tell I was brought up in snow country?)

How does your dialog with Marc play out? Is it more of an editorial commentary or more of a Socratic questioning kind of process?

SUE #2: He's not an academic either. Just informal talking for the "bigger" issues. And, he makes editorial marks on the page if I have a clunky sentence, etc.

RODNEY: Do you have any internal dialog or feedback process that you can identify? If so, what kinds of inner conversations do you have about your writing? Is it very similar to the ones you have when you cook dinner or make up a shopping list or is it somehow different?

SUE: As much as possible, I try *not* to listen to myself when I write. My own internal voice would always say, “This is bad, you should have been a waitress.” (Not that there’s anything wrong with being a waitress.) In other words, my own interior thoughts are probably too ego drive. But, when I get myself out of my way, and just focus on the word before me, I do better.

My other thought processes, oh, cooking dinner (which I avoid as much as possible), is very goal oriented: I have to eat to survive. Creative thoughts, however, are goal oriented only in that I want to figure out what this image means! (What does this maroon scarf mean? Why do I remember it after all these years?) But, at the same time, it doesn’t have that *practical* quality as in how long does the soup stay in the microwave. It’s kind of being “outside of time,” whereas cooking, etc. is being *inside of time*, or trapped in time, in this one moment. In writing, I can be in “any” time.

RODNEY #2: And three or four hours later, you notice that it’s midnight! This is what social psychologist Susan K. Perry (1999) calls “writing in flow “in her book by that title. We seem not in charge; the conversation is; “the words are” in charge. We become consumed and subsumed by the conversation and, I think, become who we really are—a space for conversation.

There is another kind of "dialog" that is subtle and more difficult to spot. It happens when you look at your draft and you compare it to some ideal, say a Raymond Carver or an Annie Dillard piece. The comparison inspires you to make changes in your text. And you read it again and "just know" it is better. Or maybe a passage brings to mind a warning you read about the difference between the sympathetic and the maudlin. You don't experience this kind of dialog as words and sentences but more like a "sense" that this needs changing in this way or that. But I think this "sense" is a very dense and compact kind of communication.

I know what you mean about the hypercritical ("Who am I fooling? This is crap!") kind of inner dialog. If I listened to that, I'd never start or finish anything. I was referring to the "What does this maroon scarf mean? Why do I remember it after all these years?" kind of internal conversation that you mention. I was wondering if this is a predictable part of your writing process. Also, is this kind of questioning part of the formative stage of writing or does it continues throughout the writing project?

Do you ever read your work out loud and kind of pretend to be reading something written by someone else? Or kind of switch back and forth between being the reader and being the author?

SUE #2: No, I don't read out loud.

RODNEY: About cooking. Funny. I don't think of cooking that way. I want the food to be tasty and beautiful and nutritious. When I was growing up, we went hungry for extended periods of time. "I had to eat to survive," as you say, and ate the most god-awful concoctions. "Fried dough": flour, water, and (with luck) baking powder fried in

lard. Sugar sandwich: spread lard on white “fluff” bread, fry in iron pan and sprinkle sugar on it (crunch, crunch). Leftover spaghetti sauce on toast. Basically, we combined any two or more ingredients that were available and tolerable together.

So now, I celebrate an abundance of food by making it smell lovely and look beautiful as well as fill the gut. And when I am cooking for someone else, I think of it as making a gift. I often hold out a “story” and a mental image of my delighted guests as I prepare the meal. So, I can get into that flowing “out-of-time” experience while cooking as well.

SUE #2: It’s difficult for me to *find* your questions in lengthy analyses. Here’s the best I can do: To some extent, I don’t even remember all the details until I am actually writing. So I’m not thinking about them. I just plunge myself into the sensory imagery of the scene (what did this moment smell like, taste like, sound like, etc.) and then the pertinent details arise. Like the maroon scarf. It never occurred to me that this maroon scarf was part of the mix until there it was, on the page. While writing, I try to think as little as possible; I try to feel and smell and taste as much as possible.

11 RODNEY: Does the writing of personal narratives change or influence *you* in anyway? Do you discover or learn new things in the process of writing a story? Do you "see" or perceive things differently during or after writing a story? Please describe anything of this nature.

SUE: I learn who I am through writing. I honestly don't know any other way. Well, okay, in therapy I learn about how to change my bad behaviors, which I'm not sure I could do through writing.

But only through writing do I learn the metaphor of the experiences. For example, sure, in therapy, I learned that the sex addiction was a direct result of the childhood incest. But I didn't know how to *feel* this or understand this metaphorically. What were the metaphors of this experience? That's what I learned through writing: my personal metaphors.

RODNEY #2: I wonder if we "*learn* who we are through writing" or *create* who we are through writing? The distinction may seem inconsequential but to learn who we are involves a discovery process, an unearthing of something buried and already there, whereas creating who we are is more of a building process, an artful engineering from the resources available to us. Adopting one case or the other has considerable impact on beliefs about what is or is not possible.

SUE #2: I guess I'll just stick with my original answer. Again, sorry, I am totally unable to be an academic and analyze in this way. It is counterintuitive to me.

12 RODNEY: Is there anything else you would like to add? Or suggestions you would like to make?

SUE: Yes, I think everyone should write his/her own personal story. If everyone did, we'd have fewer wars, less violence….

RODNEY #2: Sorry, this is a bit non sequitur for me. Please explain the belief structure and the cause-and-effect proposal underlying this statement.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

SUE #2: Sorry. You're right. It is a total non sequitur. I just made the leap since we were talking about personal writing—or any kind of writing—and I was just thinking that if people would engage in art, and learn through writing/reading/painting (instead of learning through politics), that we would be more humane. But maybe not.

RODNEY #2: Reflecting upon your experience of responding to the initial questions and the follow-up questions. What was that like for you? Was it useful for you in any way? What questions would you like to see added? Whatever comes to mind.

SUE #2: As much as I enjoyed participating in the original questionnaire, I'm afraid I must admit that I didn't enjoy the follow-up questions. I'm so sorry! At times, in the follow up, I was confused by what, exactly, you were asking (your responses were so long that I wasn't always clear what your question was); other times, I felt as if you wanted me to provide a certain response, more along the lines of what *you* were thinking. In other words, the original questions seemed open ended, while the follow-up questions seemed "closed" ended. Thus, I wasn't really able to provide useful additional thoughts or insights. I felt kind of stifled. Again, I apologize. I'm sure much of this is because, as stated above, I am not even close to being an academic. I'm simply not able to *think* along those lines.

RODNEY #2: Thanks for your response. I appreciate your candor. I am sorry this second half was disappointing for you. (Truly.) I guess I made a mess of it.

Re-reading this transcript, I can see how it might seem that I was trying to persuade you of my points. I was trying (too hard) to get a viewpoint out there for your response, though not necessarily your agreement.

My responses are long. Probably too long. I was attempting to respond to your first answers in a rambling sort of way that expressed what I am reading and thinking about with this project. I hoped if I said enough, you would pick up *something* here or there and respond to it. The particular response is unimportant as long as it has some bearing on writing and authorship. This seemed to work fairly well with the other participants.

Here is what I am up to. There is a huge debate going on in nearly all disciplines about whether there is any such thing as a "self" or an "author" in the romantic sense that ideas come from within us. Some say we cannot know or experience anything that is not encompassed by our language and culture. Therefore, our ideas, beliefs, even emotions are “local” and not universal. The older humanistic conception that ideas originate from within, from the mind working directly with experience is pretty much passé. Another view is that we are just kind of stitching together quilts from the fabric provided. There are no unique ideas and they do not originate from within but through social interaction with others and with the larger culture. Still another is that, sure, we are working with ideas that originate from interaction with others, but we are not cookie cutter products because we have unique combinations of experiences. We each develop idiosyncratic interpretations and meanings.

Although this is all very academic sounding, everything we do and are as writers will be understood differently depending on whether there is a meaningful distinction between fact and fiction, whether there are universal experiences or only "local" experiences, whether "personal" experience is only a specific instance of cultural phenomenon.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Can an author say "this is my creation" if the story is the product of a specific language, society and time? Is it my creation if it can only be told because someone else told a similar story in the past? Some say writers exist but "the author" in the humanistic sense of the originator, is dead.

I am not looking for a particular answer - just a discussion by people who write for a living. I specifically chose nonacademic writers because one of the things I am interested in knowing is whether any of this is even "on the radar" for nonacademic professional writers.

Jack Swenson

1 RODNEY: Why do you write? What is your motive in writing? Is it to influence others? Is it to a share something about yourself with others? If so, say more about why you desire to share life stories with others?

JACK: I write because it gives me great personal satisfaction. I do not now write to influence others; I have done so in the past as both an advertising copywriter and college public relations officer. Fiction and creative nonfiction writing (the kind of writing I do now) is an art form. I guess I do it because I can.

RODNEY #2: You seem to distinguish telling stories to influence others to buy or donate from telling them to influence others' experience of the world. I wonder if there is that much difference?

JACK #2: It never occurred to me that I might be influencing others' experience of the world. I don't want readers to *do* something; I want them to sit there and enjoy the experience. If they "learn" something, fine.

RODNEY #2: Let me explain. I have worked in "marcom" and PR also. When I wrote a PR piece or the *Annual Report to Sponsors* for JFS of Ventura County, for instance, and included schmaltzy vignettes with sad kickoffs and inspirational updates to illustrate the powerful difference JFS funding can make in the lives of a *particular* hungry child or frail elder living in our small corner, my storytelling was intended to provide an opening for listeners to create the experience that their action or inaction has consequences. When I wrote a personal essay about going hungry in a time when people did not believe in interfering with the "private affairs" of the family, my motives were the

same. In the report, I hoped people give money to further the good works of JFS of Ventura County. In the essay, I hoped people would consider the import of rendering "private" the welfare of children.

In *To Edward Hoagland: On the Meaning of Frogs*, I jousted with Edward Hoagland through his essay, *The Courage of Turtles*, to extol the breathtaking beauty, diversity and adaptability of frogs, and to trace them to the awe inspiring (pre)historic "moment" when life first left water to walk on land, an event that supposably made us possible. Then I talk about the rapid decline of frogs in recent times, presumably due to habitat loss, pollution and increased ultraviolet exposure due to depletion of the protective ozone layer.

In all these cases, I ask the reader to (re)consider their default philosophical stance in relation to the world and the fellow beings that inhabit it. That is *my* motive in writing. What is your's?

JACK #2: My motive? I write fiction and fictional memoirs because I can. For years I didn't think I could. I enjoy doing it, and it doesn't bother me that I have a very small audience. I'm 73 years old; I just don't care.

2 RODNEY: Do your stories have some "truth" to share? If so, do you think this truth is "universal" (that is, that is something true about all people or all times) or do you think this truth is more "local" (that it is something you learned that might be true of some people or sometimes).

JACK: Well, not some lesson or moral, but yes, there is truth in my stories. At times the truth is universal; at times it is merely my own way of looking at things. Probably it is more often the latter.

RODNEY #2: I agree. Sometimes it is difficult to separate what "is merely my own way of looking at things" from the Truth (with a capital "T").

I sometimes wonder if most "universal truths" are actually very grounded in our culture and traditions and not so universal after all. Our way of looking at things, even our emotions and feelings, whether or not these are part of our biological nature, may be in their expression and their objects relationally constructed out of socio-cultural "stuff" like language, symbols, metaphors and stories learned through social interaction.

If so, what we express through our "personal" stories isn't such internal and deeply personal stuff, though we may experience it as such. I wonder if our personal Experiences are based on more public culture-derived stories about "good" lives, "bad" lives, "sad" and "tragic" lives and so on.

JACK #2: As far as I know, there is a good deal of universality (similarity) in culture and traditions. "Know Thyself" and "Nothing Too Much" were inscribed on the entrance pillars of a Greek temple. "Do Unto Others…" is sure universal if not universally practiced. The list could go on and on.

RODNEY #2: I am curious: Can I have a tragic life without the cultural wherewithal to formulate and express it? What if the only valid option available to me in my situation is heroic stoicism? Would I be sad and despondent anyway? Can we have an emotion that is not in the common vocabulary? Is there a vocabulary of emotion? I really don't know. But I'm doubtful.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

JACK #2: The answers to your question are yes; huh? got me; no; maybe.



RODNEY: How did your interests in personal writing evolve? Have you written personal stories for as long as you can remember or was there a specific time when the desire to write personal stories appeared? In short, what is the story behind your story writing?

JACK #2: Encouragement in grammar school > high school newspaper > college newsletter and reading > post college reading and discovery of models > graduate school courses > teaching literature and writing for many years > discovery of a personal idol (Raymond Carver) > trial and error > publication of my first book of stories > stimulus of teaching writing at a senior center.

RODNEY #2: So writing has been a big part of your life. What do you mean by "discovery of models"?

JACK #2: My models were Isaac Babel, the prose pieces of William Carlos Williams, and Hemingway's short fiction.

RODNEY #2: Are you a fan of the early or the later Raymond Carver? You could be a fan of both, of course, but that would be like having two idols rather than one. No?

Some fans only like the work he did when his drinking was out of control. Others favor the work he did from recovery to early death.

JACK #2: I like the post recovery stuff especially. He and I went to the same finishing school in Calistoga, California. It's a rehab called Myrtledale.

RODNEY #2: Raymond Carver was born in was born in Clatskanie, Oregon, just up the road from where I live. I have a Carver short story collection and have attempted

to read it a few times without success, although I did finish a couple of stories. I don't say this to disparage Carver or his fans. The shortcoming is entirely my own; I'm sure of it. After all, he almost single-handedly resurrected the American short story. Still, I don't get it.

What is it about Raymond Carver that appeals to you? His subject matter? His writing style?

JACK #2: Both.

RODNEY #2: Carver said:

> I love the swift leap of a good story, the excitement that often commences in the first sentence, the sense of beauty and mystery found in the best of them; and the fact - so crucially important to me back at the beginning and now still a consideration - that the story can be written and read in one sitting. (Foreword to *Where I'm Calling From*, 1998)

So you strive for the same austere intensity in your writing? If so, why does the "minimalism" appeal to you? Carver disliked having this term applied to his work but I think it is serviceable in the context of this question.

JACK #2: Amen to what he says in the above quote, by the way. Yes, I like clear, clean, punchy prose. I'm an old newspaper guy and ad man after all. I dislike stuffy or pompous or affectedly "sensitive" prose. The term "minimalism" is of course a snotty put-down, but that's okay—no skin off my nose, as Carver would say.

RODNEY: How are you drawn to certain story ideas? In other words, where do you think your ideas come from? How do you know that it's a good idea or an idea with potential? Have you noticed that there are certain times or places or circumstances that precede a writing idea?

JACK: Primarily I get ideas from the form or content of stories that I read or events from my life both past and present. My reading often sparks ideas. I'm not always sure that the idea is a good one. I try, not always successfully, to cut out the heroic and the cute. Ideas occur at any time or place. I have written stories in my head in the shower or when driving across town. Late afternoon, early evening is the best time for me to write. Most often I have to make an effort to find ideas; I have to dig. By that, I mean I have to read something. I find a lot of stories on line. I keep an eye out for stories in the events that occur in my life day by day.

RODNEY #2: I share your experience of being “goaded” into writing an essay by reading something (sometimes only tangentially) related to a topic of interest to me. The most obvious example was my 1995 essay, “To Edward Hoagland: The Meaning of Frogs” written in direct response to my reading of Hoagland’s essay, “The Courage of Turtles.” In it, I playfully banter with Hoagland about the superiority frogs and their more sympathetic character when compared to turtles as a lead-in to discussing the sad decline of frogs as a harbinger of environmental degradation. I’d been mulling over the subject since reading a related National Geographic Kids article in the Sunday paper. Hoagland’s essay prompted me to begin by providing a venue for discussing the National Geographic

article. The frog as a symbol of kinship to all life was something that evolved as I wrote and edited the piece.

The thing is: Although this essay was different from the National Geographic article and “The Courage of Turtles” (Hoagland’s essay), it riffed off them and really could not have happened without both of them. Reading or listening to related material sets up a kind of internal dialog in which I try to integrate what I am reading or hearing with everything I already know. The struggle to make sense of it sometimes generates a new perspective that sorts out not only the new material but the old stuff as well. “New ideas” come out of this process. But, then, are these ideas really my own? Or were they sort of purloined and rouged over for black market? Does anyone ever have a truly *original* idea, I wonder?

JACK #2: How about $E=MC^2$?

5 RODNEY: How does an idea become a manuscript? Why are you drawn to writing them down? Why can't you just have an idea and leave it at that?

JACK: I can't just have a story idea and leave it at that because I haven't figured out to make them grow by themselves. I have to sit down and make something of the idea. I have to flesh it out. Add a situation, a setting, people thinking and speaking, events, a plot and a resolution, etc. The idea becomes a manuscript by first thinking up an opening line. Then I add other lines one by one. I may or may not know at this stage how things are going to turn out, how the story is going to end. I try to avoid pat endings, a resolution that is too tidy.

RODNEY #2: Hah! Can’t figure out to make them grow by themselves! That’s good. So just letting an idea die on the vine is not an option? Don’t you ever say, hey, the

idea has potential and I'd read a story like that but, you know, I just don't want to write it myself?

JACK #2: Yup. I do that all the time.

RODNEY #2: I notice that you mention "avoid the heroic and the cute, avoid pat endings" throughout this conversation. It's difficult isn't it?

JACK #2: Yes, indeed. I like to be the hero and cuteness is my middle name. But I try to avoid these no-nos. As for pat ending, I have found a great cure: just delete the last paragraph.

RODNEY #2: We want those kind of endings in life. In the era of our formative years, we were to given to expect the heroic living that resulted in tidy endings with happy-ever-afters. We have nostalgia for them, even as we deny it, don't you think?

JACK #2: Very interesting point. I think having a nostalgia for them is maybe why we find them so hard to avoid.

RODNEY #2: We don't find happy tidy endings but we want them and we look for them. And when we want them bad enough, we find them, don't we? Only "real life" is messy and unruly and ongoing, so that our happy, tidy, and heroic endings are more like arbitrary markers along a Möbius band.

Besides, in the epoch when I was learning to write, I was taught that you can't just leave the conflicts involved in any good story in a state of unresolved anorgasmic tension. You must "resolve it" in some satisfying way.

Traditionally, "in some satisfying way" has meant heroic/happy/tidy endings. I've found that most readers still want them and like them *if you can make it believable*. They

want you to provide them with “evidence” that heroic/happy/tidy endings are plausible. There’s the rub. If you “go for it” and ring untrue, readers feel disappointed and betrayed. What do you think?

JACK #2: Well, you can have partial resolutions. You can show one thread of thee tapestry, not the whole piece. I agree 100% with what you say here. Very well put.

6 RODNEY: What happens between “an idea” and “a finished story”? (Or, what is your writing and editing process?) For example, when you get an idea, do you write it down and do some sort of concept map or storyboard. Or do you just kind of wait for more ideas to evolve? Once you are convinced that you have the makings of a story, do you map out your story before you start? Or do you kind of "free write" until you have something to work with? Do you write from an outline? Or do you write from a basic concept, and then take care of organizing it later? Do you revise and edit as you write or do you pretty much write a draft, then return to revise and edit?

JACK: I go from idea to first sentence to second sentence to third sentence, etc. I seldom stop until I am finished. I aim for a resolution or a partial resolution of the conflict or problem at the end. When I finish, I add a title and click Save. I write a draft straight through if possible, and then return and edit it later.

RODNEY #2: Sounds like my wife. People ask her: How can you run a 60K? Her wisenheimer response is that you do it by putting one foot in front of the other. Over and over and over....

I envy your ability “write a draft straight through and then return and edit it later.” I have a sense that this is how it “should” be done but I can’t seem to finagle it. A sentence catches my peripheral eye. It nags me. “That’s not *exactly* what I wanted to

say," I hear. "The next few sentences would make more sense if I changed it." And I am compelled to fix it– now.

I am aghast and agog at our dear friend who feels compelled to line up the striations of our rainbow laminated wood salt & pepper shakers. She just can't tolerate them sitting there with opposing colors unmatched. I cluck, tsk, and tut-tut. But, here I am– fixing sentences midstream. Even now, as I am writing this to you, I am doing it! Sigh.

This works for me but it doesn't seem very efficient. I am big on efficiency. (My wife makes the outlandish claim that efficiency has its place but does not outrank all other values!) But I seem torn between efficiency and a peevish perfectionism.

I wonder: Roughly what portion of total time spent on a project is used for editing and polishing? (Equal time writing and editing, for example. Or, two thirds of the time is spent on editing and polishing.)

JACK #2: It varies. Sometimes I get it right the first time. Then it's just a matter of comma or a word change here and there, a nip and a tuck. Other times I fuss and stew, and when that happens, it wastes a great deal of time. Sometimes the story never does jell, and I put it aside for good. I write fast, so usually I finish a story in an hour or two (I write flash fiction). I may spend five minutes or five hours revising. Often the best solution for me when a story gets stubborn is to rewrite it, i.e., start from scratch.



RODNEY: Is your writing and editing process pretty consistent from one story to the next or is it circumstantial?

JACK: Well, it's somewhat circumstantial. Most of the time I sit down at the

computer (where I do most of my writing but not all) with an idea or subject in mind, then "put the first dot of paint on the page", i.e., the first line. Then I'm off and running. Usually I write straight through, unless I am interrupted by a phone call, etc. My editing process is consistent, except for times when I get stuck. I know that I should just put the story away until another day at that point, but I often don't do that. I fiddle with a line (esp. an ending line or lines) for hours sometimes. What works best is leaving it alone and coming back to it later. Then I see things with fresh eyes.

RODNEY #2: Like you, I tend to go through the same routine "except for times when I get stuck." Then I am forced to try something else.

I wonder if writers develop a kind of "writer's narrative" for themselves, a little story about writers and writing that becomes "installed" as an internal monologue that says "this is just the way I do it"? And this becomes calcified into "this is the way I must do it"? If so, could a more reflexive writing practice expand our "writer" narrative and, therefore, expand the possibilities for our writing?

JACK #2: This is surely true for many writers, e.g., my students (I teach a cw class at a senior center). They stubbornly cling to a mannerism (e.g., dropping articles in a poem) or are too timid to venture much beyond what they know. (Memoir is their forte.) This is an interesting question. (You pose many of them.) I try anything and everything, but I too come back to what I think I do best. Maybe the difference is that I am willing to try other things whereas they are hesitant. I think this is why it is essential for writers to *read* widely. I am always poking around the online flash and micro fiction archives, and I have read many of the print anthologies and collections, too. By the way, *Quick Bright Things* by Ron Wallace is a must.

RODNEY: Do your stories turn out pretty much as you conceived them or do they tend to change and evolve as you write them? If they change, why do they change and how do you know the change is for the better?

JACK: I have changed in this regard. I think my early stories came out as I conceived them. Often now I don't know how they are going to come out when I begin. I depend a lot on getting a rhythm going now, getting the ball rolling, and then waiting for an inspired line later on after which I can type THE END.

RODNEY #2: Well, I always know how mine should turn out. They rarely turn out that way ... but I start out knowing! People say they are “thinking out loud” when they are talking their way through a problem. That’s what writing is for me. Rather than writing what I want to say, I write to find out what I want to say.

JACK #2: I think that’s how it works for me, too. It’s important to *let it* work that way.

RODNEY #2: I once thought this "method" was a waste of time because I wound up cutting the first two-thirds of the manuscript. And (again) my wife again reminds me that efficiency is not always the goal. The process did produce the last third that I want to keep. Once I accepted the duality that I abhor inefficiency *and* this works for me, I found that the first two-thirds of the manuscript actually was not waste. It was more like seeded sod set aside for future use. I keep first drafts and read them later, often finding I can pull a few paragraphs or a few pages and use them to develop an entirely different story. Time has rolled on. I come to the first drafts with added experience and new perspectives gleaned from further living.

JACK #2: Amen.

9 RODNEY: Do you have any dialogical or feedback process that you can identify? Do you discuss your story with friends, family, colleagues at various stages of the writing? Do you consult the writing of authors you admire for inspiration before and during development of a new story? Do you go to the movies or watch certain television shows when you are writing? Don't let any of these questions box you in; I am interested in any habits you may have that help you write.

JACK: I read some of my stories to my wife. She is not a literary person per se, but her judgment is good. She tells me if an ending is forced or if it isn't. That's a big help. I read my stories to my writing class, but they seem to like the "nice" stories more than the "nasty" ones. I do get some useful feedback from them. Editors of journals are of little help. My grad school teachers were mostly useless also. Yes, I do "consult" my writing idols from time to time. No I don't watch movies or TV when I am writing. I don't listen to music, either. I like quiet. One habit I have is drinking Coke when I write. Also, I seem to write better or more easily at certain times, late afternoon and early evening, especially.

RODNEY #2: Once again, I think most readers still want nice stories with a tidy ending *if you can make it believable*. I've written stories/essays that other writers thought were really good but "guy on the street" readers did not like at all. As my in-laws say about movies, I don't want to pay good money to be depressed or morally instructed. I want to be entertained and feel good at the end. I see a big rift between what "serious writers" idealize and what readers want to read. Do you?

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

JACK #2: Yes. Writers try to tell a story in an artful manner; this means paying a great deal of attention to language and the art of storytelling. You don't want to beat readers over the head with your "message" or serve them up an explicit thesis as in an essay. I don't think most readers are interested in craft; they want razzle dazzle. Readers want long reads, too—novels. They don't have patience or time to read short stories let alone flash!

RODNEY #2: Also, tell me more about your grad school teachers being "mostly useless." What do you mean by this? If I were about to enroll in an MA/MFA in creative writing and asked your advice, what would you say to me and why?

JACK #2: My advice would be don't enroll. Read and write a lot instead. If a student ignored this excellent advice, I tell them okay, go ahead, but they will try to remake you in their own image. Don't let them do that. I could go into a great deal of detail about this, but my experience was that cw teachers aren't interested in you, and they don't pay attention. (I handed in a second copy of a story to teacher once who wanted a revision and I misunderstood. He praised the story the second time; much better, he said. Of course I hadn't changed a word!) On the other hand, my lit teachers were as good as my writing teachers were poor. I had some great teachers, Herbert Blau for example (drama) and Walter Van Tilberg Clark. Listening to Clark was like hearing God lecture!



RODNEY: Do you have any internal dialog or feedback process that you can identify? If so, what kinds of inner conversations do you have about your writing? Is it very similar to the ones you have when

you cook dinner or make up a shopping list or is it somehow different?

JACK: I'm sure I have an internal dialogue, but I'm not really aware of it. Maybe a monitor would be a better term: that word is no good, this would be better, etc. You've said that already; pick a different work (another example). Mostly for me it is just a sentence by sentence march to the end, then the cutting and pasting. I think it's a lot more focused than the kind of thinking that goes on when you are doing a household chore or just scribbling a grocery list. The level of concentration, if not absolute, is pretty close.

RODNEY #2: And three hours later, you notice it's midnight! This is what Social psychologist Susan K. Perry (1999) calls "writing in flow "and titles her book on the subject. I am not in charge, the conversation is, "the words are." We become consumed and subsumed by the conversation and, I think, become who we really are—a space for conversation.

There is another kind of "dialog" that is subtle and more difficult to spot. It happens when you look at your draft and you compare it to some ideal, say a Raymond Carver piece. The comparison inspires you to make changes in your text. And you read it again and "just know" it is better. Or maybe a passage brings to mind a piece of advice you read about the difference between the sympathetic and the maudlin. You don't experience this kind of dialog as words and sentences but more like a "sense" that this needs to be changed in this way or that. But I think this "sense" is a very dense and compact kind of communication.

JACK #2: You may be right.

RODNEY: Does the writing of personal narratives change or influence *you* in anyway? Do you discover or learn new things in the process of writing a story? Do you "see" or perceive things differently during or after writing a story? Please describe anything of this nature.

JACK: Absolutely. It really gives me perspective. For example, I see myself in more critical light. I'm better able to evaluate both my present and past as well. "Well, what do you know? I didn't have a lousy childhood after all. I had a pretty nice life when I was a kid!" It also makes me appreciate how hard it is to do what writers do. Anybody who thinks writing stories is easy is nuts. In some ways, writing narratives has smoothed some of my hard edges and made me more sympathetic to the plight and perspective of others. I think I'm less self-centered. I know I have joyfully written about things that occurred to me that I am far less proud of or happy about afterwards. Writing is a humbling experience.

RODNEY: #2: I've found that writing influences me sometimes in astounding and powerful ways. Although I'm not sure writing about it makes me understand what I went through better in the sense of getting at some final Truth of the matter, I do think it helps generate new or additional meanings and possibilities.

I wrote one personal essay dealing with some very difficult emotions around childhood rejection and physical abuse. I edited and rewrote this piece several times over a period of years. Each time I completed a rewrite, I experienced a very clear sense that not only had the *story* on the page changed but my subjective personal history had

changed as well. The last rewrite ended a lifetime of bitterness and resentment. Powerful stuff.

JACK #2: Good for you. I had a similar experience, though I was neither rejected nor physically abused.

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RODNEY: Is there anything else you would like to add? Or suggestions you would like to make?

JACK: If you've got a good memory, write both fiction and memoirs. If, like me, you don't, write "fictional memoirs." Here are a few things to write down on 3x5 cards and tape them up around your workplace. NOTHING HEROIC, NOTHING CUTE. AVOID TIDY RESOLUTIONS. DON'T SPELL EVERYTHING OUT. BE YOURSELF.

RODNEY #2: In the course of my readings in postmodernist theory, I've come across the idea that memory is not actually an individual possession. It is a collective undertaking that involves a great deal of negotiation.

JACK #2: Indeed, remembering is a shaky business. My memory isn't very good. Some of my students seem to remember *everything*. It's all kind of fuzzy to me. No doubt it is impacted by later thinking and experience. It's fun to get together with old friends and compare notes. I know there is supposedly a collective unconscious (this seems right to me), but I didn't know there is also a collective memory. I suppose there is, and the shamans now are writers and teachers? As far as my writing goes, I am not too concerned about the accuracy of my memories; I'll never write my memoirs, or if I do I'll label it fiction or fictional narrative. I write stories, generally based on my personal experience in one way or another, but usually the finished story is a combination of fiction and fact. I

do find, as you did, that writing about childhood and my parents has been useful. I think I'm a "kinder, gentler" person as a result. I know I've shed of the resentments that I harbored. Maybe I'm like a cheese—I get better with age.

RODNEY #2: Yet, people believe the "facts" they remember are unequivocal and based on their own experience. I was skeptical about this and chalked it up to postmodernist posturing and conjecture. Recently, however, I've been reading more mainstream research literature that to the same conclusion.

So, I guess you don't need that good of a personal memory to write memoirs but you do need a good peripheral (collective) memory to tell you how it "really" was. Not surprisingly, the studies found that our memories tend to coincide with those most dear to us.

## Summary and Look Ahead

Thus spoke the writers and I in conversation. While interesting in itself, do these conversations have anything to say about the guiding questions:

1. What are the differences between modern humanist and postmodern constructionist notions of persons and authors and persons-as-authors?
2. What do the responses of nine writers of personal narrative to a series of questions about their writing process and practices suggest about their views on persons and authors and persons-as-authors?
3. Specifically, how much have postmodern and constructionist considerations affected the process and practices of writers of personal narrative?

Finding contribution in these conversations will be the task of Chapter 9: *Responsive Discussion of Themes.*

# CHAPTER 9: RESPONSIVE DISCUSSION OF THEMES

*"The solution to the problem changes the problem."*
~ John Peers, 1,001 Logical Laws, Accurate Axioms, Profound Principles, Trusty Truisms, Homey Homilies, Colorful Corollaries, Quotable Quotes, and Rambunctious Ruminations for All Walks Of Life

*"What is the use of repeating all that stuff, if you don't explain it as you go on? It's by far the most confusing thing I ever heard!"*
~ Lewis Carroll, "The Mock Turtle" in Alice in Wonderland

*My aunt asked me 'Where did I travel to for such a long time?' I told her To Japan. My aunt asked me 'That Japan you traveled to what is it and how is it and what did you find there?' And I didn't know the answers.*
~ Ya'Akov Raz, Tokyo and Back (2000) (Quoted by Noy, 2003.)

The present chapter, fulfills a promise made in Chapter 3. I "pluck thematic threads"—what I take to be the most salient moments—from the writer conversations and discuss them in terms of the questions guiding this research, even while realizing that, like all representational projects it will largely, if not utterly, fail. Such is the paradox of rumination and analysis within socially constructed realities. Analysis does not simply reveal; it re-creates, leaving representational fidelity of analysis always open to question. That which is being analyzed is no longer "it-as-it-was" but it altered, it anew.

Readers of analysis re-present the re-presentation. Transparent and universal Truth thus being unavailable to us, I-we "go on" reconciled to crafting helpful, ethical and esthetic truths—knowledge suited to forms of life in a metaphorical world.

## Chapter Organization

What follows, then, are tapestries composed of dialogical warp and weft. The warp, let us say, is composed of thematic threads spun from "luminous moments" within the written conversations (Chapter 8) on personal writing; the weft is collected and spun

from my internal responses to them. The "luminosity" is, of course, added by the interplay of warp and weft without which the tapestry is not even possible. Rather than being some thing unearthed or discovered, the sparkle of recognition is constructed in the moment. It is constructed not from words or sentences or minds *per se* but from communicative gesture and meaning-laden supplemental response deriving from within relationship and danced from within relationship into the real. The dancers here include all the participants in the written conversation and all the voices they brought to it, my reading and supplement (response) to these conversations and all the voices I brought to it, and your reading of both and all the voices you bring to it.

Below, I respond to these moments in terms of the questions guiding this project; in particular, the question of the influence of postmodern and relational constructionist views on the practice and process of the nine writers. I organize my reactions under the headings (1) Writing from Within, (2) Writing Essential and Universal Truths, (3) Transferability of Truth Through Representation, and (4) Writing from Dialog.

I have placed certain phrases in italics when I found them particularly salient.

## Sheila Bender

Sheila Bender, 61, says she has been writing seriously since she turned 31. She writes and publishes personal essays and poetry in magazines and in *Writing It Real*, her own online magazine dedicated to serving those who want to write from personal experience. Sheila's memoir, *A New Theology: Turning to Poetry in a Time of Grief,* talks about relying on poetry in the months after her young son died. It was published in September 2009 by Imago Press in Tucson, AZ.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Sheila earned a B.A. in English from the University of Wisconsin, an M.A.T. (teaching) in Secondary Education from Keane College in NJ and an M.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Washington. She has eight books published on creative writing and has more in progress for two publishers.

*Writing from Within*

Sheila writes *to understand why she feels as she does* and *to investigate what hooks her emotionally*. She is "hooked" when an encounter with the world "*triggers a moody feeling in me*." She rarely starts writing without this feeling because she writes to find out *why* what has hooked her has done so. (Emphasis added.)

When I asked Sheila whether we write to find ourselves or to construct ourselves, she responded that she is not sure about the need for such a distinction but went on to say that "finding sounds better" and "more in keeping with more in keeping with what I believe—that *our essence is with us from birth* and we work all our lives to retrieve it, work and communicate from it." Sheila believes that when writing well, we are writing from a unifying presence, an essence, an integrated place. Being in this place is "a wonderful feeling" rivaled only by the wonder of making it "communicable to someone outside of my own mind and experience."

Sheila recalled feeling "compelled to write and read poems" from an early age. She believes "poetry is an essence felt by or recognized by an individual who creates a vessel for others to have the same experience." She believes that poems offer a personal view into the universal.

Sheila became serious about writing poetry after her daughter was born because she believed strongly that to raise her daughter to be *who she was*, she (Sheila) would have to learn *who she is*. “When I need to learn to be true to myself,” she says, “I turn to poetry and personal essay writing” because “both offer earned insight.”

When I asked Sheila if the writing of personal narratives changes or influences her in any way, I was hoping to prompt a conversation about how writing alters more than discovers who we are. Sheila replied that she has “grown as an individual as a consequence of my writing” and has been able to claim her own life, “the one I want to live or the one that wants to live through me rather than the one that others want me to live.”

The role of reader responses is only to let the writers know whether they have created a *fully manifested experience* for readers as well as for the writer, whether the words *recreate the writer’s experience in the reader*. (Italics added for emphasis.)

The responder has no other power. “The writer is the authority (root word author) and knows what is needed for the writing to succeed—the reader responses let the writer know whether the writing is or isn't succeeding and sometimes for what reasons. But only the writer can go back and work the words …”

Sheila finds it important to read others continually but uses them to bring her inner truths to the outside in a more effective manner. She writes to communicate with others but foremost “to claim my life, the one I want to live or the one that wants to live through me rather than the one that others want me to live.”

What does claiming your life, mean? To Sheila it is writing from her own experience and reflecting on it, using it to inform herself and others. She clarifies that

these changes don't necessarily show up “on the outside ... but the deepest me has found a home (on the page) and spoken.”

I am convinced that Sheila experiences the world as “out there” and brought “in here” through her physical senses. Deep within, there is a presence, an essential *who she is* which must be consulted to get at the truth and the meaning of things.

### *Writing Essential and Universal Truths*

In response to my questions about whether her stories have some “truth” to share, Sheila responded: “Yes, my stories do have truths to share.” Whether these are “universal” and “true about all people or all times is hard to answer.” She does not often think about cultural differences as they apply to her stories but has found literature and film from Japanese, Tibetan and Icelandic sources in particular to be haunting, profound and moving. “Although [we] might not get all the [cultural] references” she believes that “art crosses borders” and this is because “people are most alike in their feelings and least alike in their thinking.” Therefore, if your experience can evoke feelings, “there is universal connection even if the reader did not think as you did or act as you did.” The “readers will realize that in other circumstances” they have “experienced the same feelings” and “they will recognize these feelings.” When this happens, reader and writer become more intimate and connected. “That is the truth that gets shared in personal writing that succeeds.”

This sense of intimacy and connectedness “is what happens when we tell the truth about ourselves.” The best writing in any genre, Sheila said, is filled with the truth of

what it means to be a particular human in a particular world. And *when we are truthful and particular, we are also universal*. Everyone understands the human predicament, human yearnings and desire, no matter cultural and other differences. You cannot be in the presence of authenticity and not feel the vulnerable, authentic part of yourself. Hence, the intimacy. (Italics added for emphasis.)

I am persuaded that Sheila believes there are core truths which can be shared on an emotional level even across cultures through demonstration of the universal human predicament, human yearnings and desires through the story of one particular human being. As a writer, Sheila trusts that readers will translate the particular circumstances of the writer into something analogous in their own time, place and culture; that they will experience the same feelings and recognize these feelings as shared; and from this experience comes a wondrous sense of intimacy.

### *Transferability of Truth through Representation*

Sheila wrote that, despite issues raised by our discussion of the impact of historical context, culture and language in socially constructing reality, she still believes that she

> can put experience on the page so that readers experience what I did—that is my relationship to my readers. That is what I am striving for. If my experience calls up one they've had [and they mingle their own experience] with the one I have created on the page, the relationship and the intimacy deepen. (Bracketed words added for clarity.)

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Sheila recognizes “the real thing” by “a deep level of satisfaction” and by reader reaction. Sometimes we feel satisfied early in the process, she explains, but the response of our writing group shows that the writing “hasn't yet managed to fully manifest for readers”—that “the piece is worth working on but ….” Good writing-response works, Sheila says, because when the reader doesn’t get it, the writer gets it more and when the reader does get it, the writer gets it more.

Sheila seems to believe that excellent writing (“the real thing”) can be recognized by “a deep level of satisfaction” and by reader reaction which indicates the writing has “fully manifested” for readers. I take this to mean that the reader response indicates that the writer’s truth has been accurately transferred to the reader by the writing.

*Writing from Dialog*

Sheila said she is “usually a member of an ongoing writer’s group” and finds “great value in others’ responses” to her drafts. The workshop approach she learned in graduate school continues to be a great help to her.

Sheila is interested in “moving others” with her writing but mainly interested in presenting herself at the deepest levels of her perception. She writes to inform, but writes foremost “to discover what it is she wants to inform herself (and consequently others) about.”

She gladly shows raw material to a writing group or editor because she can “work with their response to “*make myself write more deeply”* and *“to call myself* on the places where I just wrote away from the opportunity to *dig deeper.”*

Sheila finds her writing and editing process consistent. She doesn't think she ever knows in advance how piece of work should turn out.

When I asked if she has any dialogical or feedback process she describes "The Three-Step Response Method" that she uses and teaches. This *feelings-oriented process* is intended to solicit *a truthful telling of "what happens inside a reader as the reader reads* the writing- in-progress" while ensuring that "*the writer is in charge* of using the response to fix the writing in *his or her own way*."

Sheila also discusses her stories "with whomever is available—my husband who is a great reader, my writing group when it meets, and a poetry colleague."

She finds it "very important to *read others continually to keep the sound of effective writing in your ears* and to find a way to clear space for writing and for *listening for deep perception*." When feeling stuck, she will read poetry and essays to get the flow going.

*Comments*

I am intrigued by Sheila Bender's responses because they seem paradoxical. Her stated motivations for writing seem deeply individualistic and essentialist while her writing process strikes me as profoundly dialogical, despite her claims to the contrary. The paradox exists in my experience but not her own.

Sheila uses dialogical feedback techniques in her writing, showing the writing to others and soliciting feedback, and values this feedback. She teaches these techniques to others. She reads other writers whose work she admires "to keep the sound of effective

writing in your ears." Sheila is always quick to add, however, that the influence of the other is only to prompt the writer *to dig deeper within.* The writer is author.

## Susan Bono

Susan Bono, 54, enjoyed creative writing even in elementary school and began writing life experiences in poetry as a teen. She first began writing prose after she completing a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing at San Francisco State University and a single subject teaching credential in English from University of California, Davis. She taught high school English for 7 years and during that time she participated in the California Writing Project at UC Santa Cruz and the Northern California Writing Project at Sonoma State University, programs which stressed writing about personal experience and the value of peer editing. This is when she began writing personal narrative and personal essay.

I plucked these exchanges from the larger conversation because they seem representative of Susan's take on the world. She is a very social being, as illustrated by her comments on needing outside validation and her difficulty with the issue of whether a personal story is always a family story. Yet, her ideas about writing, creativity, thinking, the origin of new ideas are all focused on the interior, mind, essence and so on.

Susan Bono's responses are fascinating. She embraces the idea that "we don't write in a vacuum" and "we are products of our culture and its conventions" but insists that culture would stagnate "without the dreams and energy of the solitary individual,"

that the individual is the source of major innovation whereas revision and derivation is the communal work of culture.

### *Writing from Within*

Certainly, we "have to write within conventions of culture and language," Susan acknowledges, or our writing would be "gibberish" to our readers. "If I'm to write anything that makes sense," she writes, "I have to stand in the stream of history and myth and personal experience and … amplify that signal." But, she insists, "Even if what I create is derivative, it has to come from myself alone."

While granting that we are aware of what has come before and we build upon that, Susan insists "we are always seeking UNIQUE forms of expression." Otherwise, "painting would have peaked with the Mona Lisa and Shakespeare would have brought an end to literature" or "we wouldn't have books at all, because without the solitary individual dreaming and creating, nothing [like the printing press] would be invented. Groups can refine a vision," Susan says, "but I think it always starts at a single source. We build on what has come before, but I wouldn't call it derivation. I'd call it innovation."

Of course, there is the reverse view: We build on what has come before but it is not true innovation; it is simply derivation. Individuals can refine a vision, but favorable historical and cultural factors come first. It appears the other way around only because we teach history from an individualist bias and a "Great Man" perspective. As computational creativity researcher, Oliver Brown states:

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

> Although social and cultural factors have been acknowledged … this has always been in deference to a focus on the cognitive capacities of the individual that can be addressed directly by an individualist cognitive science … approach [that] welcomes culture as a part of the external environment … but proceeds in anticipation of a situation in which creativity can be observed … as something that happens in individual humans. To be clear, the alternative—a distributed social approach—still treats the human brain as the key element in the system, but does not accept that a single human is a key originator of activity. Creativity occurs instead on a higher, social, level of organization. (Brown, 2009, pp. 1-2)

Susan points to thought and thinking as evidence that foundations are learned from others but creativity is individual. "Learning can take place in a group," she says, "but *thinking is a solo activity*."

At first blush, this seems clearly so. Thoughts are experienced as erupting and residing within us, as separate from and unknown by others; therefore, original with us. But what if thinking is not a distinct capacity but actually a sort of subvocalized or silent dialog? What if thinking is not even possible without first learning communication skills from others through social interaction? If so, we are able to think in the absence of others only because of the erstwhile presence of others. Further, as cited earlier, Sapir, Whorf and others argue that the nature of our thoughts depends both on language and the social context within which it is learned and practiced. If so, thinking is always a social act, even in utter solitude.

Susan believes our sense of needing solitude to create "is not merely to eliminate distractions." Except writing for television, she "can't think of many other times when writing is done collaboratively." However, much of corporate writing is now collaborative and, according to *Collaborative Literary Creation and Control*, the Hampshire College senior thesis of Benjamin Mako Hill (2003), literary writing is becoming more so. Kolabora (kolabora.com) is a website dedicated entirely to news and tools for intellectual collaboration. It publishes *Collaborative Writing Tools and Technology: A Mini-Guide*, a review of an increasing number of free and low cost platforms for collaborative writing, conferencing and live presentation.

More to the point, it can be argued that writing is "thinking on paper" (Anderson, H., 2010) and like other forms of communication, is learned in a social context. The manual skill of penmanship, typing or keyboarding, the grammatical and structural skill of composition, the artful skill of the good turn of phrase, are learned. Time structure and plausible cause and effect relationships are learned. What counts as meaningful and important is learned. Genre is learned. Virtually every detail of writing and its content is socially acquired. In this sense, I am never alone in the room but attended by a multitude.

### *Writing Essential and Universal Truths*

*"I do not presume to believe that my truth would feel true to everyone,"* Susan says, and she agrees with my comments "*about the impossibility of sharing the same reality,"* but wonders if we have to be "*ALIKE-minded,"* to recognize a commonality, or if it is enough "to share similar values and perspectives."

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Here, Susan suggests "personal truth becomes universal" if you don't require a 1:1 correspondence and are satisfied by "awakening echoes of similar feelings" or "recognition of a commonality" in the reader. This is a good point and similar to one made by Sheila Bender.

Of course, I do not propose that it is utterly impossible for writers to communicate with readers. Doing so in a doctoral dissertation which will be submitted to a board of readers for their assessment kneels at the altar of the absurd. I suggest only that every step of writing is dialogical and read writing is ever more so. The prospects are dim that read writing will exactly mirror what (from the writer's point of view) was written.

"*I have to be willing to confront my own bullshit.*" Susan writes. Of course, this sentiment assumes there is a deeper essential truth that is being avoided, possibly for psychodynamic reasons; or missed, perhaps for lacked of diligence.

*Transferability of Truth through Representation*

Susan believes there are universal truths that can be told through personal narrative. "My personal truth becomes universal when others see my story as a mirror into themselves." And, for Susan, it seems, finding a way to the universal through the personal is the mission of personal narrative writing.

"If I can share the insights I've gained from a particular experience *in a way that engages a reader's sympathies and curiosity and allows them to walk a while in my shoes,*" she proposes, "I just might awaken echoes of similar feelings in them. *My personal truth becomes universal when others see my story as a mirror into themselves.*"

*Writing from Dialog*

Susan has taken writing classes and workshops at conferences and colleges most of her adult life, and enjoys conducting writing workshops and serving on writer panels. She has participated in writers' groups that include editorial feedback since 1987. Her work as a writing coach, workshop facilitator, freelance editor, and editor/ publisher of Tiny Lights: A Journal of Personal Narrative which appears in both traditional print format and online (www.tiny-lights.com) keeps her actively engaged in giving and receiving feedback on the personal narrative forms.

By the late 70s and early 80s, Susan's says, training with the California Writing Project had "me writing along with my students. By writing and sharing my own stories, I felt like I found my genre." Convinced that she "didn't have what it took to be a Joan Didion or a Susan Sontag," Susan geared her writing toward parenting magazines and Sunday supplements. "My role model," she says, "was probably Erma Bombeck."

I ask if she has any dialogical or feedback process that she can identify. Susan reminds us of her tendency to kill ideas by "talking them to death …before I actually do any writing." Talking it through leaves her with the sense that there is nothing more to discover about the subject. Likewise, she often gets "lost" in the revising if she shows around drafts too early because she doesn't know where to go with the feedback.

Susan usually won't read much while writing, as it sidetracks her from the "groping process" she finds essential; although, she is finding that reading poetry or meditating before a writing session can deepen attentiveness, allowing her to work with greater passion. As a rule, the poems are unrelated to her current topic and written in a

style different from any she might use. She doesn't know why it works but guesses it opens her to unfamiliar ideas and approaches.

Although Susan recommends getting feedback from trusted others and offers feedback as part of her teaching and editing services, she is "happiest with the writing … done entirely on my own."

Does the writing of personal narratives change or influence you in anyway, I ask. Susan says she is always "discovering" what she "really meant to say in the process of writing it down," and "shaping my story for the page always ends up changing the way I feel about myself." Offering the example of answering an earlier question, she says:

> I finally understood why I can't force myself to write in the same way I can make myself clean the bathroom. I can talk my way through a chore, but I must *ask* my way through an essay. I got really excited by this insight, and if can I remember this distinction, I might be able to resist the urge to flog myself to the finish line of the next bit of writing I do.

I can't help but wonder: If Susan must *ask* her way through an essay, who answers? I am not being glib. Although it is linguistically acceptable to say "talking to myself" the circumstance is obviously more complicated. If you don't know the answer, how can asking yourself for advice possibly help? If you had only one true self and you talked to yourself, you would go round and round in circles. This is monolog and there are no new answers in monolog. Dialog is the source of new answers. If you have a silent conversation that goes somewhere new, you must be consulting an other: a role model, an "alter ego," exemplary writing you have read, advice you have read—the many voices of

the many "others" who keep you company. The difficulty it seems to me is that we have learned to identity these many voices as "my thoughts" and "mine" in origin.

Susan "confesses" that she does like the positive attention she gets from sharing her work with others. "I'm also more dependent than I'd like on outside validation," she says. Her editing and teaching experience tells her "that any idea can become a story," but laments the "depressing infrequency" of her own ideas for stories which she attributes to "the yearning to be accepted" and a gender-based rearing to "make nice" that leads her to "avoid controversial topics" and to stick with stories "about things that happen in solitude" because these stories don't implicate or embarrass anyone else.

Susan wonders if "personal" stories are unavoidably family stories: "anyone who's ever told family stories has faced arguments concerning the 'facts'." So, when we tell "personal" stories that divulge private information about other family members, "whose story is being told"? Where is the line between personal narrative and family expose? "It may be my story," she says, "but it is their privacy I am violating."

"When I am the only character in my story, my family is less likely to accuse me of exposing them," Susan says. She adds, on second thought, that even if she had embarrassing things to write about "nefarious activities" implicating her alone, she still would be "dragging my loved ones into the mud in a different way. So my logic is pretty irrational on this one."

"I tend to avoid pain," Susan says; "The tender little domestic epiphanies I end up writing about meet with my family's approval and don't create conflict in me."

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

*Comments*

Despite all that Susan says about her constant dialog with others both present and absent and the profound impact this dialog has in her subjective life, Susan seems highly invested in the interiority of it all: self, personal narrative, writing and authorship, memory, truth…. Postmodern and social constructionist ideas are nowhere to be found. She believes the individual is the driving force of creativity and innovation. She, as many of us do, views groups, society and culture as "outside" forces and impediments to finding and nurturing her one true self.

My intention is not to make her wrong for having these ideas but simply to point out that they come from an individualistic and essentialist position; that there are additional social, relational, constructionist ways of accounting. Each account sounds plausible if you accept the underlying suppositions and each has far reaching implications. As late night comic television host Johnny Carson was fond of saying, "You buy the premise, you buy the bit."

Diane Leon-Ferdico

Diane Leon-Ferdico, age 63, has been writing personal essays and memoir since 2001. She studied at the Art Students League, 1974-78, NYC and the National Academy of Design, NYC 1984 and is a professional studio artist. She studied further at New York University, earning a B.A. (1991) in art history (honors) and an M.A. (1995) from NYU Graduate School of Arts and Science in the John W. Draper Interdisciplinary Master's Program in Humanities and Social Thought.

Diane took a Gotham Writer's Workshop on non-fiction writing in 2005 and found the feedback from other students a very positive experience. She has been published in both online and print magazines since 2001 and served as Arts Editor with *Her Circle Ezine* (2005-2007). Diane is Adjunct Associate Professor of studio arts at New York University and has participated in the "Creative Words Spoken Here" literary event at NYU. Diane is primarily a studio artist (abstract painting) who finds "writing personal essays is another important way of expressing my feelings and memories."

*Writing from Within*

Diane appears to have a strong "inner" orientation. She believes personal narrative serves as an outlet for our "need to share and communicate *the things that are inside of us."* She thinks that "the *basic feelings* generated by our need for survival, food, clothing and shelter, then love, friendship *are built-in emotions*." She believes "*our facial expressions, body postures, etc., [the way] we express anger, happiness, or cuddle a child in a gentle way" are all built-in*. As such, these "go beyond language."

"I always write *from my gut*," she writes; "That is why I don't freelance. I cannot do anything creative just for the sake of making money. I have a full time administrative job for that." When I read about situations that are similar to my own, my response often takes the form of an essay idea. *If it prompts "a strong feeling*," Diane's says, "*I go with it.*" Only later does she consider "a place to submit so I can share the experience with readers."

Diane finds human experience divided between "in here" and "out there" and finds feeling originating from *"out-there"* to be *"most problematic"* because

"*personality plays a role in how we live and respond to the world around us"* and the conflict between what we know inside and what we are told by the outside is a major source of our misery.

"Society has an enormous affect upon us emotionally," Diane says. "We have no choice in when and where we were born; but at some *point the outside world either gives us that light or it can destroy it and make someone worse off.*"

When I asked Diane if there anything else you would like to add or suggestions she would like to make, she responded that "this has been a very insightful process." Although she continues to believes that personality and inner feelings play an important role in who we are and what we write, she had never thought much about "culture" or learning from others having such an impact. "I always thought it came [solely] from our inner feelings," she writes, "but [this] has opened my mind." (Bracketed content added for clarity.)

She especially "loved that question you asked." (Can I have a tragic life without the cultural wherewithal to express it? What if the only option available to me in my situation is to be stoically heroic? Would I be sad?). "That was so powerful," Diane writes; "It made me realize how culture can dictate your fate… and how you are permitted to express it. *Your mask* would be everything because that is all you would know."

*Writing from Essential and Universal Truth*

When I asked Diane if her stories have some universal truth to share, she responds that *"emotions are universal truth"* while our conceptual experience of the world around us "is constructed by our culture and mores."

Personal narrative works, Diane says, because:

> "*all humans experience the same sorrow, pain, suffering, guilt*, to some degree. *Even if it is all learned, the emotions stem from something larger*. That is why we all can relate to myths and soap operas. *We all understand what someone goes through no matter what race, gender, age or culture. The universality comes from the emotion more than society*. The *mores try to mask and control*, put us into roles, but *ultimately the truth is revealed by what we feel*. We learn to play roles [and the expectations that go with them], *but the truth lies in our emotions*."

When I inquired if emotions and feelings (grounded in our biological nature or not) might be relationally constructed from socio-cultural "stuff" like language, stories and social interaction, she agreed that many may be but hurries to add that "some people have a *strong innate feeling* about their identity" and offers up the example of "stories about transgendered people" who sense from an early age they inhabit a wrongly gendered body. Despite "very strong gender roles" and the messages they get from society, culture and significant others, she writes, "this feeling to be the 'other' is very strong."

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

After an important essay was published, Diane realized that she "wanted to continue to make personal essay writing just as important as my painting. In essence my story is primarily about showing through writing what we go through in life and *how important it is to do what you want no matter what.*"

*Transferability of Truth through Representation*

Diane writes and paints from a "need to see what I feel come to life. By that I mean I must *give a form to my feelings*." She begins painting "with no concrete idea of what I will paint. It is *purely unconscious*." As she works "from the chaos" something emerges. "*It is completely done by feeling*," says Diane; "*If and when it feels right, it is finished."*

In personal narrative writing, Diane begins from "*a strong feeling about a past event or something that needs to be resolved inside of me.* I just begin … and then it becomes the essay."

I inquired about her writing and editing process. (What happens between "an idea" and "a finished story?") "I start with something that moves me," Diane writes. "At first," she says, "I just write down everything I feel." Then she needs "to edit and edit." While editing, Diane becomes aware that "this story needs to make sense to the reader" and she begins to question "what message they will come away with." As she continues to "revise and edit, it all slowly comes together."

"Only with revising do I get to make sense of it all," Diane says, "and give it structure."

I ask Diane whether we revise to *draw sense from it* or to *bring sense to it*. And, in either case, does the process of sense-making change only the manuscript or us as well? "It works like this for me," she responds. "First it is to draw sense from it. I look for things that struck an emotional cord. I question why I felt the way I did and often why I still feel the same way." She often responds emotionally as though "it was happening again."

"Then, as I edit and revise," Diane says, "I bring sense to it." She needs somehow to take the lived experience and write it so it "makes sense on the page and makes sense so I can come to terms with it." Diane finds that this writing and editing process "definitely changes" her in the sense of coming to terms with something difficult or unpleasant. "But I always feel emotional," she adds.

### *Writing from Dialog*

"My stories seem to evolve," Diane observes. They change because "*reading what I put on the page generates more ideas and feelings.*"

Diane finds the editing process very important because "as the story changes it becomes better." While editing, the significance or irrelevance of entries becomes more obvious. "In the beginning I don't see that. The story must evolve."

Diane does not recognize a dialogical or feedback process in her writing practice. "It is solitary," she says. When painting, her husband gives feedback based on his understanding of her process. She keeps changing the painting until it feels right. When she is finished, that's it. With writing, "the changes come each time I sit down to write."

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

"I am consistent in my process," Diane replies, "because *it is who I am*. In my art and writing *I am true to myself"* and "only take on a story … *close to my heart*." Diane's internal dialog questions her motivation. "I need to validate for myself why this [topic] is important," she says. "If it doesn't resonate in my soul, I don't want to write about it."

Writing personal essay is very different from writing a cooking or shopping list, Diane writes. Once she begins writing an essay, she thinks about it constantly, making notes in bed, even while doing laundry, to capture ideas whenever her mind wonders back to how to change or edit the story. "It is a strong emotion when I write essay," she says; "very different from the chores I do at home."

I reminded Diane that she "eventually gets ideas how to change and edit what I am feeling in the piece." I wonder if this means she is changing and editing what she is feeling internally as well, so that she and story are evolving together in a generative meaning-making process.

"Yes, Rodney," Diane writes, re-reading it "validates what I originally felt while writing it and then it moves on to another level. I am changing internally because reading what I wrote … *makes me understand myself* and *what I went through* at the time of the story." She finds this editing process important because "it is really a dialog between the self of the past and of the present" that makes her ask if she has changed since the event and how.

"Ultimately," she writes, "*I must always tell the truth* in how I felt." From Diane's point of view, how she handles the writing of that truth is the result of her personality and the impact of outside influences.

I asked Diane if the writing changes or influences her in any way. It does, she says. It offers "a sense of closure." When I am writing my story, it seems to make me understand what I went through better. Even when a story is upbeat—many personal narratives are not—"just writing about it makes me understand *who I am* and what I have been through." When a story has been published and shared with others, this offers another sort of closure.

*Comments*

Diane believes that "we write personal essays because… we have a need to share and communicate *the things that are inside of us."* She writes in solitary, seeking out singular truths that others may find universal. The possible effects of "culture" and "society" are largely if not entirely stifling and to be overcome by finding and staying true to oneself. Even at the end of our discussion, when Diane expresses a newfound appreciation of cultural influences, she speaks of it (dolefully, I think) in terms of "our mask" being "everything because that is all you would know." She seems to be saying that, in spite of any social constructions of self, there is still an essential inner being that exists in parallel or in competition with this outer mask and it pines and battles desperately to break through.

Diane's perspective and writing practice is clearly not congruent with postmodernist constructions of self, personal narrative, writing and authorship, memory, truth and so on. She is comfortable with the personal essay as personal and about the personal.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Brian Doyle

Brian Doyle, 52 ("going on 400"), says he began writing at age ten. He is an award-winning Catholic writer and editor of Portland Magazine. Writing "the usual life and death stuff" that essayists write about, his literary writings always return to his Irish Catholicism. I met Brian at a Columbia Forum dinner talk/reading in Astoria (Oregon) at which he and most of the audience cried through his memorial to the victims and the heroes of September 11. He has been published in *The Atlantic Monthly, The American Scholar, Harper's, Christian Century, Commonweal*, and *America*. He is the editor of *God Is Love: Essays from Portland Magazine*. He has published numerous collections including: *Leaping: Revelations & Epiphanies; Epiphanies & Elegies: Very Short Stories; The Wet Engine: Exploring Mad Wild Miracle of Heart; Credo: Essays on Grace, Altar Boys, Bees, Kneeling Saints, the Mass, Priests, Strong Women, Epiphanies, a Wake, and the Haunting Thin Energetic Dusty Figure; Spirited Men: Story, Soul and Substance; Saints Passionate & Peculiar: Brief Exuberant Essays for Teens.*

Brian Doyle earned a B.A. from University of Notre Dame but maintains that he got most of his training at the knee of his father, an old-time newspaperman, and from working on newspapers and magazines in Boston and Chicago.

When I questioned why he writes, Brian offers what he admits is a "flip answer" that "I cannot not write, it's a benign neurosis." After "poking a little deeper," he finds "*a terrific inchoate drive* to catch stories and hand them around like food." He is not sure why he is "addicted to connecting" with others "in some substantive way."

For Brian Doyle, writing is a spiritual practice, a way to catch "a shred of the Mystery and [bring] it up to the public eye." It is also his life purpose. "I am sure *this is what I am supposed to do,"* he says. "I am that rare soul who knows what he is here for." Brian credits his interest in personal writing to the influence of his father, "a newspaperman and… a lovely writer still, a better and clearer writer than me."

*Writing from Within*

When Brian was younger and "learning to write," he "wished powerfully to *discover through writing who I was and what I thought and felt."* This echoes a common sentiment in these interviews. When I posited a prevailing concept in Western cultures that life is about finding your true self, that there is *a sort of homunculian inner self to be discovered, nurtured and brought to maturity,* Brian responded, "O, yes!"

I asked Brian how he is drawn to certain story ideas, where his ideas come from and how he knows when it's a good idea. "I seem to… listen and try to see the ocean of stories of grace under my nose. I sound them out for humor and bone…. I am sort of set on a default setting for odd stories." Having heard Brian read of his essays, particularly on the heroism of police and firefighters at the 9-11 disaster, I find "stories of grace" a particularly apt portrayal of his spiritual take on writing.

I ask Brian why he can't just have an idea and leave it at that, why he is drawn to writing them down. "Not writing them down seems lazy and irresponsible," he writes. "*You owe the universe the writing down*. Use the gift. *Not using it if you have it, that's a sin*," he says. I ask if he really means to say that we have a *moral* obligation to use our abilities.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

"Yup," he responds.

Brian's stories "change and evolve" as he writes. "Definitely. I am often startled by what happens when I write."

*Writing from Essential and Universal Truth*

I was not surprised to find that Brian, who lives writing as "a powerful form of prayer," an embodied spiritual practice, believes "the truth" of his stories is "*true for everyone ever* –love in its complex mysteries and inarticulate joys, grace under duress, laughter as prayer, attentiveness as prayer." All the same, I gave this response what I call "the Yanomami test of certainty" and ask if he *really* means to say that this message will make sense to both college students at University of Portland and the Yanomami tribal people in the Amazon. He responds forcefully: "Yup. G*reat writing, even translated and stripped of context, especially when it's story, connects."*

I asked Brian a question based on one his stories. Consider the man who runs into a burning building to save his dog but the building collapses and both the man and dog are dead. Is this guy a hero? A humanitarian? Or, a dumb ass?

"Hero." Brian's reply is blunt and unconditional. I reply that I take this shortish answer to mean the man is a hero "but only because that's the way *I* see it."

Brian's response is once again unequivocal: "Um, no. It seems to me he is a hero *no matter if you or I think he's a dolt, a fool, a nut, a hero, or an idiot*. He runs to save a life. That he loses his, or the life he went to save is snuffed out, is immaterial to the act of

running to save a life. *To run to save a life is heroic. I cannot see any other way to describe it."*

I offer this as another example illustrating Brian's approach to writing. He writes stories that lift up "grace under duress" and "laughter as prayer" and "the miracle of the moment" and a holy connection and duty to readers. This is not a man who takes his views to be relative to time and place; there is little room for compromise or doubt.

### *Transferability of Truth through Representation*

Brian believes "writing is a powerful form of prayer. Great writing goes to the heart and never leaves." It expands the capacity of the "heart" and that, Brian says, "is "mysterious and miraculous."

"I am not very interested in why I write; I am very interested indeed in how fine writing and stories connect and wake and heal human beings, and this conversation makes me dig a little deeper into something that I think matters enormously in the human shuffle."

### *Writing from Dialog*

For dialogic feedback, Brian shows everything he writes to wife. She is not a literary person, "if she's not gripped by the story line then I didn't do a good enough job and back to work I go." He often reads his writing aloud to himself as well.

On participating in writer workshops, Brian said, "I'm not much for writers' groups, I am afraid." He also avoids reading favorite writers while writing because, he

says, “their powerful voices will make a mess of my stuttering.” He needs silence “so the stuff can come out shyly by itself.”

Brian seemed to interpret my question about his internal dialog as a request for “interior rules” of writing. For him, they are to “write down every scrap of energy the piece has in it, and then go over it again and again and again cleaning, listening for music, cutting fat, making it as lean and direct as possible.” He knows he is finished when he can “sort of *feel* a piece is done….”

When I asked if the writing of personal narratives change or influence him in anyway, Brian’s response was probably his most “social.”

> O yes – I cannot imagine not being a writer and not having this chance for extra eyes and ears. Listening to and catching stories opens my heart hugely and has made me a far humbler man than I would have been, I think.

I was curious about “having this chance for extra eyes and ears” and asked Brian if he was saying that his writing “gives voice to the stories of others? That working with many voices through story is an expansive experience?”

“Absolutely,” he said, “Which leads to the moral jungle of borrowing or stealing” the stories of others.

*Comments*

Brian Doyle’s notion of personal narrative has been influenced little, if at all, by postmodern and constructionist impressions of persons, writing and authorship. In

Brian's world, I believe, "storytellers appointed by the community" are in no way end-of-the-stream flotsam and jetsam, no product of society. We are apart from community, the "sentinels, outliers, sayers,"—"sensitive beings for a reason." We are not messengers *of* the community but messengers *to* the community. The view is both romantic and Romantic. I love it even while I doubt it.

## Don Edgers

Don Edgers, 70, "started getting things published in 1978", much of that 32 years in "memoir (back when it was called autobiography)" and has worked with personal essay for about 3 years. He earned a Master of Education.

I inquired of Don why he is drawn to turning certain ideas into manuscripts. For Don, an idea becomes a manuscript because he accepts a spark of interest as a challenge and commits to making something of it. Sometimes a scrap of an idea becomes too big to ignore.

Don's writing and editing process works like this: "from a list of topics (key words and phrases), write a rough draft, revise, more editing, final draft."

Don writes for the "sense of gratification" you might get from satisfying any urge to do a certain thing, "fish, travel or grow a garden." He also writes for amusement and pleasure. "My wife crochets and does Sudoku … for enjoyment," he says. "I write or read." Getting work published also offers "the same feeling of being noticed" as when you "receive a trophy, medal or certificate for some accomplishment."

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

He also feels "an obligation to share what life and society was like on a historically interesting and significant piece of land in Puget Sound …" where he "knew most of the descendants of the original pioneers."

"Not sharing my memories *would surely be a sin and a shame*, and I would be exceedingly unhappy if I was sent to hell for my omission." When I pressed him on the matter, Don declared that this statement was more hyperbole with a grain of truth than the reverse.

Don writes because he can. That is, he has "the skills necessary to write" and "want to keep those skills through practice." Having built a reputation as a storyteller, "first publishing stories, then books. I can't stop now!"

Don quipped that writing keeps him "off the street" and "out of trouble: There's no telling what I might do if I didn't spend… my free time at the keyboard…." Don offers up a theory that writing may "relieve intracranial pressure and buildup of brain plaque, thus preventing [him] from becoming a public nuisance."

*Writing from Within*

Don likes the challenge of seeing "*what comes to mind and goes to my fingertips* on a keyboard when I see a writing contest or a topic on www.tiny-lights.com." He "started writing stories about what it felt like to be a kid during a dysfunctional time in history (WWII) because nobody else spent much time talking [or writing] about civilian life."

### *Writing from Essential and Universal Truth*

"The 'truths' in my stories," Don wrote, "deal with growing up and coming of age. I'm not a deep thinker, but I enjoy sociology and psychology. My stories boil down to: There are different strokes for different folks."

### *Transferability of Truth through Representation*

Although takes a relational approach to writing, he believes strongly in facts and historical accuracy.

### *Writing from Dialog*

Don doesn't have much familiarity with workshop or writer's groups, although some college classes included this experience. Don has relied primarily on one-to-one feedback from an instructor at Writer's Digest School and from a personal mentor, a retired professor of journalism & English from the University of AK, Fairbanks. "These men died, so I'm like the Lone Ranger." Don briefly joined a writers' group, but found other members "not much help or encouragement since they were interested in other writing markets."

Don attributes his early writing skills to a military high school he attended for four years which required every student to send a graded and corrected letter home every week. "This exercise," he says "taught me how to organize, edit and express myself."

Although the writing requirement did not originate his interest in writing, the improvements that came with this disciplined writing regimen created writing opportunities. "I wrote essays for my high school's literary magazine," he says, "and also

wrote essays for literary contests." Later, encouragement from a history professor "made me want to write the 'historical tomes' which I have ended up writing." Don also cites a debt to a writing mentor, Charles Keim, author and retired university professor of English and journalism, "basically taught me how to write" says Don, by having "me rewrite large segments" again and again.

On matters of dialogical feedback, Don agrees that reading books or articles by favorite authors and jotting down notes or highlighting sections of writing does get the creativity flowing. He finds the same effect when his church pastor "forces" him to "closely examine relevant gems throughout scriptures" relating his secular writing projects. "In-depth TV interviews with writers tend to ring a bell" as do historical or travel programs. Sometimes writing itself generates new ideas, as when "past experiences that I forgot just jump into my consciousness while I am writing." When his stories "change, they change because my wife (editor #1) says they are too wordy, unclear, or off track."

When I asked where his ideas come from, Don said he writes up lists of possible topics. When he reads writer magazines, he applies highlighter to key passages or writes in the margins. He takes lot of notes, even of church sermons.

"My learning style is audio," Don said, "so what people say transforms personal experiences or [related] things I have read, seen or heard." This may be why he finds it easy to get started on a writing project if he goes to a shopping mall coffee shop. He wonders if it is the caffeine. I wonder if it's the voices in the mall.

Don is “interested in many subjects” but is drawn to real people and their stories. “Eccentrics, which I sense you are,” Don adds, “get my attention, too.” Although I protest and make the case for mainstreaming me, Don is intractable on this and so I remain an eccentric in at least one relational space.

As for internal dialog or feedback process, “My mind reacts to certain words, sights, smells and sounds,” Don says, “especially music.” Don uses “mental Post-It® Notes” that he “fills in throughout my days.”

“My wife claims I need a hearing aid and that may be true;” Don says, “but more likely I am just in ‘Walter Mitty’ mode.”

*Comments*

Of all the conversations here, Don Edgers offered the most relational and dialogical account of his writing. He makes some mention of innate ability but gives extensive credit for his knowledge and skills to a military high school; a history professor who “made me want to write the ‘historical tomes’ which I have ended up writing;” Charles Keim, author and university professor of English and journalism, and his writing mentor; his pastor who challenges him to “closely examine relevant gems throughout scriptures” relating his secular writing projects; books or articles by favorite authors; in-depth TV interviews with writers, and historical or travel programs; the hustle and bustle of mall coffee shops, music. When his stories change, they change because his wife (and first tier editor) says they are too wordy, unclear, or off track.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Don also acknowledged that getting work published gives him “the same feeling of being noticed” as when you “receive a trophy, medal or certificate for some accomplishment.”

Don wrote that the truths in his stories deal with growing up and coming of age in an unusual place and an unusual time. They boil down to: “different strokes for different folks.”

Although I would not say any of this clearly points to postmodern or social constructionist influences, it does reflect the “social turn” away from a focus on individuals and their cloistered minds and towards a more matter-of-fact acknowledgement that membership in a particular social group and culture and historical period does provide social practices, rituals, ways of talking, plots and texts that organize, facilitate and limit what we can think.

## Mridu Khullar

Mridu Khullar, 28, is an award-winning independent journalist currently based in New Delhi, India. In 2008-09, she spent a year at the University of California, Berkeley, as a Visiting Scholar at the School of Journalism.

For the past six years, Mridu has written extensively about human rights and women's issues in Asia and Africa. Her work has been published in *Time, Marie Claire, Ms., Women’s eNews, East West, New York Times, International Herald Tribune, Global Post*, *The Caravan: A Journal of Politics & Culture*, and *Christian Science Monitor*. She is also a contributing editor at *Elle*, India edition.

Mridu participated in the first phase of the inquiry but never responded to the second round. After some prompting, she sent an e-mail declining further participation, saying “I am moving to Africa, and that's keeping me very occupied at present.” After letting some time pass, I again attempted to contact her in Africa and rekindle her interest but got no response.

I asked Mridu why she writes. Is it to influence others, to share something about yourself with others? “All of these reasons, I guess,” is her reply.

I inquired whether personal narratives change or influence her in any way, whether she ever perceives things differently during or after writing a story than at the beginning. “Absolutely,” she responds. “Putting words on paper, especially if they're about feelings, emotions and incidents” transform them from “random thoughts” to “meaningful events tied together … in a more coherent form.”

### *Writing from Within*

Mridu said, “Like most writers,” she “didn't set out to be an essayist. But in the process of finding stories, sometimes, *we find ourselves*.”

“There were so many *unique stories* from my childhood, from my upbringing, from my culture, that I wanted to share with the world. My personal stories are a result.”

I asked what draws her to certain story ideas, where her ideas come from.

“Who knows?” she replied. “Sometimes a random sentence will *come into my head* and I'll play with it. Sometimes a full-formed story can't wait to get *out of my head* onto paper.”

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Mridu judges that “there's no process to it, really. Someone might mention their kid's lunchbox, and I'll be reminded of my own lunchbox—things like that.” She can't really say what makes her write certain ideas into stories versus just letting them go. “I take them as far as I can and see where they can go” she says. “Sometimes they come fully formed. Sometimes, half-written pieces sit in the computer for years.”

*Writing from Essential and Universal Truth*

In response to questions about whether her personal narratives have “universal truth” to share, Mridu declared that “*The truth is always universal*. Circumstances may differ, cultures may differ, languages may differ—but the *feelings are the same all around the world. We're all the same.*”

*Writing from Dialog*

Mridu participates in three online support groups: one critique group and two discussion lists for professional writers and journalists, “where we share contacts, ideas and have discussions on the craft.” She spends about an hour on these groups every day and considers them free education and an opportunity to share professional knowledge.

*Comments*

Conversation is critical to the approach used in this research and depends on the charitable talkativeness of participants. Mridu’s responses are terse, making it difficult to find any particular influence. On the other hand, I can make a few observations. Mridu said she writes unique stories that can’t wait to get out of her head onto paper and these

contains universal truths: though "circumstances may differ, cultures may differ, languages may differ—the feelings are the same all around the world. We're all the same." I do not find much of the social constructionist here.

## Charles Markee

Charles Markee, 74, figures he has been writing fiction for 10 years, non-fiction for about 34 years, and "depending how you figure it," about 12 years in personal essay with a yearlong effort at autobiography. Charles' formal education includes a B.S. in Electrical Engineering (1960) from University of California, Berkeley, certificates earned from University of California, Santa Cruz in Software Engineering and Network engineering ("circa 1995"). He also completed independent class work in transistor circuit design, digital design, and web design.

His formal training in writing includes 3 semesters of creative writing classes at Foothill Community College, 3 semesters of creative writing at Santa Rosa Junior College, and a semester-long course in memoir writing at Sonoma State University. He has taken formal courses in poetry and literature as well.

### *Writing from Within*

Charles feels he "was *born with a talent for writing*, a talent that was subverted in order to earn a living and support my family." The motivation to write "bubbled up unexpectedly" when he was both "surprised and pleased" by praise for his technical writing. Feeling constrained by technical writing, Charles began writing short essays about experiences with his children. When peers began asking for copies to keep, he felt rewarded "far beyond anything from a paycheck or a promotion" in his field. Today,

retired, he writes “to offer humor or a life lesson or to document something significant that he wants to pass on to his children.”

I asked Charles whether he means to say a person “born with a talent for writing” in the same sense that one is born with blue eyes or hemophilia or Huntington’s disease. He expressly rejected *tabula rasa*, asserting, “There is a *genetic bias, predispositions or predilections*” that bloom or wither “*depending on what happens to us environmentally*.” I understand Charles’ use of the term “environmentally” to mean that he recognizes a blend, if not a balance, of genetic and social forces.

“Story ideas *churn through my head* and when one of them seems like drama, it takes on a life of its own”; Charles wrote, and becomes “a cruel taskmaster, unrelenting” in reminding him that he should be writing it down.

As for writing and editing process, Charles said as soon he gets an idea, he begins “formatting it into a story arc. Is there a beginning and an end? How does it move? What do the characters do? Are they interesting? Is what they do interesting?”

“The prep work is all mental” for short works, Charles said. He works the whole thing out “in his head” before he even starts to write. For longer works that seem pretty straightforward, he begins writing a first draft with only the beginning sorted out. “When it gets muddy,” he said, “I stop writing” and use a variety of approaches like idea maps, “reading hard copy, reading aloud, reading to my wife” or “I leave it and come back to it later.” For a really long, complicated piece, he uses “a skeleton outline.”

Editing, for Charles is “90% of the work on any major piece.” Using what he calls “an iterative process,” he starts each day by “going over” (which includes reading,

editing and rewriting) the writing of the day prior; this improves the already written while getting him "back into the piece" with some momentum.

*Writing from Essential and Universal Truth*

Charles calls his truths "a similarity in experiences, i.e. the facts may be different, but *the underlying psychology strikes a chord of recognition* in people who are thoughtful about such events. *To the extent that 'truth' exists within a framework of culture, those who might be influenced must be like-minded."*

I play "the Yanomami card" and ask whether a single message can be relevant to both college students at University of Portland and the Yanomami tribal people in the Amazon?

"In terms of our planet," Charles responded, "I'm aiming for a miniscule subset of readers. Furthermore*, I don't presume to speak the philosophical language of tribal peoples such that they would understand what I was saying.*"

Intrigued by this seemingly multiculturalist response, I followed up by asking Charles if this "underlying psychology" might be constructed of socio-cultural "stuff" such as language, cultural narratives and "facts of life" learned through social interaction? If so, I propose, our beliefs and emotion stories may not be such internal and deeply personal stuff, though we may experience them as such; rather, we may be performing sentiments that are public, cultural, and learned in relations with others.

"Since we live in the world," he responded, "*our thinking and in particular, our communication is contaminated by it.*" This idea—that our thinking and our communication is contaminated or polluted by our living in the world—jerks me back to

the Cartesian habitus desperate to unearth its soul-mind and to maintain its purity (Gergen, K., 2009b, pp. 79, 134).

I asked Charles to consider "loss" for a reader who believes in free will, individual autonomy and personal responsibility then compare that to "loss" for a reader who believes all that happens is by the will of God and is, therefore, the right thing to happen. Now, if I write a story of loss and grief in a war torn country, will the two readers share the same "truth" when they try to make sense of the story?

If your war story "relates only the facts," Charles wrote, without intentionally "spinning" the story, "then they could both identify with 'grief' since it is a universal human emotion. I believe that grief as a response to 'loss' is a kind of 'truth.' What they do with that identification is shaped by all the … belief systems you have mentioned, so, even though their "grief" is an identical internal feeling associated with loss, all external signs may be diametrically different."

"The problem with this analysis," Charles added, "is it requires that information triggering an internal feeling of loss arrive uncontaminated by cultural biases. Since no two people are identical in this respect, identical feelings of loss [are] probably impossible."

*Transferability of Truth through Representation*

When Charles asks his writing to "strike a chord of recognition" and finds 'truth' "within a framework of culture" so that those who might be influenced by the writing "must be like-minded." This suggests to me that Charles finds representation to be approximate and truth-making to be interactive.

### *Writing from Dialog*

Charles is a fan of workshop. He lists three ongoing writer groups and numerous workshops that he attends regularly in conjunction with writer conferences, each offering feedback. His writing and editing process is circumstantial and related to the length and complexity of the piece. It can also depend on the sensitivity of the content. If it is a personal story that involves other family members, Charles solicits multiple readers, weighing the input of each according to his opinion of their ability to read critically.

I asked Charles why he is drawn to certain ideas and turning them into a story. “I can't explain this,” he replied, “but I can describe it. I'm always thinking about turning events into a story.” An interesting dinnertime chat, a movie, these are all grist for story.

### *Comments*

Looking beyond some of the individualist vocabulary, Charles seems to propose that any universality of his truths rests on having a shared basis for “striking a chord of recognition. *To the extent that ‘truth’ exists within a framework of culture, those who might be influenced must be like-minded.”*

An interesting dinnertime chat, a movie, these are all grist for story.

When I told Charles about having a poem accepted to publication and going from elation to disappointment as the editor reveled in the fine distinctions she “got” from my poem but I had never even entertained let alone intended. If the meaning is not in “my” words, I asked, what is the point of writing?

Charles responded that writing is “a process of discovery for me” and “I want it to be a process of discovery for my reader.” For this to happen, Charles wrote, the reader

must be free to "spin" her own understanding. "A poem, especially, being an extended metaphor," is apt to inspire feelings in the reader "that may not have [even] the faintest relationship to the author's thoughts." Here, Charles embraces the notion that the reader has an appropriate and powerful role in the meaning-making process, that there is no single reading of the text.

I asked Charles if I write a story of loss and grief in a war torn country whether two readers with widely differing belief systems will share the same "truth" when they try to make sense of the story. Charles thought if my story "relates only the facts" without intentionally "spinning" the story, they could both identify with 'grief' since it is a universal human emotion. "I believe that grief as a response to 'loss' is a kind of 'truth.' Even though their 'grief' is an identical internal feeling associated with loss, all external signs may be diametrically different."

"The problem with this analysis," Charles adds, "is it requires information triggering an internal feeling of loss to arrive uncontaminated by cultural biases. Since no two people are identical in this respect, identical feelings of loss [are] probably impossible."

Here we return to the internal/external dichotomy. The internal is more real but is inevitably "contaminated" by the social and cultural influence from the outside.

Charles offers an interesting mix of perspectives. He is comfortable with the idea that a writer loses control over meaning-making process once the text is taken up by the reader. He seems to subscribe to a bio-psychosocial model that describes us as a mix of genetic, psychological and social influences, with the genetic and psychological (internal)

being more pure and the social (external) being an important but corrupting influence to consider. Like most of the writers in this inquiry, Charles seems to rely on feelings as the touchstone for the universal, the real and the true.

## Sue William Silverman

Sue William Silverman, 63, is the author of two memoirs. *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, won the Association of Writers and Writing Programs Award Series in Creative Nonfiction. Her memoir, *Love Sick: One Woman's Journey through Sexual Addiction*, was made into a Lifetime TV Original Movie. She has a writing book titled, *Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir* and a poetry collection, *Hieroglyphics in Neon*.

Sue's poems and short works have appeared in such places as the *Louisville Review, Chicago Tribune, Detroit Free Press, Charleston Review, WordWrights, Nebraska Review, Chronicle of Higher Education, Redbook, The Writer's Chronicle, Rockhurst Review, Southern Poetry Review, Mid-America Poetry Review, Absinthe Literary Review, Poetry Motel, Potomac Review, and Prairie Schooner*. She is associate editor of *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* and serves on faculty in the Vermont College MFA program.

Sue William Silverman earned the M.F.A. in fiction and was awarded the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Humane Letters by Aquinas College in recognition of her work in literature and child abuse victim advocacy.

(Note: Italics were not in the original text. They are added to indicate concepts that caught my attention and.)

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

When I asked Sue if there anything else she would like to add, I was shocked and embarrassed by some of her comments. My intention in replying to the responses that each writer gave to the open-ended questions in the "pilot questionnaire" was to provide a kind spontaneous rambling reaction in the hope that an abundance of material would be certain to provide *something* that would spark further conversation—just to see where that leads. Sue interpreted my long replies to her responses as confrontational and an attempt to bully her into agreeing with me:

- As much as I enjoyed participating in the original questionnaire, I'm afraid I must admit that I didn't enjoy the follow-up questions.
- At times, in the follow up, I was confused by what, exactly, you were asking… while at other times, I felt as if you wanted me to provide a certain response, more along the lines of what you were thinking. In other words, the original questions seemed open- ended, while the follow-up questions seemed "closed" ended.
- Thus, I wasn't really able to provide useful additional thoughts or insights. I felt kind of stifled.

Reflecting on these comments by "putting myself in her place" as well as I could, I could understand her response. I followed up with an explanation and regrets, and twice tried to bring her back into the conversation—but to no avail.

## *Writing from Within*

"I began to write to figure out *who I was*," Sue says. "In part because I was sexually molested by my father … and, in part, because *public education doesn't teach us to discover who we are or how to think.* I felt truly lost by my mid-twenties."

This assumes an already formed "I" to be discovered and some teachable way to find it; likewise, that there is a correct way to think. It can be argued that the "I" we discover is formed by the search for it and thinking is a system of internal discourse, of which there are many.

"When I switched [from novels] to creative nonfiction, *self-awareness really blossomed*. These are my metaphors. These are the *words that represent my experience*."

This sort of self-awareness also could be understood as rumination on one's self-narrative and it makes sense that memoir and rumination on self-narrative would go hand-in-hand. From a traditional perspective, metaphors can represent experience; from a more constructionist view, however, metaphors can re-contextualize and transform experience. Meaning can be seen as created rather than discovered.

Sue wrote, "I'd say that *writing memoir or personal narrative… organizes life, gives it a structure, a shape, one that's unseen or unknown in real life.* When I finish an essay or a book I can hold all the pages in my hands—*now they are outside of me*—and look at them, and think: *Yes, this is my story; I see it now.*"

I sometimes wonder, I told Sue, if, rather than discovering who we are by writing, contrariwise, we become as we write; if the writing generates a transformational organization of events and feelings, and creates meaning and value where none (or

another) existed prior. Breakthrough discovery and breakthrough transformation can be difficult to tell apart.

Our tradition coaches us to experience such transformations in knowledge as welling up from within ourselves—something to be mined or plumbed through introspection. What if they are changes in internal dialog brought about by exposure to new possibilities for meaning and making sense?

If such is the case, then the writing process bestows rather than represents. It *re*presents experience and gives it new meaning. This new meaning was not only unseen and unknown, but was not at all. Thus, the sense: "Yes, this is my story; I see it now."

Sue responded: "I guess I'll just stick with my original answer. That's the one that fits me and my experience the best."

"Perhaps because I grew up in silence and lies (since I never told anyone, as a child, that my father was sexually molesting me), it does mean a lot that my voice is now heard. *Having someone hear your voice is very life affirming*."

But, is shame silent? Surely there is this deadening silence that Sue Silverman talks about, the suppressing of that which most needs to be spoken because it is deemed unspeakable, the sense of being crushed by secrets. Yet, for the shamed, it is never truly silent. Indeed, a period of utter silence might be a welcome reprieve from the circular and ceaseless internal monolog of degradation (Garfinkel, 1956) that attends to shame. Breaking free of that degrading internal monolog and speaking the unspeakable, having someone hear the confidence and clarity in your voice that says, without need of uttering

the words, do not look to me to be ashamed for the shame is not mine to own, and hearing it yourself. Yes, it is very life affirming.

### *Writing from Essential and Universal Truth*

I asked Sue if her stories have some "universal truth" to share. "Oh, I think *all good (literary) writing is truth-based*," Sue writes, "*and, thus, universal, our themes are universal*. I write about loss, alienation, identity—themes to which most anyone might relate." Even granting that loss, alienation and identity are universal concerns, what constitutes these (with the possible exception of loss of a loved member of family or community) is likely to be wildly different from one place and time to another, so much so that I have grave doubts that parallels would even be recognized.

In her memoir, *Love Sick*, Sue writes about a college affair with a married man "old enough to be my father." She acquires the maroon cashmere scarf he always wears and keeps it close to her.

"Only through the writing process," she said, "did I come to understand that to me the scarf was a metaphor both for comfort and, ironically, for alienation (because I couldn't have the man)." Even if none of the readers has a maroon scarf that is metaphoric for their relationship, Sue said, "most everyone can, I dare say, relate to the universal themes of comfort and alienation." Readers access the story through metaphor.

"In this way," she writes, "I feel, my story is universal."

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

*Transferability of Truth through Representation*

I told Sue that the metaphor made sense to me but I wondered if metaphor is more local and contextual than universal. I wondered: how many strands of socio-cultural contingency are required to make a metaphor work? Would the maroon scarf (or a local counterpart) work in a culture that is less ownership-oriented, for example? Where relationships were less ownership-oriented?

Sue rejected outright the idea that such things interfere with her metaphor. "From my perspective it would work as long as the reader has ever felt alienation, loss, comfort—all the things that the maroon scarf *represents*. The metaphor has nothing to do with ownership."

I fear the analogy in my metaphor comment was lost in translation. Ownership was not really the point, except that in our way of life love-sex partnerships have an ownership element and offers just one example of the impediments to transferring metaphor across history and culture.

"Metaphor," say Lakoff and Johnson (2008, p.3) "is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature." More to the point here: metaphorical value derives from literal and transitive meaning within local and historical discourse. What constitutes meaningful metaphor is likely to be divergent from one place and time to another, so much so that I have grave doubts that parallels would even be recognized.

Metaphor is not simply a way of conceptualizing or reflecting a preexisting reality, it can create the reality (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 144). Metaphors shape the way we think. Yet, each metaphor relies on its relationship to other metaphors and the language system to do its work. A "maroon scarf" might require "translation" to a "silver feather" to make sense to some distant reader. Even then, it may be impossible to conjure sympathy for a woman having an affair with a married man and, it seems to me that feelings a reader has for this woman is likely to affect his/her understanding of a "maroon scarf."

### *Writing from Dialog*

"Where do the ideas come from? To a large extent, I have no idea," Sue wrote. "Maybe an idea emerges with a word or a tiny image…and then you just see where it goes. Usually, when I think I know what an essay is about it turns out to be about something else altogether."

Another way of looking at this: "a word or a tiny image" comes up tangential to something else and, it does not go anywhere unless I play around with it and embroider it and makes linkages to other external or internal dialog. Once a "hook" is set, however, it *seems* to take on a discursive life of its own. If I had been raised by wolves and lived in a cave my whole life, it probably would go nowhere at all.

I asked Sue why she is drawn to writing an idea down, why she can't just have an idea and leave it at that. "Because *I don't know what I think until I write it*," Sue wrote. "Ideas are all vague and abstract. I need to *discover the metaphor* and the sensory details of the experience, *which can only be discovered as I write*."

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Another way of constructing this: once I start writing, I begin a conversation with everything I know about writing, everything I have ever read in the genre, and this free association eventually clicks on the metaphor that describes what I want to say. After that, all the details seem to fall in line and those that do not seem irrelevant or extraneous.

Sue does not pre-plan her writing. "No outlines. No story boards. No mapping out. No waiting around for ideas to evolve one after the other. *I can only discover the story as I write it*, one word at a time, one draft at a time. Sometimes the story is there, more or less, in the first draft."

Sue said her writing and editing process is "fairly consistent. I write a rough draft. Print it out. Sit in a chair with a pencil and edit it on the hard page. Put those changes into the computer. Print it out. Sit in a chair with a pencil and edit it on the hard page. Put those changes into the computer… on and on."

Once again, one could as easily say, I can only discover the story as I write it because the writing *generates* a commonsensical storyline for the largely messy happenings of my life. Once they begin to make sense, the writing and editing become easier because the sorting the meaningful from the meaningless and the relevant from the irrelevant becomes easier.

I asked Sue what percentage of her total writing time is spent on editing. Though she was not sure about a percentage, she was comfortable in saying "…definitely more time revising than writing."

Based on experiences like trying to force an essay to be about high-school romance "when it really wanted to be about [her] grandmother," Sue says she longer does

a whole lot of conceiving. "Instead," she says, *"I like to follow the words, as if I'm listening to a whisper, and see where the words lead me.*"

I asked why stories change *as* they are written. "Good question. I mean, that really is a good question," Sue wrote. "I'm not sure I know…except, clearly, *the original idea wasn't what I was meant to write.*"

Sue's dialogical process consists of showing her work to Marc, her partner and "the world's best editor." She also reads "a lot of poetry" when she writes and sometimes will "discover a word—just a single word!—that opens up new worlds for me."

Dialog begets dialog, you might say.

As for internal dialog, Sue tries *not* to listen to herself as she writes because her internal voice tends to tell her the writing is dreadful and she "should have been a waitress." She does better by keeping this voice "out of the way, and just focus on the words before me." Other writers have mentioned this more recognizable sort of internal dialog, which I might rather call "internalized monolog." Listening carefully, I can often recognize a critical voice from my past (a parent, a teacher) that speaks to me in this way.

Sue found the thought process when cooking dinner very different from thinking about writing. She described cooking, etc. as being "trapped in time, in this one moment." In writing, she feels "outside of time."

"While writing, *I try to think as little as possible*; I just plunge myself into the sensory imagery of the scene and try to feel and smell and taste as much as possible."

I asked Sue whether the writing of personal narrative changes her or influences her in any way. *"I learn who I am through writing,"* Sue wrote. "*I honestly don't know any other way.*

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Said another way, by making sense of the senseless, by remarking on the ineffable, by consulting all those who make me possible, I *become* through writing.

*Comments*

Firmly in the individualist tradition, Sue William Silver believes in universal truths, and the power of language to echo reality well enough that the reader has the experience intended by the writer. Sue seeks a resilient self, a powerful voice and a narrative of triumph over victimhood. She asks writing to provide a vehicle of self-discovery. I understand this tradition. It has served me well.

My job is not to approve of or discredit but only to ask whether there is evidence of postmodern or social constructionist influence in what Sue said. I find none.

Jack Swenson

Jack Swenson, 74, is a bit of a wisecracker. When I asked how many years of experience he has with writing, he said 68 years (I'm guessing he learned how to write at 6 years old) but admitted "only 60" of them were writing personal essay, memoir or other closely related genre. For the past twelve years, he has been writing lots of "flash and micro fiction and reading lots of it, too."

"I was born with a pencil in my hand," Jack declares. "I've written lots and lots of essays, letters, book reports and several books." I know of eight books.

Otherwise, Jack seems tight-lipped (perhaps modest?) about his achievements, offering only the bare minimum to meet my request. When I ask about his formal education, he says "B.A., M.A." and nothing more. In fact, with the exception of his

“pencil in my hand” remark, my request for information got a “shopping list” of one word answers. I looked up his book “bios”; they quip on his being a binge writer who needs help, a Minnesotan living in exile in California, living the idlers life, herding cats and the like. He never says much about his education or his writing.

Jack, now retired, worked as an advertising copywriter and college public relations officer and writing was definitively about attempting to influence others. I have been a “marcom” writer as well and know that much of this kind of writing is a “collaborative” process, rarely in the best sense of the word. The technical experts micromanage our work and our content, yet we get the blame if the article flops and only partial credit if it is a success.

“Now,” he says, “I write because it gives me great personal satisfaction. Fiction and creative nonfiction writing is an art form.”

I asked Jack whether there is a big difference between telling stories to influence people to buy or to donate and telling stories to influence their experience of the world. He responded that he had never considered that this sort of writing might “influence others’ experience of the world.”

When I asked why he can't just have an idea and leave it at that, he wisecracks “… because I haven't figured out to make them grow by themselves.”

As for his writing and editing process “The idea becomes a manuscript by first thinking up an opening line. Then I add other lines one by one. At this stage, I may or may not know … how the story is going to end.” Jack works “straight through, if possible… not stopping until I finish.”

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

"When I finish, I add a title and click *Save*," he writes. (I imagine he is smiling as he writes this.) He edits later.

Editing varies. "Sometimes I get it right the first time. Then it's just a matter of comma or a word change here and there, a nip and a tuck. Other times I fuss and stew, and sometimes the story never does jell, and I put it aside for good." Editing may take "five minutes or five hours." Often the best solution with a really stubborn edit, Jack says, is to abandon it and just start the writing from scratch. "I should just put the story away … but I often don't do that" and "sometimes fiddle with a line, especially an ending" for hours.

He finds writing easier in late afternoon, early evening and drinks Coke® when he writes. This references the embodied element of writing that seems ignored by relational constructionism.

### *Writing from Within*

Jack is not aware of having an internal dialog as such, but "is aware of a commentator" or critic: "that word is no good; try this word instead; you've said that already; pick a different example" and so on. Here, Jack seems to be distinguishing between dialog and critical monolog.

Jack finds the internal writing process "a lot more focused than the kind of thinking that goes … [into] a household chore or just scribbling a grocery list. The level of concentration, if not absolute, is pretty close."

As to whether stories turn out as planned, Jack says, in the early days, “stories came out as I conceived them. Often now I don't know how they are going to come out” and “depend a lot on getting the ball rolling, and then waiting for an inspired line … after which I can type THE END.” This “waiting for an inspired line” seems to be a tacit conversation with the text and the writing tradition, though this is unclear and I am not sure Jack would use such terminology in any case.

*Writing from Essential and Universal Truth*

I asked Jack if his stories have some “truth” to share; and, if so, if this truth is universal. “Well, not some lesson or moral,” he says, “but yes, there is truth in my stories. *At times the truth is universal; at times it is merely my own way of looking at things.* Probably it is more often the latter.”

I tell him that I wonder if what we take to be “universal truths” are actually grounded in our local culture and traditions and not so universal after all, if the “personal experiences” incarnations of local public stories about “good” lives, “bad” lives, “sad” and “tragic” lives and so on.

“As far as I know,” he responds, “there is *a good deal of universality in culture and traditions*. *Know Thyself* and *Nothing Too Much* were inscribed on the pillars at the entrance of a Greek temple. *Do Unto Others* … is sure universal if not universally practiced. The list could go on and on.”

Accordingly, Jack believes in universal truths, cultural universals and unique individual truth. As do most of the writers here, Jack believes that there is an essence in

these truths which can be shared between individuals and across cultures despite any sociocultural and linguistic barriers.

*Transferability of Truth through Representation*

Although Jack displays a sociological sensibility in his understanding of how we know what we know (epistemology) and how we express it. He does believe there are universal truths, however, and that truths can be represented through story.

*Writing from Dialog*

When I inquire about his experience in workshop or writing groups, Jack claims none. Jack describes his graduate school writing teachers as “mostly useless.”

He does read some of his stories to his wife. He also reads them to his class of “senior” writing students, and gets “some useful feedback” but finds they like “nice” stories more than gritty ones. And he does consult the work of his “writing idols” for inspiration from time to time.

Jack describes “the story behind his story writing” in the following graphic representation, which I take to be an historical progression:

> encouragement in grammar school > high school newspaper > college newsletter and reading > post college reading and discovery of models > graduate school courses > teaching literature and writing for many years > discovery of a personal idol (Raymond Carver) > trial and error > publication of my first book of stories > stimulus of teaching writing at a senior center.

*Comments*

When I mentioned the postmodernist idea that memory is not actually an individual possession but a collective undertaking that involves a great deal of negotiation. “Indeed, remembering is a shaky business,” Jack responds; “No doubt it is impacted by later thinking and experience. I do find, as you did, that writing about childhood and my parents has been useful. I think I’m a ‘kinder, gentler’ person as a result. I know I’ve shed of the resentments that I harbored.”

“In some ways,” Jack wrote, “writing narratives has smoothed some of my hard edges and made me more sympathetic to the plight and perspective of others. I think I'm less self-centered. Writing is a humbling experience.”

I found this interesting because personal narrative is often dismissed as self-centered navel gazing; yet, my experience corresponds to Jack’s in this regard. Brian Doyle made similar remarks in his response.

Jack Swenson seems to incorporate, as do other writers here, some of the thought styles made available in the early-to-mid 20th century by the popularity of sociology and anthropology and its popular exponents Margaret Mead, Aldous Huxley, and Mortimer Adler, among others. I do not, however, find any evidence of the wide-ranging skepticism one might expect of a writer significantly swayed by postmodern or social constructionist thought.

Jack seems to live within the traditions of individualism, universal truths, and language as a mirror on reality and on the experience represented by the writer. Though his stance is moderated by the ideas that social influences help shape the way we think

and memory is altered by later thinking and experience, Jack seems to view these as obstacles to understanding rather than the very substance of it.

## Summation and Look Ahead

In this chapter, I "plucked thematic threads"—what I take to be the most salient threads—from the writer conversations, then discussed and responded to them, in terms of the questions guiding this inquiry. As discussed in Chapter 3 and the beginning of this chapter, I embarked on this mission with some sense of futility but pressed onward to learn what I could about the influence of postmodern and relational constructionist views (of authorship, self, mind, creativity and personal history) on the understanding and practices of these nine practitioners of personal narrative writing. I found it to be minimal. Writing process and practice among these nine writers seem what I would expect to find among writers who construe themselves within an individualistic model of creativity and authorship.

I did find it interesting and somewhat surprising that our two oldest participants, Charles Markee and Jack Swenson were most open to historical-social-cultural limitations on universality of truth claims. I have no hypothesis as to why this would be so.

In the chapter immediately following, Chapter 10, *Reflections and Regrets (Things Learned along the Way),* I consider the practical issues and limitations of the methods used here as well as potential sampling bias. I also ruminate on the "uses" for knowledge built in this project. In terms of regrets, there is the matter of the adversarial

approach used in responding to the initial “questionnaire” responses. Finally, there is some discussion of dialogic intentions for polyvocality and the inadvertent monological finalization of participants.

# CHAPTER 10: REFLECTIONS & REGRETS (THINGS LEARNED ALONG THE WAY)

*Obviously the truth is what's so. Not so obviously, it's also so what.*
~Werner Erhard (1974), If God had Meant Man to Fly, He Would Have Given Him Wings, or: Up to Your Ass in Aphorisms

This chapter is about things learned along the way. It is divided into two major parts: *Reflections* and *Regrets.*

In the first, I reflect on *wabi-sabi,* the Japanese esthetic of learning from and appreciating impermanence and imperfection. Then I talk about practical issues and limitations of this project. First among these is potential sampling bias. The exploratory-formative (versus descriptive-explanatory), the dialogical intentions of the inquiry, centered on knowledge-building rather than hypothesis-testing: while these certainly have powers and advantages, they also have limitations.

In the second half, I talk about certain regrets, which include the dialectic (or adversarial or "devil's advocate") approach I adopted in responding to the initial "questionnaire" responses; again, it had certain powers but some respondents seemed to react unfavorably. Despite "good intentions," there are things I would do differently—like choosing a more web-like interaction format—to make the project even more polyvocal and heteroglossiac. Perhaps my biggest regret, again despite good intentions, is the apparent "monological finalization" inherent in my analysis of the written conversations.

## Reflections

The portmanteau *wabi-sabi* refers to the art and practice of honoring the beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. By gilding the flaws and calling attention to them rather than repairing or hiding them, the wabi-sabi esthetic asks us to recognize that the beauty and value of a thing can be brought into being by its flaws. In a vase, for example, the crackle of its finish tells a story of its improbably long life.

In research, we are able to recognize that knowledge and learning available from practical inquiry even when—sometimes especially when—it does not proceed according to plan. What follows, then, is gilding and accentuating

### *Practical Methodological Issues and Limitations*

I kept, fed and groomed this "mangy mutt" for many months and hundreds of pages before it let me know how it wanted me to pet it. It was both a laconic and a petulant pooch, which can be an irksome combination.

This inquiry offers up a number of methodological issues and concerns. In fact, if the current reader is looking for results that can be scientifically generalized to writers of personal narrative, this inquiry has nothing to offer.

#### *Snowball Sampling*

I used snowball (chain) sampling in this research, which has no controls for randomness. I selected and "interviewed" a first contact, then asked this contact to suggest others and so on. This method is useful for identifying occupational or other specific groups within communities. If investigators expect to make claims of generality,

then complex follow up procedures are needed to avoid the biases which may accumulate with such a method.

The nonrandom nature of the participant selection was not problematic for me, until much later in the inquiry when I became aware of a sample bias to which I had given no consideration. I did not solicit demographics until late in the project to preclude the information from influencing my interactions with participants.

Not until I began writing up this section did I realize how many of us qualify for an AARP [20] card (American Association of Retired Persons membership). Except for Mridu, we are all over 50 year of age, three of us are 60 or more, and another three are 70 or more. This almost certainly constitutes a skewed sample of writers of personal narrative, certainly in terms of the historical context of our rearing and formal education; making broad generalizations about writers of personal narrative based on this sample would be risky.

Purposive, quota, and/or even "random walk" sampling could supplement the snowball sample with the effect of "evening out" the sample. As with a case study or many ethnographic field studies, these methods cannot meet the requirements of "proof" or the standards of statistical generalizability. A second phase, randomized study might follow to verify the generality of suggestive findings of the first phase.

*Exploratory-Formative vs. Descriptive-Explanatory Intention*

This inquiry was exploratory and formative and not descriptive-explanatory. That is, I did not seek to generalize "findings" or to "sum up" the situation, to find cause-and-

effect relationships or predict the future. Just as one would not attempt to extrapolate to all writers from a case study, I did not extrapolate from a small snowball sample.

On the other hand, as discussed in Chapter 7 and elsewhere, I had no interest in rendering a statistically average writer, or in comparing and contrasting the pureed responses of statistically average writers with those "observations" located at one or two standard deviations from the average. Not that doing so is universally without value; however, I find its monologically finalizing esthetic uninteresting and impoverished for the purposes of this inquiry. Instead, I opted for rich description and dialogical discovery.

### *Dialogical Intentions*

I intended to explore with writers of personal narrative how they go about doing what they do (writing) by asking them to write about their writing process. The centerpiece of this project, being grounded in writing practice, is a dialogical inquiry consisting of correspondence with each of nine experienced practitioners of personal narrative writing.

Using a list of "interview" questions as a starting point, I responded into the conversation rather than standing outside as an impartial observer and collector of data. The idea was for writers to become research collaborators rather than research subjects. The research was not designed to study the writers or their words as specimens but for us to explore and make sense of personal narrative writing practices through collegial dialog. As well, I interrogated postmodern and constructionist literature on problematic issues that intersect personal essay writing and the writing process: namely, "taken-for-granteds" such as authorship, self, mind, creativity and personal history.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Because this research was centered on *knowledge-building* rather than *hypothesis-testing,* I staged the dialogs with practicing writers of personal essay as the centerpiece (rather than merely referring to them or stuffing them in evidentiary appendix). I did so because this is a composition for many voices, not a solo. My job was to have a writing conversation with writers, present the dialogs in as unadulterated and transparent a fashion as possible, then to share my responses to their responses.

I employed inquiry methods informed by social constructionist and Bakhtinian epistemologies (where these overlap in a social and generative model of meaning and knowing) and by postmodern research ethics concerned with "subjective transparency" and the "power gradient" between researcher and subject-as-object.

Rather than keeping my subjective experience out of the way, I admitted to believing this impossible and tried to make my subjective experience obvious and available to readers to make of it what they can. In terms of power relations, I endeavored to enlist collaborators in conversation rather than interview subjects. While this was partially successful, I would do a few things differently were I to do this or a similar project in future. I will discuss these further in the *Regrets* section (later in this chapter).

In terms of social constructionist and Bakhtinian epistemologies, I worked from the presumption that inquiry cannot render "out there" in mirror-like fashion; rather, knowledge building is interactive, generative and transformative. As Kenneth Gergen (1997) writes, language without an account of relational construction cannot "bear the ponderous responsibility of 'depicting' or 'mirroring' what is the case" (p. 31) because in every case there is a "disjunction between word and world (p. 31)."

In *Discourse in the Novel* Bakhtin (1981) said, “All direct meanings and direct expressions are false” (p. 401). The denotative (dictionary) meaning of words is not the crux of what is said; meaning derives from “the actual and always self-centered use to which it is put and the way it is expressed by the speaker, a use determined by the speaker’s position (class, power, status) and by the concrete situation (p. 401).

Sociologist John Law (2004) reminds us that studying an object, regardless of the particular method, acts upon it, alters it, confines and attenuates it in ways that make it more amenable to the method. In other words, to study what is “out there” is to make it more like “in here” (models, maps, paradigms shared by the community of discourse) so that it is understandable. Alternatively, if certain features of “out there” are not amenable to the method and measurements used, they remain unknown or what we “know” is transformed in some way to make it admissible. “Out there” must (at least at first) resemble what can be understood within the research paradigm and the assumptions underlying it. The best we can do, then, is to choose an inquiry method that best conforms to the ethics and the aesthetics we find most compatible.

Preferring richness and complexity over reduction and compartmentalization, I emulated the example set in the doctoral research of collaborative therapist Janice DeFehr (2008) by “responding into” the conversation. While I admire how DeFehr left meaning making in the constructive dialogical space between writer and reader where it probably belongs, I somewhat sheepishly engaged in a postmortem of the conversations. Rather than “summarizing” and “concluding”—as if something has been settled for all time or that such a thing is even possible—I gathered together salient conversational threads and responded to them.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

On first reading of the dialogs, I surprised myself by despairing that I had nothing useful to work with and nothing useful to say. The writers seem to present a fairly individualistic view of writing and somehow that seems undesirable. In fact, I am pretty sure that my project has failed miserably. Notwithstanding my earlier protestations to the contrary, this suggests that, indeed, I had unacknowledged expectations or hoped to be surprised and have "something interesting" to write about.

*The Scholar/Practitioner Divide*

Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin (2005) find in the social sciences a great divide between university-generated knowledge and the needs of society:

> If we attempt to conceptualize social science knowledge, consistent with its origins, as the knowledge that is necessary to create a bridge between social research and the knowledge needs of society at large, then the disconnection between what currently counts as knowledge and what serves the society's needs is nearly complete. (p. 49)

Based on this conversation with writers, I sensed a similar disjuncture between university writing departments and writers at large. "University-generated knowledge" from departments of writing and composition studies and, according to Mike Harris (2009, p.30), increasingly from university Creative Writing departments, is steeped in the discourse of postmodernism, cultural studies and New Criticism ("lit crit"), namely the "reader-and-text" theory (Harris, 2009, pp. 31-32) depicted earlier in this book. "This

seems to be inevitable," writes Harris, "because such theories overwhelmed all others in 20th century literature departments, and continue to do so" (Harris, 2009, p. 32).

Writers participating in this study, particularly when it comes to such pivotal issues as creativity, writing and authorship, speak with Cartesian humanist vocabularies and, as far as I can tell, live Cartesian humanist lives. I should imagine that most of us, particularly in the United States, being immersed and "socialized" into a strong version of the individualist narrative (and not into "crit theory") do speak with Cartesian humanist vocabularies and, assuming even a moderate version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, live Cartesian humanist lives, there being no other way to organize experience and make it meaningful.

As I mention above, the age distribution of the participants in this inquiry may contribute to this finding. For many of us, the postmodern discourse was nonexistent or in the margins of academia when we went to college, even to graduate school. It seems likely that we were taught by professors who were unaware or dismissive of this discourse. Perhaps a younger sample of participants might yield different findings in this regard.

For most of my 60 years to date, I have believed[21] that authorship is a heroic, singlehanded bringing forth of ideas from within, from nothingness, by sheer creative will, an act approximate to godliness:

> Freshly sharpened magic wand
>
> Call forth sensual roses red
>
> From alphabet soup
>
> (Merrill, 2002)

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

It *is* that way to some extent. We stand in the clearing of possibility generated by a blank sheet of paper or its digital counterpart, a white screen, and through our incantations and our rituals we call forth words, sentences, stories. It *is* magical. But questions remain: where is this "clearing" to be found and what is the nature of this "calling forth"?

*Epistemological & Methodological Difficulties*

Poststructuralists, postmodernists, social constructionists have "contributed to the understanding that there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. According to philosophers Norman Denzin & Yvonna Lincoln (2005/1994), "Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity" (2005, p. 21; 1994, p. 31). From this perspective, all observations are "socially situated in the world of—and between—the observer and the observed" and, therefore, "there are no objective observations" (2005, p. 21; 1994, p. 31).

From a postmodernist perspective this conversation (dissertation) always already existed and nothing new was said; from a constructionist perspective, it is a product of local discourse deriving its standing and truth value through relational negotiation within the discourse community; from a dialogical perspective, it is always new, emergent and never complete—creation without beginning or end. That is why I changed the name of this chapter from *Analysis, Conclusions and Discussion* to *Reflections & Regrets (Things Learned Along The Way.)* There are no conclusions, only declarations made under erasure and requiring supplement.

Physicist John Archibald Wheeler has said, “No elementary phenomenon is a phenomenon until it is a registered phenomenon.” Correspondingly, University of Massachusetts physicist Thomas V. Marcella (2009) writes:

> Neils Bohr recognized that the experiment is not complete without a measurement result. The result is an irreversible event that gives closure to the experiment.
>
> Just as Wheeler has called particle detection an "act of creation," we suggest that, in some circumstances, not detecting the particle might be considered an “act of annihilation.” We propose a delayed choice experiment in which we decide to interrupt an experiment after the particle has supposedly passed through the preparation apparatus and is on the verge of being detected. Even with the detection device in place, the particle is nowhere to be found. (Marcella, an 8-page email.)

These statements by quantum physicists Bohr, Wheeler and Marcella have been given a lot of spin to promote “mind-over-matter” and “cosmos=consciousness” metaphysical ideologies; but I would suggest that they were pointing up the role that “irreversible acts of amplification” play in the research of probabilistic phenomena. Irreversible acts of amplification  predict that the results you get depend on what you are looking for, if/how the experiment is performed, what measurements are taken. These scientists are talking about quantum experiments and it is unclear whether their insights are applicable at the macro-physical and the social levels. Whether these are purely epistemological or ontological concerns or to some degree both is also unclear to me. However, the notion that outcomes are probabilistic until you observe them, at which

time they become fatalistic (and, by extension that the present and future causes the past) seems at least cautionary—particularly since this same field once proposed a clockwork universe operated by simple laws of cause-and-effect.

Sociology Professor John Law (2004) proposes that there is no such thing as "pure data"—data come into existence because we are looking for them and we are looking for them in the way we are looking for them; that is, a system of discourse and technology that defines (co-constructs) both the data and how we are to consider them.

In his paper, *On Sociology and STS*, John Law (2008) writes:

> It seems to me that methods that imagine the world to be relatively neat and tidy and try enact it in that way, are missing the point. Worse, they are seeking to stipulate and so to enact an order that is epistemologically mistaken, ontologically unrealistic, and politically obnoxious. (p. 12)

University of California at Santa Cruz Professor Karan Barad (2007) points out in her well-named book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, that "matter and meaning are not separate elements. They are inextricably fused…" (p. 3) and "to be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent self-contained existence" (p. ix).

"Researchers of culture and consciousness who use narrative are caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place," writes ethnographer Wendy Luttrell (2000, p.1§1). Observation and analysis participates in the creation of data that conforms to a presupposed reality. There is no escaping this existential predicament.

Epistemology, ontology, metaphysics, these are not separate considerations but thoroughly entangled ones. Observed phenomena require an observer and regardless of "controls" we instigate, an observer brings the "observed" into a field of meaning. Scientific controls, as apparatus of a philosophy of observation, is constituent of this field of meaning that envelopes and subsumes the observed. An observer co-constructs observed phenomenon; a constructed thing is never neutral. Data is never truly "raw" because it is both prospectively and retrospectively conditioned (reconstructed)—first by the apparatus of observation and then by the maneuvers of interpretation.

Lutrell (2000) continues:

> "On the one hand, we strive to listen and represent those we study on and in their own terms. On the other hand, we recognize that our role in shaping the ethnographic encounter is huge; consciously or not, we listen and make sense of what we hear according to particular theoretical, ontological, personal, and cultural frameworks and in the context of unequal power relations. The worry always exists that the voices and perspectives of those we study will be lost or subsumed to our own views and interests. Given all this, it is understandable that some researchers see no way out of this dilemma" (p.1§1).

*So, what does it all mean?*

Nothing. Nothing means anything, intrinsically (Sartre, 1956). And, really, nothing we can say philosophically about it means anything either, at least nothing that can be extracted from the words themselves (Wienpahl, 1965, p. 135).

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Coming to this understanding can be corrosive and unnerving; but, as Werner Erhard said after "putting it out there" that life is empty and meaningless:

> You didn't even notice what I said, did you? You may not have noticed that *if life doesn't mean anything* then it also *doesn't mean anything that it doesn't mean anything!* Of course, if we agree that it really *ought to* mean something, then it immediately becomes meaningful. (Paraphrased from Werner Erhard, The est Standard Training.)

I did not and do not intend this work to provide *the answer* or a set of slick tips to take to work on flash cards so that when somebody asks about writing or creativity or authorship, you can say "Oh hey, let me tell you …." I intend only to engage the reader in a game of communicative conventions, "a language game, a forms of life" (Wittgenstein, 2001, §23), calling upon them to consider the influence of postmodern social constructionist ideas upon this small group of writers, individually and as a whole.

I found individualists inclined to consider social influences on writers, writing and readers. This may be related to the popularity of anthropology and sociology in the 1950s and 1960s. More in line with social constructivists, however, they seem disposed to locate the social "out there" and the real "out there" while the hard work of "truth finding" and sense-making takes place "in here" where is found a "mind" capable of the mining and the sifting necessary to get at "the truth" and a "true self" capable of recognizing that truth when it is unearthed (McNamee, S., 2004, p.38). Likewise, this "true self" is the only force astute enough to recognize the inauthenticity and the "contaminating influence" of the social, as one participant, Charles, phrases it.

Some responded to my social rhetoric agreeably, some grudgingly, none unreservedly. Some took a small step into the social territory of persons, authorship and creativity; some took two, some three; but all sooner or later withdrew into the sanctuary of individualism.

## Regrets

Dissertations can be seen an occasion to demonstrate what you know. It is that, I suppose; however, this seems a limited view. Dissertations can be a time and place to establish that one knows that what one knows is less significant than holding that knowing gingerly enough to continue learning, especially when this new learning threatens to set aside what one already knows. Below are regrets and things learned along the way.

### *"Pushing too hard" as a participant.*

I like being the guy who knows things. It seems "natural" that I take the dialectical "devil's advocate" position in my conversations with other writers in this inquiry, presenting a contrasting view to the participant's opening response to my questions. I hope to elicit a response that indicates my conversational partner's level of commitment to the original position without alienating him/her. This seemed to work well for most of the project.

Unfortunately, Sue William Silverman recoiled from this process and felt browbeaten by my responses. Even after I explained my intentions and invited her to reconsider, she abstained from further conversation.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Still, this response was a learning experience! I speculate about other ways to go about this would without alienating my co-respondents. Sue Silverman's unfortunate experience and my experience of her experience suggest the potential for improvement by moving away from a dialectic (oppositional) dyadic conversation and into a multivocal format.

### *Monological Finalization*

When I wrote the *Reflections* section it seemed right to me. Reading it again, I am disappointed. I decided to leave it there, just as I wrote it, and rather than "sweeping it under the rug,"[22] address what is ill-advised about it and some general means for improving it in future.

I claim to conduct a dialogical research and, in the ways discussed above, did a commendable job. Yet, in a major way, I botched it up. Specifically, I impose "monological finalization" on the participants, a cardinal offense in Bakhtin's view. Bakhtin admires Dostoevsky's portrayal of heroes "all do furious battle with such definitions of their personality in the mouths of other people" (Emerson, C. in Bakhtin, 1984, p. 59). "In social science, researchers are these 'other people,'" counsels University of Calgary Professor of Sociology, Arthur Frank (2005, p. 966).

> Such discourse occurs in many speech genres, most notably medical diagnosis …, academic grading and assessment, judicial sentencing, and, crucial to our purposes, social scientific research. Examining these speech genres leads to the disturbing observation that the claim of groups to

> professional status depends crucially on their socially sanctioned capacity to utter monological finalizations. (p. 967).

In my eagerness to tie a big bow atop a finished package, I repay the generosity of my co-respondents by "killing them off" in the Bakhtinian sense of sealing them in a sarcophagus of stagnant representations, categories and last words.

If I were to do this project again, participants would have the last word. At least then they (and, hopefully, readers) are left a sense of

> their own unfinalizability, their capacity to outgrow… any externalizing and finalizing definition of them. As long as a person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word. (Emerson in Bakhtin, 1984, p.59)

*Polyvocality and heteroglossia*

The possibility of a multivocal (multi-authorial) memoir occurred to me while working on this project. I have written about my childhood of hunger and violence many times and, of course, believe I have the "right" version of it; but I am fascinated by the potential in examining a single childhood event or period from the viewpoint of all involved rather than, as is the usual case, from the perspective of a single author. Many of those I might solicit for such a project on my own childhood are now deceased and I feel the story is diminished by that fact.

Along the same line, this project demonstrates the value of polyvocality to some degree, yet it stops short of its potential because it is actually a collection of dyadic conversations. While it is true that each of us is composed of many voices and

polyvocality is therefore inescapable, the richness, depth and complexity of the conversation might be improved by adopting a more heteroglossiac format that connects all participants simultaneously. I am thinking of chat rooms, forums and other mediated formats that would allow participants to respond to each other as well as to me. I am curious how the conversation might be enriched by improvisation and riff enabled by such a multivocal format.

### *A "not-knowing" stance*

Some version of the "not-knowing" stance Harlene Anderson (Anderson, 1997, p. 133-137; Anderson & Goolishan, 1992) advocates in collaborative therapy might be more appropriate. Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams-St. Pierre (2005) describe a similar process in writing qualitative research papers:

> I used writing as a method of data analysis by using writing to think; that is, I wrote my way into particular spaces I could not have occupied by sorting data with a computer program or by analytic induction. This was rhizomatic work (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987) in which I made accidental and fortuitous connections I could not foresee or control. My point here is that I did not limit data analysis to conventional practices of coding data and then sorting it into categories that I then grouped into themes that became section headings in an outline that organized and governed my writing in advance of writing. Thought happened in the writing. As I wrote, I watched word after word appear on the computer

> screen—ideas, theories, I had not thought before I wrote them. Sometimes I wrote something so marvelous it startled me. I doubt I could have thought such a thought by thinking alone. (p. 970)

While referred to here as rhizomatic work, many writers in this project describe a similar process in writing personal narrative: writing from a stance of not-knowing to find out what it is they need to know, writing to find out what the writing will be about, trusting in the process, this as opposed to writing from a position of knowing that "govern[s]writing in advance of writing" (p. 970). Whether this nondirective approach, this creating your path by walking, can be used effectively as a tool of dialogical inquiry as well as a method of analysis, I do not know.

## Summation and Look Ahead

In this chapter, I reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of the method and sampling process used in this project. I discussed the dialogical intentions for the project and the strengths and limitations of generative inquiry versus hypothesis testing. In the remainder of the chapter, I reflected on the project in terms of regrets, shortcomings—particularly the failure of monological finalization of participants—and ways to improve such a project next time around. As well, I talk about things learned along the way.

In the next and final chapter, I reflect on certain transformative experiences resulting from participating in this project and writing this dissertation.

# CHAPTER 11: PARTING WORDS

*"I quite agree with you"' said the Duchess; "and the moral of that is– Be what you would seem to Be – or if you'd like it put more simply– Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise."*

*"I think I should understand that better," Alice said very politely, "if I had it written down: but I can't quite follow it as you say it."*

*"That's nothing to what I could say if I chose," the Duchess replied, in a pleased tone.*

~Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

I really had hoped to title this last chapter, *Last Words: Feedback from Dialog Participant,* as it would have consisted of responses of the other participants to what I might have said in Chapter 9 about what they said in chapters prior.

In the mold of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) and other postmodern social researchers such as Harlene Anderson, (1997), Sheila McNamee (1992, 1999, 2004), Mary and Kenneth Gergen (2003, 2004), John Shotter, (1993, 1993a, 1993b, 2008) and Janice DeFehr (2008) interested in dissolving, minimizing (or at least recognizing) the power gradient between the inquirer and the inquired about, I wanted to solicit evaluative feedback from dialog participants. They would have the *last words* in this work, rather than I.

Unfortunately, writing this dissertation took dramatically longer than I had anticipated. By the time I reached the stage for submitting Chapter 9 for their review, I felt the dialogical trail had cooled, perhaps iced over. I knew for sure two respondents had lost interest and my research advisor and I agreed it was too much to ask of my research participants and, at any rate, was probably less useful two years later than when

it was planned. We also agreed that the change of plan ought to be acknowledged and registered here.

Now titled *Parting Words*, this is a place for telling stories related to the writing of this dissertation. I will talk about how it is that "dead men" and "dead authors" and "nonexistent persons" can write personal narratives. I will testify to luminous exceptions to the encapsulated experience, to being written while writing and to writing as a transformative experience.

## Dead Man Writing

Some postmodern theorizers—Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard among them—pronounced (I think convincingly) the "death" of the autonomous individual, the mind, and the author. What does this mean?

When I sit down to write a personal essay, a life experience, a memoir, what does it mean that the autonomous individual, as an encapsulated mind, is "fictive"—that the individual is (or might be) a relational (social) construction rather than an immutable ordained essence? How is this writing done and who does it? Who writes and about whom? Questions such as these inspired me to undertake this project and have plagued me throughout.

Obviously, individual human organisms write. Less apparently, individual human organisms can write personal narrative without certifying that they are persons or authors in the individualistic sense of an autonomous, self-contained, source of what is written. In a relational constructionist sense, authors are participants in a communication tradition called storytelling which includes such sociolinguistic distinctions as subjectively

independent persons, synchronous chronological history, facticity, veracity, metaphorical representation and so on. Likewise, persons are partakers in traditions of personhood, in stories about what being persons means and entails. In this sense, writers of personal narrative might be called original but here originality is defined as the imaginative use of the given by developing a writing style and an authorial voice, a position and stance assumed in relation to the given, preferred ways of interacting with and expressing the given, and so on.

## Luminous Exceptions to the Encapsulated Experience

In special circumstances: e.g. meditative epiphanies which show up only fitfully and fleetingly even after years of dedicated practice (Watts, 1961, p. 155) or a fentanyl-induced oceanic euphoria in the emergency room or even when reading and writing (more about that below), our apparent insularity can evaporate, replaced by a pleasurable melding with humanity, life, world. In those fleeting moments, I "know" without reservation that compassion and kinship, affinity and connection, mutual support and cooperation are (while no more inevitable) just as plausible and just as viable a foundation for human life as insularity, animosity and competition. Likewise, I know that a context of deficit and insufficiency is no more inevitable or true than a context of adequacy and abundance. And I know that we are what we are because we say[23] we *are* that; and, therefore, we just as well can be something else.

Under the weight of commonsense reality, however, this assurance skitters away like spittle on a hot iron; and the chimera of insularity quickly coalesces and recovers its

bona fides. Still, these small luminous moments alternant to individualizing experience apprise us of other-possibility. They advise us that other embodiments of ourselves and others are possible.

## Being Written While Writing

This book, it turns out, is quite coincidentally about personal narrative writing as a generative and transformative activity. As I read and talk about personal writing and the issues surrounding it, even as I am writing this book about writing, I am convinced that when we write our stories, our stories write us. As such, setting out to write a once-and-for-all-time "factual account" is a bit delusional because the search for sense and meaning that goes along with personal writing transforms us and our "history" even as we write it.

I used to feel powerless in the face of social constructionism (which I understood to be a species of deterministic social behaviorism) but now I see that through writing, through narrative, through *dialog* I can take a part in who I am (Johnson, 1996) and regain some sense of agency. Though I can never again lay claim to sovereignty in the individualist sense, nor can I believe in my predetermined essence, I can *take part* in who I *was*, who I am, and who I will become.

If all text is under erasure, and self is text, then self is under erasure too. "The unreliability of constantly rewritten memory and the inescapable selectivity of life-writing," as Neilson (2006, p. 1) writes, are addressed by writers as problems to be overcome, as if sufficient virtue and diligence might yield veracity, integrity and comprehensiveness of recollection. Yet, industrious reflection can be transformative: first

of the recollected historical context for the facts; later, the timbre of the facts; then the facts themselves; and, with this, even the emotional investment of the writer and, therefore, the writer.

We have constructed “memory” as static data stores (Neilson, 2006) analogous to file cabinets, faithfully stockpiling facts for later retrieval, unchanged by time or context, save the normal fading and yellowing with age. Yet this metaphor betrays our everyday experience. Human memory does not seem as concerned with accurately storing, assembling and recounting data (the past) as it does with organizing it around important themes and lessons learned. Memory seems less detail-oriented and more hermeneutic (Neilson, 2006, p. 1), making sense of the past as an interpretative act, the end of which is an enlarged understanding of the self (Freeman, 1993; Olney, 1998).

If so, then personal narrative writing (life-writing) may not be the innocent act of reportage that we have construed it to be (Lysaker, 2007). The “reporting” of “events” and the placing of them within a context of relationships, expectation and disenchantment, love found and lost and recovered, strokes of luck and injustices suffered, reaffirms our lives as saga and generates the impression of a relatively coherent self in the process (Pasupathi, 2001).

## Writing as a Transformative Experience

After many months of reading Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jacques Derrida, Kenneth Gergen, Mary Gergen, John Shotter, Harlene Anderson, Sheila McNamee and countless others parading through the

hundreds of books and journal articles acquired specifically for this project, I began to write and "I" altered. That is, the experience of "I-ness" and of its location budged. This is one of those special circumstances, one of those luminous exceptions to individualizing experience that I pledged to speak about.

"I-as-essence" —as self or mind, as homunculean "mini-me" sitting in the driver seat inside my skull taking in the world and acting upon it through sensory-motor networks—no longer mapped my experience. I am prone to say I found myself "out there" rather than "in here"; but, that is not quite it. It seemed more the case that I exist neither "out there" nor "in here" yet both "out there" and "in here" in the sense that being in/out is nebulous, continuous and concurrent.

I am said into the world. I exist in conversation and I am never without conversation, even when alone. I take this lesson from the story of Helen Keller. Without the ability to converse, Helen Keller was "a wild child who smashed plates and kicked people" (Herrmann, 1999, p. 3), behaving toward other humans as objects or obstacles to be circumvented or overcome. With language, Helen Keller was transformed from "a little more than a beast into a human being" (ibid) in whose presence "invariably people were moved to tears" (ibid). Meeting Helen Keller has been described as "like an encounter with an angel" (ibid) and something "akin to having a religious experience" (ibid).

The capacity to converse and, with it, the ability to participate in human relationship enables us to become humans *being*. Dethroned as the source of myself, I exist where you exist, in the intangible communicative social space that envelopes us, the incorporeal place where "we" is. "I-in-we" exist *because* you exist in "we" and "you-in-

we exist" *because* I exist in "we" but neither of us is solely sufficient. I am necessary for "we" and you are necessary for "we" but neither you nor I is enough for "we-as-we-are together."

We-as-we-are together depends to some uncertain degree on antecedent "we" experiences (both we together and we with different others) and the narratives each of us carries about those experiences and the storytelling tools each of us has acquired from participating in those preceding relationships. On the other hand, new we experiences and new storytelling apparatuses generated in our current relationship can retroactively transform antecedent we experiences, leaving them always already different. The now, the then, the we, the you, the I, all these socialities are fluid, changeable and always under erasure. The apparent historical permanence and unity we experience is a trick of narrative excision, revision and stitchery that we do not distinguish.

"I-as-author-construct" or "I-performing-the-author-function" remain a skilled and agentic writer (not the passive conduit that Roland Barthes seems to advocate); *but*, rather than an insular autonomous actor, this agent—attracted by a sense of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* [24] (community feeling or social interest)—is a constituent of a community of knowledge and a partaker of traditions beyond the doing or the inventiveness of any single individual.

I attempted to express this de-centered sense of self at a Taos Institute workshop on social constructionism but what I was saying was still new to me and held such significance that, without warning, I was disabled by uncontainable sobbing. My "sense" of that experience is this: a deeply nostalgic sadness at losing a central, meaningful and

long-standing narrative of victimization, heroic struggle and personal triumph to which I have clung for most of my life; yet, a joyous kind of awe at becoming far more than I had imagined—a participant in an immense and continuous conversation, a clearing in which my grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters, school teachers, schoolmates, pastors, mentors, lovers, friends and foes, even those long dead, carry on a conversation that makes me possible.

"I hear voices everywhere," Bakhtin (1981) said; each voice exists only in dialogue with other voices and no utterance is self-sufficient. It seems to me, then, that when we "dig deep within" and discover an important story there, we are living a profound paradox: when we dig deep within, we are looking deeply without (outside), for, that which is within is fashioned from without. More accurately, within and without are ways of experiencing the private and the public within an individualist conversation; yet, when experienced from a relational point of view the binary dissolves; within and without become porous and continuous.

The conversation that makes me possible is never finished. New characters enter stage left and stage right contributing an extra bit of dialog and a more expansive point of view, a more promising edit, another revision, becomes possible. This extra bit is added onto, woven into, merged with, or juxtaposed to the wealth of dialog that precedes it and its combinations and permutations are infinitely multiplied.

How extraordinary. How splendid. How lifelike.

I did not intend to "convert" to social constructionism and its happening seems more than a simple case of Stockholm Syndrome.[25] Although I have long privileged "sociological man" over the psychological, sociological representations of consciousness,

thought and individual behavior seem lifeless, like chess pieces situated on a board, governed by endowed powers and rules of movement but without animation or agency to exercise them. This is, perhaps, inevitable in any representation that strives above all to the sound of science.

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical microsociology, best exemplified by *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), *Encounters* (1961), *Stigma* (1963), and *Interaction Ritual* (1967) are among my favorite sociological takes on the individual and small groups; yet they strike me with a fatalistic melancholy akin to that suffered by Shakespeare's wretched Jacques. Standing over a slain deer that still struggles, Jacques speaks the famed monolog which may well have inspired Goffman's dramaturgy.

All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players;

They have their exits and their entrances,

And one man in his time plays many parts ….

Shakespeare's *As You Like It, Scene VII, Jacques' Forest Monolog*

This much of the monolog is well known. The remaining and grimmer portion of the monolog goes on in account of the seven acts or "seven ages" of this drama: the infant, mewling and puking; the whining schoolboy, going to school against his will; the lover, overcome with sighing and singing a woeful ballad; a soldier, full of strange oaths and flamboyantly bearded, puffed up with honor and quick to fight, seeking high reputation on the battlefield even in the face of death; the justice, fattened with rich food, eyes severe and now conservatively bearded, full of well-tried proverbs and modern

examples; the sixth age finds a gaunt and bespectacled  old man, his youthful stockings carefully spared for later use now too big for his bony legs, and his booming manly basso turning back toward childish treble, except now with asthmatic gurgles and whistles added; and the last scene that ends this bizarre story is a return to infantile behavior and mere oblivion, sans taste and smell, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans everything. (Paraphrased from Shakespeare's *As You Like It, Scene VI,) Jacques' Forest Monolog.*)

Along with certain other variations on symbolic interactionism, Goffman's dramaturgical analysis strikes me as closest to a lifelike microsociology. It is brilliant and unprecedented; and I am fascinated by every reading. It possesses a great formal beauty. Yet, too much too formal beauty leaves me dull and apathetic; too much Goffman leaves me sympathetic with poor Jacques. These mechanistic accounts are fascinating but cold and lifeless, lacking vitality, rendering everyday life banal, robotic, too resolved by situation. Certainly, this is not the only imaginable reaction to Goffman; but, there you have mine.

In studying "social constructionism" in preparation for this project, I had this brief occasion (described above) to hear the internal conversations that make me possible. Not striving for the precise metronomic click, click, click of laboratory science but, instead, fidelity to the loose splish, splash, slip, slop of everyday life: the cacophony of historical context, the elusiveness of linguistic representation, the metered chaos of relational interaction in the meaning- and sense-making process, social constructionism seems to me—albeit sadly crippled by its deliberate dismissal of organismic embodiment—a far more sustainable account than foundational essentialisms. Not "true" per se, it is serviceable and true enough.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

## What Now?

There is a Zen saying, “Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment: chop wood, carry water.” At first glance, this seems analogous to the proverb “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” I take the latter (proverb) to mean that change is illusory and perhaps futile because they are only cosmetic while the underlying reality becomes even more entrenched. This sentiment would have seemed appropriate when Napoleon overthrew the king only to declare himself emperor, then overthrew the king of Spain and installed his brother Joseph on the throne.

I take the Zen statement to mean something quite different. Before enlightenment and after enlightenment *seem* the same at the level of empirical observation but the subjective experience of the enlightened is profoundly transformed and, therefore, so have the tasks of chopping of wood and carrying of water. To be fully engaged in chopping wood while chopping wood, to be fully engaged in carrying water while carrying water, this is not at all like the usual chopping of wood and carrying of water.

Something of this sort occurred in the process of this research and dissertation. For the most part, daily writing life continues to be internal and solitary; although, this experience is more playful and metaphorical. I am more aware of performing in a company of improvisational actors so that being the solitary writer is more an “as if” stance, more strutting a part upon the stage, beret cocked akimbo, perhaps, if it helps.

Along these lines, I wonder if there are additional ways to say the world that can open up new possibilities for the writing and reading of personal writing. As I add these final words, I become convinced that we can re-contextualize personal narrative writing

and its "taken-for-granteds" (e.g. authorship, self, mind, creativity and personal history) in helpful ways.

One very good example of a constructive direction for creative writing and the teaching of creative writing is available in the form of *Creating Re-creations: Inspiration from the Source (2nd Edition)* a book and CD package by Gabriele Rico, Professor of English and Creative Arts at San Jose State University. Dr. Rico is well known for her best-selling book, *Writing the Natural Way*. In *Creating Re-creations: Inspiration from the Source (2nd Edition),* she explicitly states that "creative acts do not belong only to the very few" nor do they take place in a vacuum. We internalize and are influenced by and build upon the inspirations of others. In the process of so doing, we discover our own voices.

*Creating Re-creations* explains and illustrates what might be called "re-creative writing" instruction. In a typical re-creative writing exercise, the writer hears a poem or piece of prose read aloud twice. You can have someone else read to you, or you can listen to Gabrielle Rico read aloud on the CD included with the book. The first time the writer just listens receptively. On the second reading, the writer jots down words and phrases from the reading, along with any internal dialog emerging from it. Rico encourages using the "clustering" techniques she teaches here and in *Writing the Natural Way*.

From this point, the writer uses the notes and responses to form a short creative work. The object is not to reproduce or plagiarize the original poem but to use it as riff , run and fill, as a starting place from which to improvise. The examples show an interesting combination of incorporation, response and creation. None of the results replicate the original, nor, in group exercises, do writers approximate each other.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

I am not suggesting that “being a humanist” or perceiving the world in an individualist light is wrong, only that it is local and historical and, therefore, not inevitable, that there are other possibilities, other spaces in which to stand. To paraphrase Kenneth Gergen (1999, p. 62), what kind of world do we bring forth with what we say together? What kind of person?

DIRECTORY OF APPENDICES



# APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

## INFORMED CONSENT
## For All Participants in a Doctoral Research Project Tentatively Titled Saying the World: A Constructionist Social Psychology of Writing and Authorship

You are invited to participate in a research study of how skilled personal essay writers go about writing personal essays and how this process might be applied to improve the teaching of writing and writerly practice in the personal narrative genre. You were selected as a possible participant because you are recognized by me (the researcher) as a skilled writer of personal narrative. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Rodney L. Merrill, in preparation of a doctoral dissertation under the auspices of the Taos-Tilburg Ph.D. program, a joint program of The Taos Institute in Chagrin Falls, Ohio and Tilburg University in Tilburg, Netherlands. The degree is granted by the Tilburg University Faculty of Social Science.

<u>Background information</u>

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

The purpose of this study is: To explore how personal essay writers go about writing personal essays by asking them to write about their writing process. I am hoping that the reflection process that you go through while you write about how you go about writing will bring you in closer contact with the lived experience of personal writing.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

The study will begin with a "pilot interview" questionnaire consisting of a series of open-ended questions about your writing process. I will be a participant in the study as well. The responses to this questionnaire will be presented verbatim in the dissertation along with discussion of the dominant writing process theory and some possibilities for understanding writing and creativity from a social constructionist perspective.

If the results of the pilot questionnaire suggest follow-up, you may be asked to respond to a limited number of follow-up questions. These questions may be asked and answered formally, by e-mail, by instant messaging, or by telephone as seems appropriate and agreeable.

Risks, inconveniences, and benefits of being in the study

In this case, there seems no risk involved in participation. Possible benefits to you include improved understanding of your writing process.

Compensation

You will receive no payment for participation. You may request a free copy of the results and formal dissertation.

Confidentiality

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

We will keep all facts about you private.

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law.

***Due to the non-threatening nature of this study, anonymity and confidentiality about your responses is at your option.*** Please elect below whether you want your real name used or disguised in reporting the results of this study.

When you report on this study in any format, I elect to have:

□ my real name used.

□ my real name omitted/disguised.

Voluntary nature of the study

All aspects of your decision to participate in this study are voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you are free to opt-out of any question or withdraw at any time without prejudice or repercussions.

Contacts and questions

The researcher conducting this study is: Rodney L. Merrill, a doctoral student in social science at the Taos-Tilburg Ph.D. program. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 35798 Dow Lane, Astoria, Oregon, 97103; telephone (503) 325 -1835 or e-mail Rodney.Merrill@charter.net . If you have any questions or concerns, my dissertation advisor is Dr. Harlene Anderson at Houston Galveston Institute 3316 Mount Vernon, Houston TX 77006. Her e-mail is harleneanderson@earthlink.net and her office phone is (713) 526-8390. Her role at the Taos/Tilburg Ph.D. program is more fully described at http://www.taosinstitute.net/tilburg/tilburgEduc.html.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Your signature below acknowledges receipt of a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature _____

Replace this text with Research Participant's Name

Date: _____

Signature of Investigator:

Rodney L. Merrill

Date: 17 March 2008

You may FAX this back at 1-501-325-5608

Or mail to:

Rodney Merrill

35798 Dow Lane,

Astoria, Oregon, 97103

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

# APPENDIX B: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

I invite you to participate in a research study of how skilled personal essay writers go about writing personal essays and how this process might be applied to improve the teaching of writing and writerly practice. I selected you because I consider you a skilled writer of personal narrative.

I, Rodney L. Merrill, am conducting this study in support of my doctoral dissertation in Applied Social Science for the Ph.D. degree offered jointly by The Taos Institute in Chagrin Falls, Ohio and Tilburg University in Tilburg, Netherlands. The degree is granted by the Tilburg University Faculty of Social and Behavioral Science.

**Background information**

The purpose of this study is: To explore how writers of personal narrative go about doing what they do (writing) by asking them to write about their writing process. I am hoping that the reflective process that you go through while writing about how you go about writing will bring you in closer contact with the lived experience of personal writing.

Below are the “pilot interview” questions. Don't let any of these questions box you in; just tell me how you do what you do. I want these questions to be *guideposts but not fence posts*. Feel free to roam. I am calling this an “interview” rather than a questionnaire because I don’t want the procedure to have the feel or implications of a questionnaire. You may notice that each item actually consists of several questions. This is more a matter of rephrasing for clarification; you need not answer each question in an item individually.

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

Take as much time as you need to provide a thorough and reflective response. Use whatever format you like - anything from an item-by-item response to a personal essay about writing a personal essay, just so long as the key questions get answered in the process.

Thanks for your support.

*Rodney*

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

# APPENDIX C: THE “PILOT INTERVIEW” QUESTIONS

1. Why do you write? What is your motive in writing? Is it to influence others? Is it to a share something about yourself with others? If so, say more about why you desire to share life stories with others?

2. Do your stories have some “truth” to share? If so, do you think this truth is “universal” (that is, that is something true about all people or all times) or do you think this truth is more “local” (that it is something you learned that might be true of some people or sometimes).

3. How did your interests in personal writing evolve? Have you written personal stories for as long as you can remember or was there a specific time when the desire to write personal stories appeared? In short, what is the story behind your story writing?

4. How are you drawn to certain story ideas? In other words, where do you think your ideas come from? How do you know that it’s a good idea or an idea with potential? Have you noticed that there are certain times or places or circumstances that precede a writing idea?

5. How does an idea become a manuscript? Why are you drawn to writing them down? Why can't you just have an idea and leave it at that?

6. What happens between "an idea" and "a finished story." (Or, what is your writing and editing process?) For example, when you get an idea, do you write it down and do some sort of concept map or storyboard. Or do you just kind of wait for more

ideas to evolve? Once you are convinced that you have the makings of a story, do you map out your story before you start? Or do you kind of "free write" until you have something to work with? Do you write from an outline? Or do you write from a basic concept, then take care of organizing it later? Do you revise and edit as you write or do you pretty much write a draft, then return to revise and edit?

7. Is your writing and editing process pretty consistent from one story to the next or is it circumstantial?

8. Do your stories turn out pretty much as you conceived them or do they tend to change and evolve as you write them? If they change, why do they change and how do you know the change is for the better?

9. Do you have any dialogical or feedback process that you can identify? Do you discuss your story with friends, family, colleagues at various stages of the writing? Do you consult the writing of authors you admire for inspiration before and during development of a new story? Do you go to the movies or watch certain television shows when you are writing? Don't let any of these questions box you in; I am interested in any habits you may have that help you write.

10. Do you have any internal dialog or feedback process that you can identify? If so, what kinds of inner conversations do you have about your writing? Is it very similar to the ones you have when you cook dinner or make up a shopping list or is it somehow different?

Who writes and about whom in personal narrative?

11. Does the writing of personal narratives change or influence you in anyway? Do you discover or learn new things in the process of writing a story? Do you "see" or perceive things differently during or after writing a story? Please describe anything of this nature.

12. Is there anything else you would like to add? Or suggestions you would like to make?

# APPENDIX D: INTRODUCTION TO THE DIALOGS

I want to thank you again for participating in this conversation about writing. And I apologize for taking so long to respond. I was out of the country for the entire month of November and returned home only to participate in "the storm of the century" which pretty much shut down my part of the country. I did not have Internet service for three weeks. You can read more details if you are interested You can read more about this disastrous storm, if you like, at www.dailyastorian.com (the web version of our own Daily Astorian newspaper).

After a month in Europe (my first time ever!) and three weeks virtually cut off from world, I am back! I am working feverishly to catch up on my dissertation research and development, catching up on my consulting businesses, and , of course, building back to my running schedule. I am uprighting some of the fallen trees and cutting up others. I am learning how to use a chainsaw, (something I've never had a desire to know), how to sharpen them (even less a sirens call), and how easily they dull on even the tiniest patch of sand. I am calling roofing and window contractors ....

To top things off, I've had a series of computer crashes (possibly related to dramatic power fluctuations during the storm) requiring me to rebuild a lot of my files. Some of my email has been lost forever. Things seem to have stabilized now.

Also, I've been "in crisis" - so to speak - about where to go with this project and didn't want to waste your time by drawing you further into it only to realize I wanted to do something else. The problem has been how to "do something" with what you say without doing too much. I want to avoid a fairly typical research scheme that pokes and

prods and massages, analyzes and categorizes, until what you said gets lost in charts and graphs and interpretations and all that remains is what I say you said.

I'm thinking the best approach might be to use the pilot questionnaire as a springboard for further conversation. If you are willing, I would like to continue on for a while just having a dialog based on your initial responses but going wherever it takes us- on the premise that wherever it takes us is where we need to go with it.

If you find this interesting, respond as you are moved. I have no sense that you are obligated to answer but would appreciate it if you did. Just let me know so that I can plan accordingly. If you do choose to continue, which I certainly hope you will, I am going to ask that you use this opportunity to really look deeply into what writing is about, what it means to you, and how you go about it.

I have highlighted certain passages and questions in yellow, as above, to indicate that I am particularly interested in further clarification or elaboration. But please feel free to respond to anything you find in here, highlighted or not.

> I WANT TO EMPHASIZE THAT I AM NOT LOOKING FOR ANY PARTICULAR ("RIGHT" OR "WRONG") RESPONSE. I AM PUTTING SOME IDEAS OUT THERE FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION – MORE AS QUESTIONS OR THINGS TO CONSIDER RATHER THAN ANSWERS – AND WANT WHATEVER YOU HAVE TO OFFER IN RESPONSE.

# APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW BY SHEILA BENDER

## *On Personal Writing and the Social Construction of Reality*

*—November '08 Interview by Sheila Bender at Writing It Real Magazine.*

SHEILA: Rodney L. Merrill contacted me for an interview about writing from personal experience. He explained that for his doctoral thesis, he is conducting a "research study on how skilled personal essay writers go about writing personal essays and how this process might be applied to improve the teaching of writing and writerly practice in the personal narrative genre."

I answered the questions he sent and, of course, wanted to know more about Rodney L. Merrill, his project and his own writing (I assumed someone interested in this topic also wrote personal essays).

I believe this interview will help you realize much about the significance of writing in your life and in our culture. And if you wished your college took personal writing seriously when you were a student, putting it up there with psychology and sociology, you'll be gratified learning more about Rodney L. Merrill's background, how he values writing, and the foundation for his research. The wonderful answers and links he supplied to my questions are a course treasures in themselves. [Although the interview is a bit lengthy, keep reading so you can use the valuable knowledge bank he has offered. --Ed]

SHEILA: When I was invited to participate in your research study, I immediately wondered where your interest in personal writing came from. Do you write? Have you observed benefits of writing in yourself or others?

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RODNEY: Yes. I've been a writer of one sort or another since I was a child. In fact, it is my favorite means of communication. I would much rather write than talk on the telephone or, in many cases, talk face-to-face. I enjoy informal situations, like parties or other social events. I'm often the life of the party and a good social mixer. People who have met me at social events are shocked to find out I have an aversion to the verbal communication. I do not like giving speeches or doing interviews (laughs). The key, I think, is this: I like chatting and jousting and just having fun verbally. But when there are formal expectations for communication either on my part or on the recipient's part, when I think impact and outcome are serious and important, I much prefer to write. That's why I've had some 400 articles published or reprinted but given only a couple of interviews and have actually turned down speech invitations.

SHEILA: Wow! What are the subjects of the 400 articles? How long have you been publishing?

RODNEY: I'll come back to the nature of the 400 articles later, if I can remember. Most of them are not personal essays. Most of them are journalism of some variety: informatory, how-to, human interest, nature. I've also done a lot of technical stuff like annual reports, manuals, marketing communications and fund raising pitches. Whenever I can get away with it, I write these in the first-person with big human interest because they are more likely to get read.

I never finished answering your question about where my interest in personal writing came from. I think the most accurate answer might be that personal writing was initially an act of desperation.

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I used personal storytelling to convince my grandparents to rescue me from a very violent and abusive family situation. My situation was so bad that I became convinced that I would never survive into adulthood if I wasn't somehow removed from it. To my astonishment and relief, my stories and my grandparents' goodwill combined to have me sequestered at their rustic cabin in rural New Hampshire from age 12 until I graduated from high school. That was the beginning of my understanding of the power of words to change the course of events.

The bemused and amused faculty of Lisbon Regional passed around a 50-page paper I submitted in seventh grade on the mulish inefficiencies I saw all around me. Written in the style of a comedy roast but with a wider target, from the Board of Selectmen to the road crew to the school principal, faculty and staff, no one was spared. And I think that's why it was passed around so widely – because no one was spared. As in a comedy roast, some of the "targets" called me in for a roasting of my own. I took it good-naturedly, and there were no further repercussions. That's when I began to understand that humor could be both amusing and powerful, that it can be used to say things that one could not say with impunity by any other means.

SHEILA: Did you see anything efficient get put in place?

RODNEY: Hah! No, I doubt any efficiencies were enacted due to my “Twainish” hyperbole. But it was fun. I actually got a good mark on it. I got some positive recognition. Considering my situation at the time, it was time and energy well spent.

I went through a period of posting reactionary rhetoric under such noms de plume as Paul Revere (the midnight rider), Patrick Henry ("Give me liberty or give me death.")

and Ben Franklin ( "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately."). I even tried some combinations like John Paul Revere, sadly striving to imbue more power and authority to the tracts.

I've been a bleeding heart liberal ever since but I loved my grandparents and they were reactionaries, so there you have it. I even won some sort of American Legion Reactionary Youth Award for a patriotic essay and was asked to present it as a speech before the entire student body, faculty, and staff of Lisbon Regional School. I accepted and that was a mistake. I botched the speech terribly, and - to the delight of the student body and the alarm of faculty and staff – even muttered "awh-shit" into the microphone when I lost my place. This may be the source of my dislike for live speech.

SHEILA: I would imagine the incident could have lasting effects. Where did you post the reactionary rhetoric? What where you reacting to in particular?

RODNEY: Where? Wherever I thought I could get away with it. A few times I was called on the carpet for it because I failed to get permission to post it. But, it doesn't seem very Paul Revere-like to go around asking permission, does it?

What was I reacting to in particular? Hmmm .... Well, ostensibly it was *the triumph of the American Way over the advance of godless communism*, I suppose. But that wasn't it, not really. I was reacting to a need for a community of discourse, a need to belong, maybe a need for a sense of truth and justice. For the world to make sense.

On the lighter side, this moment of celebrity resulted in the formation of a Free America Youth Organization. The group disbanded after the first meeting, primarily because they were looking for leadership and elected me as the first president and, I

imagine, Freedom Führer. Being an anarchist, I didn't believe in telling people what to do; being followers, they had no ideas of their own and FAYO suffered a swift, uncomplicated, and, I think, timely death.

SHEILA: So were most of your writings political?

RODNEY: Oh, no. Well, *all writing is political* from a constructionist and deconstructionist point of view. No statement is entirely innocent. It always has some purpose, strategy or endgame. But in the sense you mean here, no.

As a youngster, I saved the quips and sayings of my grandfather on 3 x 5 cards because, I felt loss when I imagined them vanishing when he died. And, being a man in his early sixties, he seemed to my young eyes ready to keel over at any moment. I did manage to get some of his sayings published under the title of "New England Witcracker" or some such. Looking back, I now sense that love made his stories a lot funnier than they might seem to a stranger not charmed by the twinkle in his eye and the cant of his toothless grin that implied Socratic irony.

I stopped writing for a while after the school counselor informed me that my I.Q. scores indicated that I was inherently and immutably stupid and should prepare for a life of swabbing decks. I mean, why write? Who is going read the blathering of a retarded guy who thinks he’s smart –except maybe to laugh at him?

SHEILA: Schools had the audacity to label you by one test score when they saw all you were doing–even if they disapproved, there's no way I can see them really thinking this kid was a retarded guy. So was there something more sinister afoot like punishing you for your outspoken behavior?

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RODNEY: Well, it's not that simple though. At the time I was given the I.Q. test and informed of its infallible and immutable results, I was a very depressed kid and I wasn't doing a lot. Except staring out the window. I did a lot of that. And my parents, especially my father, liked to tell me what a waste of sperm I was and how stupid I was and the like. And as much as I hated the man and lacked respect for him, it still hurt and affected me to hear things like that. When I was disappointed with myself, I would have internal dialogs that sounded pretty much the same.

So, to be fair to the school, it wasn't like there was this outgoing high-functioning kid who happened to do poorly on the I.Q. test and they just bought into the I.Q. test. It wasn't that simple. On the other hand, a lot of educators seemed pretty eager to buy into the eugenics behind the I.Q. test. I mean, it took them off the hook if they could say this kid is failing because he just doesn't have the wherewithal. With that backdrop, they don't have to look at why they and the school system and maybe even society at large is failing the kid.

So there was that. In terms sinister, well, for me, sinister conjures up something planned and diabolical, so I'm not really comfortable with that word. But there was a lot of self-fulfilling prophecy due to pedagogical slack and laziness. I suspected as much and asked my classmate, Steve Howland, to do an experiment with me. Steve was a very sincere and ethical kid who turned out to be the Class Salutatorian or some such in spite of being a poor boy leased out to a farmer by his family because they couldn't afford to support him. This kid was up at 4:00 o'clock every morning and got on the school bus

smelling of cow and cow shit and stayed up late every night studying. I didn't think he would do it because there were some very serious truth-claims at stake.

My experiment was this: On our next writing assignment, we would do our own work as usual but then we would exchange papers and transcribe each other's paper into our handwriting and submit it as our own. In other words, Steve hand copied my paper and submitted it as his and I hand copied his paper and submitted it as mine. My hypothesis was that we would get our customary grade (him an A or B, me a C or D) despite submitting each other's paper. If I was wrong, he was risking that he would get a lower grade. If I was right, he was risking the knowledge that he did better than I and I did poorer than he, partly, *only partly now*, due to tradition not effort.

When the papers came back, his paper (that is, *my* paper) got an "A" and my paper (that is, *his* paper) got a "C" just as I predicted. We shared this "local knowledge" quietly through the rest of high school.

SHEILA: So, did you tell anyone about this?

RODNEY: Nope. Part of the deal I made with Steve was we would keep it to ourselves no matter what the outcome, because, we believed, no good and only harm would come of exposing it. We knew and that's all that mattered.

Anyway, yes, there was some of that kind of stuff going on. But mainly I think people just believed what they were told about the predictive value of I.Q. because (1) it came bearing the authoritative stamp of science, (2) it made teaching and academic counseling less complicated if ability is inherited, (3) it explained why poverty and

"failure" runs in families as does success and (4) it fits our mythology that our system affords equal opportunity for equal ability.

What interests me, though, is the self-fulfilling nature of the I.Q. verdict. Once I "found out" I was stupid, I went to looking out the window pretty much full time. When I did poorly on assignments, I didn't try harder. I didn't argue the point. I just shrugged and accepted it. Sometimes I accepted it as evidence of my stupidity. Other times, I accepted it as my lot in life.

Then something interesting happened in a "Home Room" class meeting one afternoon. Someone made a hurtful rapier-like remark about me; I don't even remember what it was. It had something to do with being a loser or stupid or something of that nature. But I shot back that I could do just as well as they did if I gave a shit but I don't. Well, there followed a caterwauling of discredit and disbelief that normally would have sent me into a semi-catatonic depressive withdrawal. Instead, I proclaimed this "The Year of Instant Genius" in which all would be revealed. And, by god, it was! My junior and senior years were a regular whirlwind of extra-curricular activity, a part-time job, and unheard-of grade point averages.

Looking back, I understand that I am not due the credit in the heroic tradition of Horatio Alger. I did not simply tap into my inherent inner resources. I did not simply lift myself up by my bootstraps. I came up to the plate and swung the bat, yes. But I owe the language of ability to, among many others, the brother-in-law of our local minister and to Susan Hazelton, our high school English and drama teacher. While helping the reverend built a little cabin in the woods, I spent the evenings struggling with some of his brother-

in-law's college texts and began to ask questions. His brother-in-law (I wish I could remember his name) commented that these questions reveal a sharp intelligence. No one had ever said that to me. I know that was important me because it is among the very few things I remember clearly. Mrs. Hazelton, a towering powerhouse of 5 feet, challenged me to audition for Oscar, the lead in *The Odd Couple*. When I declined, she fixed her gaze into my eyes and asked what I was hiding from. I still don't know if she *gave* me the part for "therapeutic" reasons, but I auditioned for it, I got it, and I played it.

These pivotal people [4] did not want to hear about I.Q. tests. Their experience told them that I was not living up to my abilities. So, the thing is, when the other students laughed, it was this man and this woman who had moved into my vocabulary for saying the world, it was *they*, not just some heroic me, who empowered me to step up to the plate and swing at the ball.

By the way, there is a kind of final chapter or epilogue on this I.Q. story. Some six or so years later, I was telling the story to Leroy Smith, my psychology instructor at Ventura College, and he grew distraught and insisted on giving me another I.Q. test right there and then. You'd have to know Leroy. I'm sure he is a fan of I.Q. tests and wanted to set the record straight. When he returned with the results, he bore a sly grin and the news that I am, in fact, a genius.

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Ah well, shucks. The truth is probably somewhere between, if there is anything to it at all. Being a genius is not the point. I still remember the assured authority of that school counselor when she told me that my I.Q. was low, that it was inherent and immutable, that I should give up any ideas of college and begin planning a career of swabbing decks in the Navy. She had it all worked out.

This "news" that was so devastating to me, these "facts of life" as it were, turned out to be fallible and capricious science stories that did not take into account a host of confounding variables like nutritional status, parental attitudes toward education, concepts of self-worth, chronic anxiety and stress …. To my way of thinking, the only difference between my first I.Q. score and the later one is that in the meantime a few people had walked onstage and acknowledged me as worthwhile, someone had told me to give myself more credit. Inherent and immutable, indeed! I have been skeptical of "facts" ever since.

SHEILA: What about those 400 articles?

RODNEY: Well, you'll notice that I carefully worded that. I said some 400 articles and reprints. Whenever possible, I grant only First Rights and retain the rest. A lot of my articles have been published more than once. Also, I've served as contributing editor on a couple of small print and online magazines. I remember getting one rural living magazine off the ground, it still exists, and I was writing about 75% of the content for the first year! We didn't want that to be obvious, so I registered a couple of pen names so I could cash my paychecks!

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I don't consider myself a very good personal writer actually. I am quite competent at putting together how-to articles, persuasive essays and, hopefully, dissertations. I scored an unusual 12 out of 12 possible points on a mandated writing proficiency exam. I even managed to bill $70,000 one year for writing marketing materials and human interest with a commercial or fund raising motive. And I've done a lot of first person storytelling in the interest of making an otherwise tired article more interesting.

But when it comes to what is commonly meant by personal writing, I feel clumsy and ham fisted. I don’t think I am being overly self-critical to say that even the few personal essays that I've had published seem to miss the mark. I really think they were published because the publisher felt they ought to be rewarded for getting close to hitting the mark.

SHEILA: But that's what I think is so endearing about personal essays--how hard we try to find the intangible, the "unsayable," how humble our efforts. The only way we can miss the mark, I think, is by walking away from the abyss we've written ourselves to. That we climb down awkwardly or fall flat on our faces down there is so human.

RODNEY: Of course, you are right. We essayists pick the unfathomable as our topic then beat ourselves up for failing to fully unravel it. Beyond that, though, is the craftsmanship that produces emotional depth rather than maudlin wallowing and I am not sure I can always tell the difference. Well, let me take that back. I can tell the difference when it's the writing of someone else. I can't always tell the difference when the writing is my own.

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But here's the thing: good or not, this writing has been a generative and transformative dialog. It has played a huge part in creating the rehabilitated reality I inhabit today. Maybe we can talk a little more about that later.

SHEILA: Yes, let's talk about that because it is just what I think: writing the personal essay changes us--it's the most powerful self-actualizing tool there is, I believe.

RODNEY: Maybe we can hit on that more later on. For now, let me just say that my research questions whether this process is *self-actualizing*[26] in the sense of the humanistic model developed by Abraham Maslow[27] and others or if it is self-generating in the social constructionist sense of speaking or singing the world into existence[28]?

There is an old but appropriate joke about the man who was looking for his keys under a street lamp, although he thought he might have dropped the keys elsewhere, because the light was better under the street lamp. I suggest that we are so indoctrinated by the "cogito, ergo sum"[29] divisive and egocentric model of reality that it is hard for us to tell the difference. I suggest that we locate a lot of developmental forces internally because that is where we have been taught to experience them when the action really isn't inside our heads but out there −*in the relational space between you and me, in the language we share, in the model of reality we share. I suggest that without a culture that tells us that we live inside our heads we would not experience it as such.*

SHEILA: How did you come to propose your research and why was your proposal accepted?

RODNEY: To be truthful, it wasn't my first idea. The Taos Institute-Tilburg University jointly sponsored Ph.D. program[30] wants our dissertations to be related to our

professions or at least something that is a very strong avocation. I was going to do something with distance learning since I've been interested in that since the 1980s and have been running DegreeFinders.com for 10 years or so. I also have a professional writing consultancy called Elite Word & Image that specializes in marketing and PR writing, so I thought I might do something with the increasing use of collaborative writing. I still think that has a lot of potential as a social constructionist project. But I also have a few hundred articles and reprints published in a wide variety of nonfiction subjects and many of them using the familiar first-person approach. And, really, writing is my passion. Well, writing and social studies.

The Taos-Tilburg Ph.D. program also requires that research be a contribution to the *social constructionist*[31] viewpoint. Without going into *all* that means right here, right now, I will just say that social constructionism has a lot in common with other postmodern perspectives and takes the view that much of what we take for granted and for real isn't necessarily the only way to see it – that we've come to construct reality as we know it through language which is very powerfully impacted by culture and social institutions. Reality isn't just *there*. It is there largely as we have been taught. This is incredibly simplified rendition of a tradition launched by the publication of *The Social Construction of Reality*[32] (Berger[33] and Luckmann[34], 1966) some 240 pages of brilliant work, but the idea is that people agree on social institutions and give them meanings as well as agreeing on their roles and agency within these constructions. Socially constructed institutions and the social and power relationships authorized by them over time are experienced as not our own invention but an objective reality. The most

important symbol systems in developing these institutions are religion, philosophy, art and science (Berger & Luckmann, p. 40). From this it is a short step to hypothesize that church, education, and justice evolve to serve special interest communities and these socially constructed institutions too seem to be "natural" and as things ought to be. What may be less obvious is that the autonomous individual an*d the encapsulated mind are also social constructions and serve certain ends.*

SHEILA: Synchronicity is at work. I just finished reading an interview in the *Sun Magazine* with David Korten, "Putting An End to Global Competition."

His newest book is The Great Turning: From Empire: to Earth Community[35]. He says:

> Most of our stories about the nature of prosperity and how it is achieved serve the cause of concentrating power, not meeting actual needs... I'm trying to help people recognize that these stories are not reality, and also to articulate alternative stories that promote the idea of the planet as an interconnected community. It seems he is working from a social constructionist point of view. He is also one of the founders of Yes! (www.yesmagazine.org), a journal I admire.

RODNEY: Yes. Although these ideas have been hotly debated in academic circles since the 1960s, more so the 1970s, and especially the 1980s and ‘90s, they are just beginning to gain some Main Street currency. I think that may related to an increased acceptance that weeping on behalf of a declining planet is not just for (as Spiro T. Agnew said) "the nattering nay-bobs of negativity" but reflects justified alarm at our increasingly apparent collision course with extinction.

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Einstein said we can't solve problems using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them. Without some very different thinking and doing in the near future, this precious blue ball we call home may become as noxious and lifeless as the remainder our solar system.

Social constructionists and most other postmodernists want to find a way to combine the best of enlightenment ideas while realizing that much, maybe all, of what we take as given and natural about life is really just a compilation of stories that need some really serious editing and re-writing. And one of those stories, one very dear to us, is the narrative of the encapsulated individual.

The upshot of this is that certain postmodern theorists have declared the “death” of the autonomous individual, the mind, and the author. What does this mean? If the autonomous individual (Belsey, 1997, pp. 184, 254), as an encapsulated mind, is fictive, that is, a social construction, how is writing done and who does it? And, in personal writing, who is the writing *about*?

I wondered: How might we talk meaningfully about personal writing in the context of this social turn and cultural "turn" in theory, as it is called? Here we have a subject— how writers write—that is normally considered a very personal, a very internal, a very *mental* activity. And I wondered: What if it just isn’t so? How might writing be understood in social terms that are useful to writers and writing?

I think my dissertation proposal was accepted because personal essay writing is normally studied by English and humanities scholars and sometimes by educational psychologists. Writing programs are dominated by one or more of these disciplines.

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These folks are interested in the mechanics of writing, the analysis of writing, and the cognitive processes involved in writing. All great stuff but I wanted to explore the "process" of personal essay writers from a different angle and see whether this can be usefully understood in social constructionist terms. In other words, I'm not sure personal writing is strictly the product of an individual encapsulated mind that somehow "invents" or "creates" ex nihilo, out of thin air. I want to look where, it seems to me, the action is—out there, in the social spaces in which you and I live, in the interactions we have and the culturally impacted meanings we generate from them. These are the social and cultural realms, not the personal. And that's what I want to look at: Whether personal writing, one of our most "personal" of activities, can be understood as a social process and whether this understanding can contribute positively to the teaching of writing and writerly practice.

See, our culture, and most of Western culture for that matter, situates the individual as more or less the center of the universe. I mean, we don't say it that way because that sounds kind of silly on the face of it. Yet, we do construe ourselves, our essences, if you will, to be individual minds encapsulated by a body. We are said to "have" a body. Meaning that who we are "really" is a kind of ghost manipulator (puppeteer) that sits behind the eyes and ears and nose of this bag of skin and bones and pulls the strings for its "meat puppet" (Gibson, 1984) to carry out.

Even those of us who believe in souls tend to believe in individuated and isolated souls wandering the earth seeking a way to reunite with God or whatever our concept of the postmortem reward might be. And we take this view so much for granted that for me

to even bring it up or suggest it is otherwise seems peculiar. *Of course*, you are an individual and I am an individual. And, if not, it is something we should try to achieve through personal growth. I mean, it's right there − *personal* growth. But is what we call personal growth really *personal*, that is, a welling up from within the individual or is it something that happens only when we are in dialogical relationship with others? Social constructionists and other postmodernist thinkers tend to think it is the latter.

SHEILA: I know that when my son died seven years ago (he was 25 and hit a tree snowboarding in CO), I definitely felt the interconnectedness of us all--it was if the hundreds of people who knew Seth were like the aspen trees that he had told me are really one stand. I spent the next years writing about the first six months after he died finding out more about this larger connection. His death, that impression, and my writing have definitely changed me.

RODNEY: Interesting that you bring up Seth's comments on the aspens because the aspen, it turns out, propagates through underground shoots and roots known as rhizomes. If you cut down an aspen, the roots are still interconnected with the organismic whole so the trees grow back undeterred. Scientists speculate that the largest living organism on earth may be a huge grove of aspen trees along the Colorado mountainside. Fans of Deleuze & Guattarri's *A Thousand Plateaus*[36] like to use this fact to extol the superiority of communalist values[37] and to devalue humanist individualism as a survival strategy. Although I am sympathetic to some aspects of their collaborative esthetic[38], I find the rhizome analogy a little repugnant because these trees are all identical. They are, in fact, clones of each other.

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As many others born in the much maligned "me" generation, I've spent a lot of time and effort searching for my true self, the real me, and what that means in the larger scheme of things. As part of that quest, I've always wanted to learn something new and try something else, thinking in characteristically American style[39], that you find your true self through work[40]. But, for me, *work* has proven splendid and rewarding but *jobs* have proven vacuous and life-depleting.

Since happening upon Buddhism[41], postmodern[42] studies and the social construction of reality[43], I've come to the conclusion that trying to find my "true self" or "my true purpose" is wasted effort. There is no one true self. There is no one true purpose.

Being a died-in-the-wool New England individualist, I met this conclusion with despair and mourning. But, as Werner Erhard said in *est* Training[44], "Don't you get it? It doesn't *mean anything* that it doesn't mean anything!"

On the up side, if there is no one true self, life is an adventure. Without an a priori course or destination, I can give up a lot of painful stories of violence and abuse that I have lugged around for decades out of some misguided commitment to cherishing a pathetic and impoverished identity – first, as victim; later, as brave (victim) survivor; and, more recently, as (victim) thriver.

Now, as the ideas of a dialogical self [45] and relational social constructionism become less alien and more "real" way of speaking the world, I find myself evolving a gossamer web of stories peopled with more loveable characters and a narrative less rigidly tied to hurts of the past. I hold my historical narrative lightly and imbue it with

less significance because, after all, it is only one telling of the story. Even granted that all of the events that I believe occurred actually occurred, and that becomes less clear with each telling, but even if they did happen, the story could have been stitched together with many threads other than cynicism and bitterness. Compassion, sympathy, humor, any number of other prisms might have been available with the proper resources, even to me, someone assaulted in every imaginable way.

SHEILA: Yes, that's how writing is I think: the pure act of paying attention and getting the details down and offering the experience on the page through images that appeal to all five senses, allows us to make meaning and it allows us to love, ourselves, life. As someone famous sad, there is always singing--in bad times we sing about bad times.

RODNEY: I first lived this experience when I wrote and rewrote and rewrote *Baking Powder Biscuits*, a personal essay describing my tormented relationship with my mean-tempered and assaultive stepmother. The first draft of the essay was filled with bitterness, sadness and disappointment. With each rewriting, the "facts" of the story have remained essentially the same but by the last version, I was writing with tears streaming down my face just as they had when I wrote the first draft – but these were tears of forgiveness, compassion, and resolution, tears of relief to be free at last of a resentment that sat so heavily on my chest that I found it hard to breath, of joy at finding at last a way to love the violent, weak-willed and only mother I knew. (That’s not it exactly; I loved her always. More like: joy at finding a way to let loving her be okay.)

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SHEILA: Frost said[46], "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader." What did you do with this personal essay? Can we reprint it for Writing It Real subscribers?

RODNEY: Frost is from my neighborhood. And, although I think good fences sometimes do make good neighbors[47], I think he's onto something there.

"Baking Powder Biscuits" is one of the essays I was talking about earlier, one of those that was published but doesn't quite hit the mark for me. Writing it and re-writing it did wonders for me, though.

*Did I finally arrive at the Truth of the matter? Probably not. I arrived at a* truth that let me breath again, *a* truth that let me cry out in relief and satisfaction. But *the* Truth? I don't think so. And I don't think so because I'm not sure there is one. I have noticed that each time I tell this and other stories about my childhood, I discover more funny streams, more poignant rivulets, more somethings else. My "story" is evolving, not along some path toward some Ultimate Truth, but tangentially, more like a spherical web.

We tend to think of history as developing along a straight line toward some destiny or other. It makes more sense to think of personal history and maybe all history as multidimensional[48], multilineal[49], and rhizomatous[50], that is, best envisioned as developing holistically[51] rather than traveling some predetermined straight line toward some end. And that means the trajectory of my history and what it "really means" depends on where in the web-ball I am standing when I tell it.

SHEILA: Thank you for the definition links. Do you read a lot of the memoirs out today? If so, which ones have left an impression on you and why?

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RODNEY: Yes, I do. I especially like Augusten Burroughs[52]. I've read most of his books. I knew a family very much like the one he describes in Running With Scissors[53]. Tobias Wolff's This Boy's Life[54]. I'm reading The Glass Castle[55] by Jeannette Walls right now. I am so busy with other things that I am usually on the trailing edge. I picked up *The Glass Castle* because Kate (my wife) was getting ready to put it in the thrift shop box. I was drawn in by the end of the first page. I also like The Liars' Club: A Memoir[56] by Mary Karr. I enjoyed this story because my own childhood has a lot in common with the author's. A crazy mother, an alcoholic fist-swinging father who spun tales with his cronies, the piles of empty beer bottles, and guns leveled at family and stranger alike. Even being sexually molested by my sister's boyfriend. What I liked most, I think, is the clarity, the authentic ring, and the lack of self-pity in Karr's telling.

SHEILA: Back to your writing. Why did you enroll in social science program rather than a writing program or an English program?

RODNEY: My two passions are storytelling and social studies. I want to find some way to join them in this doctoral project and dissertation.

The contemporary "turn to the social" in theory in many disciplines and the simultaneous "turn to the personal" in writing and reportage across the same disciplines strikes me as paradoxical. In so far as the "turn to the social' downplays or excludes "the personal" in the sense of minds encapsulated within autonomous individuals, it seems odd that many proponents of constructionist and other postmodern ontological[57] and epistemological[58] models favor writing in a first person narrative style. That is, we were once expected to adopt the language of science and pretend we can be objective and now

we are expected to reveal where on the web-ball we are standing while we are saying how the world is. And most of us don't have a clue on how to go about that.

It seemed to me that the conversation might begin by talking to people who write the personal and asking them how they go about that. And rather than "interpret" what you "really mean" as scientists like to do, I thought maybe I could strike up a conversation about what that might look like to a social constructionist and see if anything useful comes of it.

SHEILA: Oh, is that interesting. It's almost like an organic rebalancing in action. We are one and we are many. We are part of a whole and wholly apart. We need to see each leaf on the aspen.

RODNEY: Yes, and thank you for that. Except for the "clone" aspect, I agree. And as the poet John Donne put it: "No man is an island, entire of itself."[59] We cannot "become" alone. I become who I am because we are talking and you become who you are because your son was who he was and you know me and you know someone else who ... Just like that web-ball of connections. We need each other and, in many ways, we *are* each other. At any rate, that's what I think *right now*. Hah!

SHEILA: From my experience as a poet and personal essayist as well as a writing teacher I think about that issue this way: We cannot open ourselves to all that is (the social) fully until we know where we are coming from (we are on the web ball as you say, but more importantly, what threads are tangling in us) – and working on that creates an ongoing body of work that involves writing from our obsessions, writing from the images and situations that our lives gave to us. We spend years seeing the narrative

we constructed and in seeing it we offer it and others see their own in what we offer. In this way, reading one another's personal work, we see that we are alike in our feelings, even though we think so differently so often.

What will you consider interesting results?

RODNEY: That's a very good question. Although any results will be interesting, I am hoping to find within the responses a legitimate place to identify writing as a social process disguised as a private, isolated, internal process. If it does, then that has some practical implications for the teaching of writing and writing practice. Like, why the hell are we locking ourselves up in our rooms searching for our deeper innermost selves when these are largely social constructs? Why aren't we searching for the meaning of our stories out there – in the social space of relationships where the generation of meaning takes place?

I don't know. It's too soon to say right now but that's the sense I have about the interesting stuff that could come out of this. There is a fellow, famous among social constructionists, who liked to say "the dog will tell you how it wants to be stroked."

That's what remains to be seen. How will this pooch want to be stroked?

SHEILA: What might the impact of the results be?

RODNEY: Well, writers of doctoral dissertations always hope their findings will overturn or create a breakthrough for their field of study, better yet, shift *entire paradigms* of thought.

In fact, dissertations usually sit on university library shelves and collect dust. The biggest impact of much dissertation writing is the additional expense the university incurs

in storing them in perpetuity. In fact, there is a big push to find an agreeable standard for electronic storage to reduce storage requirements for a dissertation to a few hundred kilobytes on a hard drive or optical storage media.

My research is different, of course, and really *will* overturn entire fields of study and maybe even the entire paradigms of writing.

Hah!

No, realistically, it would be nice if people who read my dissertation began to dialog about writing, personal writing in particular, in terms of a dialogical and relational process rather than a purely mental one.

SHEILA: Will you set up a website for that?

RODNEY: Actually, I have a dissertation blog set up already at http://rodneymerrill.com where people can follow the research and, of course, offer comments and interaction. That's what this is all about.

I am in the pilot study stage right now. Depending on how that goes, I may need a number of volunteers who regularly write personal essay to talk about their writing process.

If any of your readers might be interested, they can contact me at rodney.merrill@rodneymerrill.com. Those who write from personal experience should feel free to interact with my dissertation blog as well, at http://rodneymerrill.com.

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# ENDNOTES

[1] Heidegger believed the split of things into subject/object by Western language and thought lead to certain illusions and must be overcome. “Being-in-the-world” is Heidegger’s attempt to signify subject, object, consciousness, world as a single indivisible phenomenon.

[2] Lyotard: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. Still, the postmodern condition is as much a stranger to disenchantment as it is to the blind positivist of delegitimation. Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?” (Introduction, The Postmodern Condition.)

[3] Intersubjectivity is "The sharing of subjective states by two or more individuals."

[4] The term “intertextuality” has (d)evolved so much since it was coined by poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966 that it has almost as many meanings as users (Irwin, 228). Kristeva’s “intertextuality” attempts to merge Saussure’s semiotics (signs derive their meaning within the structure of a text) with Bakhtin’s dialogism (dynamic multiple meanings, or “heteroglossia”). Intertextuality suggests that the meaning of a text derives from other texts by literary allusion or authorial “referencing” (copying, pastiche, palimpsest) or the reader’s making of the connection.

[5] Anyone who knows est and Werner Erhard would predict that this books has no page numbers.

[6] By truth-value, I mean to differentiate truth in the absolutist sense from metaphorical truth that contributes to working knowledge regardless of any absolute status as a truth-claim.

[7] Edward Weston , widely recognized as one of the greatest photographic artists of the 20th century, believed “the camera should be used for a recording of life, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of *the thing itself*, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh” (Photography-Now, 2009).

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[Emphasis mine.] Weston spent his career trying to perfect a photography technique that could accomplish this but, in the end, decided he came as close as possible but that the task is, in fact, not possible (Photography-Now, 2009).

[8] Also poststructuralist discourse with the marginalized "Other" (Sim, 2005: 158)

[9] In American English, "yarn" is a strand of spun threads of natural or synthetic fibers used in weaving or knitting; or, it can be a long and involved story about (usually exaggerated) fantastic events.

[10] Sign: to communicate using sign language

[11] Hyris was Greek goddess of insolence, reckless pride, arrogance and outrageous behavior.

[12] American English: a generally negative term referring to preconceived ideas or emotional reactions retained from previous life experiences.

[13] In evolutionary biology, the long-held explanation for evolutionary change was the theory of *phyletic gradualism* and held that whole genetic lines of descent evolve gradually and incrementally (anagenesis). In short, evolution was thought a smooth and continuous process. Punctuated equilibrium, by contrast, holds that most sexually reproducing populations experience little ongoing change and when phenotypic change does occur, it is a sudden localized event resulting in cleaving and branching speciation (cladogenesis). See: Stephen Jay Gould, 2002. *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. Also, Eldredge, N., and S. J. Gould. 1972. "Punctuated equilibria: an alternative to phyletic gradualism." In T.J.M. Schopf, ed., *Models in Paleobiology*. San Francisco: Freeman, Cooper and Company, pp. 82-115, http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/ridley/classictexts/eldredge.pdf

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[14] It is a short step from here to a constructionist metatheory replete with ontological, etiological, epistemological, and axiological foundations. Foundations, however, contradict the most basic constructionist assertion that there are no foundations except those socially constructed. Thus, a social constructionist philosophy, according to critics, quickly becomes self-contradictory.

[15] In NeuroLinguistic Programming (NLP), “installing” refers to the practice of generating new “resource states” or “beliefs” and making them accessible for future use.

[16] Saussure and other structuralists stress the importance of the relationship of signs to each other but tend to treat the text as a closed system. As with all empirical analysis, structuralist analysis begins by defining the boundaries of the system so that it can be analyzed internally (Chandler, 2007: 197). Julia Kristeva introduced intertextuality, a semiotic idea that bounding text is ontologically problematic because every text is part of a larger discourse which imposes a universe upon it (Culler, 1981). Kristeva argued that we should move beyond the study of internal structure to one that “unpacks” that structure by situating it within the genre or social discourse of which it was one transformation.(Chandler, 2007: 197).

[17] I italicize being here to center stage attributes such subjective sentience and consciousness, self-reflexivity, symbolic interaction and other features might (but not without risk) be called “transcendent” to mere “life functions” of human organisms.

[18] C. Wright Mills coined the term “grand theory” in The Sociological Imagination (1959) to refer to highly abstract theorizing (for example, the work of Talcott Parsons, his contemporary) in which the intellectual activity of creating a logically wonderful conceptualization overtakes the original goal of understanding the workings of the social world.

[19] psychological breakthroughs= "transformations in self-narrative”?

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[20] To qualify for an American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), an applicant must be 50 years of age or older.

[21] http://www.cominguptaller.org/report/chapter1-2.htm

[22] American English idiom meaning to hide something by covering it up.

[23] "say" can include language in the broadest sense, so that placing a cloth, plates and utensils on a flat piece of wood, stone, glass or other sturdy surface that is surrounded by seating of some kind "says" it is a table.

[24] Gemeinschaftsgefühl (geh-MINE-shafts-geh-foohl) (literally) "community engagement" or "social interest," was a term used by Alfred Adler to describe one's connectedness and interest in the well-being of others that enhances or pre-conditions psychological health. Adler used the construct of social interest to explain people, guide his work with people, and describe our responsibility to each other in community. (From the masthead of Gemeinschaftsgefühl magazine, Spring 2010 Issue 2, Volume 2.)

[25] Paradoxical hostage behavior in which victims become sympathetic to their captors.

[26] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-actualization#Self-actualization

[27] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Maslow

[28] http://faculty.maxwell.syr.edu/gmbonham/ISA_Presidential_Address.doc Steve Smith, *Singing Our World Into Existence: International Relations Theory And September 11* "My title comes from the practice of Australian Aboriginal people who, during their period of 'dream-time', sing their world into existence …"

[29] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cogito%2C_ergo_sum

[30] http://www.taosinstitute.net/tilburg/tilburg.html

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[31] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_constructionism

[32] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Social_Construction_of_Reality

[33] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Berger

[34] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Luckmann

[35] http://www.amazon.com/Great-Turning-Empire-Community-Currents/dp/1887208070

[36] http://www.amazon.com/Thousand-Plateaus-Continuum-Impacts-Deleuze/dp/0826476945/

[37] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communalism

[38] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collaborative_method

[39] http://www.psychotherapy.net/article/Work_is_Life

[40]http://books.google.com/books?id=Fi3tnA2CzLcC&dq=married+to+the+job&sa=X&oi=print&ct=book-ref-page-link

[41] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Buddhism

[42] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernism

[43] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_construction_of_reality

[44] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Est_training

[45] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialogical_self

[46] http://personal.centenary.edu/~dhavird/331Frost.html

[47] http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/frost-mending.html

[48] http://www.thefreedictionary.com/multidimensional

[49] http://www.thefreedictionary.com/multilineal

[50] http://www.thefreedictionary.com/rhizomatous

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[51] http://www.thefreedictionary.com/holistically

[52] http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_ss_gw/103-6667213-5087005?initialSearch=1&url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=Augusten+Burroughs

[53] http://www.amazon.com/Running-Scissors-Memoir-Augusten-Burroughs/dp/031242227X

[54] http://www.amazon.com/This-Boys-Life-Tobias-Wolff/dp/0802136680/

[55] http://www.amazon.com/Glass-Castle-Memoir-Jeannette-Walls/dp/074324754X/

[56] http://www.amazon.com/Liars-Club-Memoir-Mary-Karr/dp/0140179836

[57] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ontological

[58] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemological

[59] http://isu.indstate.edu/ilnprof/ENG451/ISLAND/index.html