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From Teacher to Teller:  
How Applied Storytelling Informs Autobiographical Instruction

A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Storytelling

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by  
Peggy Rosann Kent  
December 2006

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Joseph Sobol, Chair  
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Graham Disque

Keywords: storytelling studies, autobiography, narrative gerontology

## ABSTRACT

From Teacher to Teller:

How Applied Storytelling Informs Autobiographical Instruction

by

Peggy Rosann Kent

This thesis uses autobiographical inquiry to “re-member” how I came to understand that applied storytelling was a valid teaching tool in facilitating autobiographical expression in mature learners. It is an examination of how story sharing and story listening can transform a continuing education classroom into a learning community. Applied storytelling can help elders reframe their negative mental models about the value of their stories, memory, and mythology and create opportunities for positive story sharing experiences. I selected highlights of my journey that best represented my experience and use of applied storytelling techniques. Each chapter includes an exercise and reflection as well as a story and commentary. In the appendices, I include stories written by the elders.

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## DEDICATION

To my husband, John Cantwell, who can edit as well as cook.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am one of those journeyman storytellers that Del Negro describes as a “middle ground practitioner somewhere between kitchen table and platform teller” (2003). But on the day my storytelling journey began more than a decade ago, I was no teller. I was a writer who sometimes taught writing. Armed with nothing more than a passion for older people and their stories and my experiences as a journalist, I volunteered to teach an autobiography class. I blithely recommended the conventional, yet mechanistic method of writing chronologically. Their frank responses precipitated a search for answers to the essential question that faces every educator: How can I improve my practice? This search led me to the storytelling program at East Tennessee State University. I would like to thank the storytellers and professors who demonstrated that storytelling is a powerful medium that can transform a classroom into a learning community.

Donald Davis  
Elizabeth Ellis  
David Novak  
Joseph Sobol  
Ed Wesley

I would also like to acknowledge the elders who took my autobiography classes in continuing education programs at University of Georgia, Piedmont College, and Brenau University. Without them, there would be no story.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background

*What is the best way to facilitate autobiographical expression in older people?* For the past decade, that question has been driving my informal action research in the continuing education classroom. Through a dialogical process, the elders and I worked together to design a model for crafting personal and family stories that has been well received among Elderhostels and three continuing education programs in north Georgia, as well as national conferences on aging, reminiscence, and oral history (Kent, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 1999a, 1999b). Elders consistently experienced an increase in confidence in writing as well as increased enjoyment in sharing their stories. Others entered national and local writing contests, submitted their work to local newspapers, and self-published small volumes of life stories. Many of these stories were also adapted for the spoken word and performed in venues such as public radio and a reader's theater commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of World War II (Adair, 1995; "Two Jackson," 1995; "Unitarian," 1995). (See appendices for selected stories.)

#### Purpose of the Study

However, this model lacked a conceptual framework, which I believe can be provided by the emerging field of storytelling studies, the study of narrative as performance art in formal and informal contexts and the study of narrative "as a tool in education, organizational development, social action, therapy, ministry, medicine, and healing arts..." (Sobol, Gentile, & Sunwolf, 2004, p. 5). It is applied storytelling – telling as a service-oriented tool in contrast to "platform" telling for pure entertainment – that has informed my teaching practice. The purpose of this study is to

use autobiographical inquiry to “re-member” or reconnect with the story of how I came to understand applied storytelling as a valid teaching tool in autobiographical instruction.

### Justification

First, this research will contribute to the nascent body of academic literature in storytelling studies. Until the 2004 launch of *Storytelling, Self, and Society*, “writers on storytelling [had] to orient their referred journal work retrospectively towards those disciplinary standards in which they have been trained” (Sobol, personal communication, 2004). Applied storytellers have also just begun to formally articulate their work. For example, West (2001), along with input from other prominent applied storytellers who work primarily in therapeutic settings, proposed a set of guidelines to help “individuals think about their roles and responsibilities” (para. 1). It is my hope that this thesis will contribute to these conversations.

To my knowledge, neither academic nor popular literature has explored how applied storytelling can facilitate autobiographical instruction. Most popular literature does not address the negative, internalized scripts elders have come to believe about their ability to write and share life stories. In fact, the very methods advocated may actually stymie autobiographical expression. Without a new way of helping elders regard themselves as storytellers and storywriters, many stories will not be preserved and that loss diminishes us all.

### Delimitations and Limitations

First, my research examined the challenges of facilitating written discourse rather than oral discourse such as storytelling, life review, or reminiscence. Second, my students represented a highly self-selected sample of approximately 250 mature learners: relatively educated, predominately white, middle-class retirees ranging in age from the late 50s to late 80s. They were cognitively well and most were physically healthy and lived in their own homes. Class size

ranged from very small groups (5 to 6 members) to as many as 25 to 50 students in a seminar format. We met in continuing education settings as well as community settings such as churches, libraries, and history centers. Two small groups in two different cities continued to meet after the workshops in their homes and libraries to assist in developing the model. The first group consisted of men and women, while the second consisted only of women.

This thesis will not explore how applied storytelling can facilitate autobiographical expression in frail elders who live in an institutional setting, nor those suffering from dementia or untreated mental illness. Neither will it address working with those who are deeply bereaved or those who have recently entered recovery from alcohol or drug dependency.

### Assumptions

Central to this thesis is the metaphor of “life as story” as explored in narrative gerontology, an emerging subfield of gerontology that provides a storied lens through which to view the experience of growing older (Kenyon, Clark, & de Vries, p. xi). Kenyon and Randall (2001) have outlined its tenets as follows (pp. 4-8).

1. Humans are natural storytelling creatures. At our most fundamental level, we are not only storytellers and story listeners, but we are the stories we spin about ourselves along with the ones we co-construct with others. These stories – and the lives in which they inhabit – will change with age, i.e., we age biographically as well as biologically.
2. Our lives and our stories about them are characterized by facticity and possibility. Facticity includes the actual events of the past as well as what we have formerly told ourselves about these events. We can, however, challenge facticity through possibility, the inner aspect of our story that is subject to choice and therefore, change.

3. We live in clock time and story time. Clock, or chronological, time is closed and linear, while story time is open and cyclical, a strange mixture of facticity and possibility that reflects the “idiosyncratic and creative ways in which we each order the events and themes of our lives in terms of their meaning and significance” (p. 6). Because this ordering and re-ordering continues throughout our lives, we are always free to re-story.

4. Life stories have four interrelated dimensions. First, there is the structural dimension, the larger societal stories, the “-isms” that influence us all, e.g., ageism, sexism, racism, capitalism. The second dimension contains sociocultural, the occupational, cultural, and ethnic stories. The third, or interpersonal dimension, includes stories of intimacy such as those of a couple, friends, or family. In the fourth dimension, the previous dimensions combine and merge with the events of our own life to form our personal story (p. 6).

5. Life stories are fundamentally paradoxical. Our stories can never be fully known to others, or even to ourselves. As long as we are living we are also re-storying; therefore, “we will never have ‘the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’ about lives, either our own or anyone else’s” (pp. 7-8).

### Methodology

Because autobiographical inquiry is cyclical and organic rather than chronological and linear, I selected highlights of my journey that best represented my experience and use of applied storytelling. Using such nodal moments (Graham, 1989) is a common, accepted way for educators to organize self-studies. To connect my readers to these experiences, I have relied on dramatic recall, a convention used in autoethnography (Ellis, 1997). Although this study upholds the format conventions of a positivist paradigm, it incorporates elements of creative non-fiction such as dialogue and interior monologue, scene and summary and other techniques usually used

by fiction writers (Gutkind, 2006). Each chapter includes an exercise and reflection as well as a story and commentary.

Dark Enchantments. In this chapter, I reflect on an exercise adapted from Gail Rosen that helps elders to externalize their perceived barriers to sharing and writing personal and family stories.

Truth or Storytelling? In this chapter, I examine the prevailing metaphors of memory and how those outdated notions can hinder autobiographical expression. I relate a family story to demonstrate why the art of autobiography may lie in lying.

Once Upon a Time. In this chapter, I explain how I have adapted Tristine Rainer's technique of "Life as a Fairytale" (1997) to help elders discover their personal myth. I examine Jungian concepts to discuss the archetypal power of fairy tales.

In the conclusion, I reflect on the defining influences on my journey from teller to teacher, and, in the appendices, I include samples of autobiographical stories written by the elders.

### Definitions

Much like the Zen story in which the Master challenged his disciples to put into words the fragrance of a rose, we believe we know the meanings of a word such as *storytelling*, yet we cannot articulate a precise, much less agreed upon, definition. Naming, however, is not only a "key to identity," it is also the key to further development in any discipline (Sobol et al., 2004, p. 2). According to E. Michael Brady, a professor of adult education and senior research fellow at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at University of Southern Maine, terms such as life review, reminiscence, or autobiography are collapsed or used interchangeably, which can obscure the efficacy of research into *any* form of memory recall with older people (personal communication, Nov. 5, 2005). Therefore, to clarify the terms used in this thesis, I draw from definitions

suggested by scholars in storytelling studies as well as those in life review and reminiscence and autobiography studies.

Applied storytelling. This term refers to stories as a tool, i.e., telling that is service-oriented, in contrast to work that is geared more as art or as entertainment (West, 2003).

Autobiography. Although oral or “spoken” autobiography can be produced through recorded stories (Stone, 1996), the term autobiography as used in this thesis refers to written discourse created directly by an author about his or her lived experience (Olney, 1972, 1980). Historically, the term was used to refer to a genre of non-fiction prose written by famous individuals who tell the story of their entire life span. Postmodern and postcolonial critics – as well as Olney himself – have challenged this definition of autobiography claiming it has been “installed as the master narrative of the ‘sovereign self’” and canonized in literature and culture (Smith & Watson, 2001, pp. 4-5). This thesis also challenges the traditional usage of the term and offers the term New Autobiography as an alternative to the traditional autobiography. Olney noted after years of attempting to fix the rules and conventions of this genre, “I have never met a definition of autobiography that I could really like” (Olney, 1980).

Autobiographical storytelling. These narratives are personal stories, which may be told or written, about one’s life. In the contemporary storytelling revival, personal storytelling ranks high in popularity among festival audiences (Sobol, 1999). Autobiographical storytelling can also occur as every day conversation (Tannen, 1989), in familial settings as performance acts (Bauman, 1984, 1986), or as this thesis shows, in the continuing education classroom.

Guided Autobiography. This method of semi-structured life review combines both written and oral discourse to facilitate and focus reminiscence for small groups, usually for older people

(Birren & Deutchman, 1991). Unlike autobiography, the written product is not the emphasis of guided autobiography.

Life Review. This term is often confused with reminiscence, which is a free-form recall that can occur anytime, anyplace, either silently or aloud (Brady, personal communication, Nov. 5, 2005). However, reminiscence is merely the raw material for the formal life review process and not the process itself. Life review is highly structured, facilitated process, a sequential recounting from childhood to the present and is done primarily for therapeutic purposes and usually does not have a written component.

New Autobiography. Rainer (1997) defined New Autobiography as the written process of discovering personal myth by applying “story structure...to life experiences to give them meaning” (pp. 1-2). The resulting text “becomes more like creative non-fiction as ‘new autobiographers’ tend to incorporate more story-telling qualities and their factual narrative may include infusions of fiction and/or imagination” (Brady, personal communication, Nov. 5, 2005). This thesis supports Rainer’s new definition of autobiography and “challenges long-held assumptions about who may write, why, and who” (p. 2).

Reminiscence. This form of memory recall is an informal and non-systematic recollection of past events such as daydreams, ramblings, or musings, which may be either silent or aloud. (Brady, personal communication, Nov. 5, 2005). Although this thesis deals with a method of written discourse to help older people focus their reminiscences about the past, reminiscence is by no means limited to elders. Webster and Haight (1995) defined reminiscence as a “multifaceted, multipurpose, naturally occurring mental phenomenon manifested across the life span in a variety of forms and contexts” (p. 286).



Storytelling. Sobol et al. (2004) prefaced the definition of storytelling by explaining what it is not: “literature, though its images are often translated into literacy forms....nor is it .... diaries, letters, e-mails, or blogs...film...a CD or video....journalism...or computer animation” (p. 3). Storytelling is “a medium in its own right...an artistic process that works with...the technologies of the human mainframe – memory, imagination, emotion, intellect, language, gesture, movement, expression (of face and of body)” (p. 3). Most importantly, however, storytelling is not a solo art; as “a medium of connectivity and community,” storytelling requires a teller and a listener. With storytelling, there must be a “relationship in the living moment – person-to-person or person-to-group” (p. 3). This thesis maintains that, as a live, interpersonal communication medium, storytelling can nourish and transform the process of writing.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Reminiscence and Life Review

Fifty years ago reminiscence in elders was believed to a symptom of senility or a pathological denial of reality. This prevailing paradigm meant that healthcare professionals worked to keep elders busy, distracting them with bingo or crafts; any external activity was preferable to that of inward reflection. However, in 1963, two seminal works were published that would dramatically alter attitudes and change the accepted story about elders' tendencies to tell stories. First, Erikson (1963) published his life span theory of human development in which he posited elders had unfinished psychological business to attend to before they died. He said that the primary task in this stage, Integrity versus Despair, is to accept the past and reconcile it with the present, for resolving this conflict brings wisdom. Secondly, Butler (1963) challenged the idea of reminiscence as a unhealthy phenomenon of aging.

I saw reminiscence in the aged as part of a normal life review process brought about by the realization of approaching dissolution and death. It is characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, particularly the resurgence of unresolved conflicts. These conflicts may be reviewed again and reintegrated. If the reintegration is successful, it may give new significance to the other person's life and prepare him or her for death by mitigating fear and anxiety. (Butler, 1995, p. xvii)

The Erikson-Butler meta-model was quickly embraced by the emerging life review and reminiscence field and became the prevailing paradigm for the next 30 years. At the beginning of

my teaching career, I too embraced this idea and passed it along to the elders. For example, I once wrote on a handout

Wanting to tell your stories is not a sign of senility. It is a natural stage of human development. Just like a two-year old has a fundamental urge to say NO and a teenager to rebel, older people feel a deep-seated need to look back over their lives in order to make sense of it and ask the big questions: *What do I regret? In what do I rejoice? Has my life been meaningful?* The answers come through stories, stories told, and for this workshop, they will come through stories told on paper.

Yet, the longer I taught, the more I questioned my uncritical allegiance to this paradigm. I noticed that the most elders said “just wanted to write a few stories for the grandchildren” and enjoyed telling about as a favorite pet, an eccentric family member, or a childhood home. While some wrote about dramatic life changing moments, others wanted to jot down a few humorous family anecdotes. Some preferred to write about the present, not the past. A few insisted on sticking to the glory tales of their youth. Only rarely did an elder repeatedly rehash unpleasant memories. (See samples of these stories in the appendices.)

I began to look for taxonomies of reminiscence that would explain these variations of storytelling preferences. For example, Watt and Wong (1990, pp. 24-35) described six major types of reminiscers according to psychological function. Integrative reminiscers tell stories about the past to accept themselves and others, to resolve conflicts and reconcile reality with the ideal, to develop a sense of meaning and self worth. Instrumental reminiscers tell stories of the past to remember times in which they struggled and survived, and how they coped with past difficulties. Transmissive reminiscers tell stories to share a cultural heritage and personal

wisdom. Likewise, Narrative reminiscers tell stories sans lessons or values. Escapist reminiscers tell stories in which the good old days are idealized; in these accounts they may boast of past achievements or exaggerate the pleasant parts of the past, conveniently forgetting painful episodes. Conversely, obsessive reminiscers can't stop repeating the same old stories about who did them wrong (and how and when).

In further research, Wong and Watt (1991) and Wong (1995) claimed only integrative and instrumental types to contribute to successful aging. However, I have observed that transmissive and narrative types gained as much pleasure from writing and sharing their stories as well as those who are searching for meaning or strength from their memories. As the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur remarked, working creatively with language leads to “an emancipatory reflective process of the self” (1980, p. 165).

Webster (1993) created another widely-used taxonomical system, the Reminiscence Function Scale by analyzing the responses of 700 subjects. The study showed that elders reminisce for eight reasons: to reduce boredom, to prepare for death, to maintain a core sense of self, to problem-solve, to converse with others, to maintain intimacy, to revive bitterness, and to teach or inform. Although this scale is widely used in the therapeutic world of life review and reminiscence, I question whether Webster's taxonomy leaves out a human function as ancient as the tribal campfire: storytelling for the sake of Story itself.

These taxonomies and the shifting of the Erikson-Butler paradigm have implications for life review and reminiscence professionals and applied storytellers alike. Webster (1999) has argued that if all older people – and only older people – experience the need to review their life at the end of life, there is no need for research into cross-cultural, individual, or age-related differences. If the reminiscence functions chiefly to assist in reaching ego-integrity, then there is

no need to look for other functions. If the approaching end of life is the only reminiscence trigger, then there is no need to look for other triggers. If all research subjects are from a similar socio-historical background, then there is no need to consider possible cohort effects. Such delimitations represent “tacit assumptions which remain virtually unexamined by reminiscence researchers” (p. 29). For applied storytellers, the stakes of the unexamined assumption of life examination are equally high lest we may come to view the reluctance to reminiscence or tell stories as an “indication of a pathological condition rather than an expression of individual choice” (p. 29).

These expressions may also change. For example, Charley Kempthorne, founder of The Life Story Institute in Manhattan, KS asks new subscribers to his magazine *LifeStory* to rank their reasons for wanting to write personal and family stories using the following list.

1. To review my own life to understand it better.
2. To pass on family stories and/or my own story to my family.
3. To leave a historical account.
4. For the pleasure of reminiscing.
5. For the pleasure of writing.
6. To give an honest account of my life.

However, Kempthorne said those reasons usually reverse as their writing progresses. Nine out of 10 of those who respond list number two as the most important, with number one somewhere near the bottom, if it is checked at all...but after they have done a substantial amount of writing or finished their entire project, they will overwhelmingly volunteer that the best thing they got out of the writing was a clearer idea of what their life was all about. (1996, pp. 9-10).

I found similar motivations among the elders in my workshops. Take Ms. J., for example. When I realized that I had joined the ‘older generation’ and that memories of things told me by my grandparents and parents were rapidly disappearing as they died out, I started a notebook of memories. At first the objective was to get down everything my grandparents had told me about their family history. Later I realized, that for my grandchildren, *my* history was family history and I began to expand into my own life stories – some funny, some sad, some horrific. Some I share, some I don’t. The important thing is to get them down.

Likewise, Ms. E. wanted to create a narrative heirloom. In a piece called, “My Most Precious Gifts,” she contemplates her most important legacy. Is it the rosewood furniture passed down from her grandmother’s grandparents? The antique clock that belonged to her mother’s parents? Her grandmother’s rocker? Family photographs? Genealogy?

I am attempting to write stories about my children, my childhood, and those ancestors that I knew. I have also asked my sisters to share their memories with me. This is not only the heritage of my children and grandchildren but that of generations yet unborn. Perhaps this is my most precious gift.

Mr. B. wanted to record his World War II experience not just as personal history but as witness to a larger world drama. In “Homage,” he describes what he saw at Dachau.

There was a large smokestack in the center of the compound belching thick black smoke and the atmosphere was filled with a deathly odor. The gate had been broken open and the inmates were roaming along the street in a dazed condition. They had on uniforms that resembled those worn by the Georgia chain-gang in the 1930s and early 1940s. They were all men; we could see no women or

children. Some of the men were lying along the side of the road and others were standing in a weakened condition.... In years to come let no one say there were no death camps in Germany, for we saw one with our own eyes; we smelled death and saw the starving eyes of some of the victims.

I found that other elders do not know why they feel compelled to respond to what Randall (1995) has called the “autobiographical imperative.” In an essay called, “Why Write?,” Mr. L. questions why he should “even consider it?...It's not my field, and I never had an interest in it before. Writing can be such a struggle (at least for me), so why the sudden interest?”

Still, he wondered if he “should write down some of what I know before it is too late....There is no longer a tribal council at which to represent my clan. Perhaps writing is what I am supposed to do now.” He speculated that maybe a written text would bring acknowledgment, “I have often longed for the moment of fame, that moment when the world turns to you to say, ‘Yes, you have made a good and valuable contribution to life.’”

Was his desire to write his life stories a part of a higher spiritual path, or just “a function of ego? I could write a best seller. I could be on all the talk shows. I could even win the lottery. It could happen.” Mr. L. ended his essay with, “Indeed, why write? I have a hundred reasons, but I really could not say for sure.”

### Narrative Gerontology

Both narrative gerontology and storytelling studies have maintained that storytelling is the essential instrument of meaning-making for all people, not just older ones. Randall (1999) has defined this unique human faculty as “the capacity both to formulate (compose, narrate) and to follow (understand, read) the story of our life” (para. 10). He has argued that such narrative intelligence should be regarded as a ninth intelligence type in addition to Gardner’s seven –

linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (1990) – and Goleman’s emotional intelligence (1995). At the core of each intelligence “exists a computational capacity, or information-processing device, which is unique to that particular intelligence, and upon which are based the more complex realizations and embodiments of that intelligence” (Gardner, p. 278). Narrative intelligence is no different, but because “we are ceaselessly immersed in story,” it is difficult to recognize, much less separate the following “intertwining sub-capacities” (Randall, 1999, para. 16).

1. Emplotment has nine functions: to edit, summarize, cope with conflict, prioritize, and perceive events as events and connect them, comprehend, fill in the blanks, and generate alternatives (para. 17-25).

2. Characterization involves forming “working” or “ever-revisable pictures” of ourselves and others (para. 26-27).

3. Narration allows us to communicate, impose order on events, sustain interest, to be both narrative and character, and to use a particular narrative tone (para. 28-32).

4. Genre-ation means humans can organize events into patterns and to imagine and/or articulate the shape of our life (para. 33-34).

5. Thematize allows us to be aware of patterns of meaning and identify symbols or motifs, essentially seeing life into literature (para. 35-36).

Randall (1999) has pointed out that narrative intelligence is not distributed equally. Some people such as journalists or filmmakers have “advanced” narrative intelligence and are drawn to storytelling professions. More importantly, those with a basic level of narrative intelligence can refine their ability to make meaning through stories, “just as we might train a basic musical intelligence in the appreciation and performance of classical works” (Randall, para. 40).



While elders can benefit from such refinement, it is important to note that my students already had an advanced degree of narrative intelligence. Many of them were skilled family storytellers working in what Sobol (1996) has called the “oral traditional or conversational mode,” i.e., they heard or experienced the story and retold it without the intervention of a written text.” Some enrolled in the class at their family’s request to “write those stories down;” others had always wanted to write. However, most students struggled with turning these tales into text because of another limiting story, an old, internalized script that prevented or restricted expression. For example, Ms. N. shared that she enrolled because she had been trying for years to write her memoirs. “I could only get down a page or two. I couldn’t get beyond my doubts: ‘Who is going to read this? You better not put that in there. Someone will be offended.’ But now I have learned to trust the group and myself. And with trust comes expression.”

Ms. M. reported she also convinced herself she could not write personal or family stories because her 10<sup>th</sup> grade teacher said she “had no writing talent”. According to Bruner (1987), “our ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring our experience itself, for laying down routes in memory” (p. 69). With the group’s encouragement, Ms. M. began to produce stories and with each sharing she grew in confidence. This reinforcement allowed Ms. K to change her story because she realized that events were “occurring for which our old story cannot account because it is too little or too small” (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 102). When our story wears like a pair of shoes we have outgrown, we have two choices: We can cut off our toes like Cinderella’s stepsisters or buy new shoes that fit our feet. In other words, we can “change the events to accommodate the story” or “change the story to accommodate the events” (Carr, 1986, p. 61). The first option ushers in a

Procrustean denial while the second invites us to revise our story and thus opens our life to “radical reformulation” (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 102).

I witnessed such a restorying in our classroom with Ms. M, who initially considered herself a non-writer; yet, with the help of her peers she persisted in “just getting her stories down, not getting them down perfectly.” She explained what she had discovered from a similar community (Kent, 2003).

“You see,” she demonstrated by clasping her arms tightly in front of her.

I realized that when you are young, your body holds your spirit close. You worry about all the things of the body. Appearances...children...house work. You don’t have time to think about what really matters. But as you get older, the things of the body begin to break away.... (p. 2).

With a graceful, slow motion, she began to unfold one of her hands and forearms from the other, lifting it slightly. “.... and you can start concentrating on things of the spirit. And as you get closer to the end, your spirit can go free.” One arm flew upward while the other dangled at her side. “You see,” she said, “the rising is in the telling” (p. 2).

Through such restorying, a concept narrative gerontologists borrowed from narrative therapy, Ms. M. and many others like her enhanced “their sense of possibilities by telling, reading, and retelling their life stories,” (Kenyon, Ruth & Mader, 1999). But it cannot be done alone. As in storytelling performance, restorying requires a listener and a teller, or what Alheit (1992) calls a biographical coach. The respectful narrative environment created in our class facilitated this mutual coaching.

[Restorying] is giving someone the space and encouragement to lay out their life story, then to stand back and assess both its content and its form as a story ...

affords them an affectionate distance on the shape of their life as they have composed it hitherto, with its many ‘chapters,’ ‘characters,’ and ‘themes’ and the several twists and turns in its ‘plot.’” (Kenyon & Randall, 1999, p. viii)

### Guided Autobiography

Our approach to autobiography was adapted from a semi-structured approach to life review called guided autobiography. Developed by Birren and Deutchman (1991), this facilitated model combines individual and group experiences in addition to both oral and written stories.

We believe that autobiography is most fruitful for older adults when done as a part of a guided process that directs attention to major life themes and when shared in a group. [It] is based on the conviction that certain themes elicit the most powerful memories and are then most relevant to the issues and needs of older adults. (p. 59)

The moderator, as well as the following nine, pre-determined themes, “guide” the participant “efficiently and effectively” through the life review process (pp. 2-3).

1. History of life’s major branching points;
2. Family history;
3. Career or major life work;
4. The role of money;
5. Health and body image;
6. Loves and hates over a lifetime;
7. Sexual identity, sex roles, and sexual experience;
8. Experiences with and ideas about death and dying and other losses;
9. Aspirations and life goals and life meaning.

After privately reflecting on each theme and writing a two-page narrative, members then read and share those stories with the five-to-six member group and its leader. These themes are usually approach sequentially because this order corresponds with the successful progression of what Birren and Deutchman (1991) have called the “developmental exchange, the key mutual sharing among members of who they are and where they come from, their personally important historical and emotional events” (p. 44). Creating incremental developmental exchange is key to the success of the group.

[Participants] move from tentatively and guardedly alluding to important features of their lives toward and increasingly open sharing of significant personal information.....As time together increases and more of each life is shared, the developmental exchange leads to an increased willingness toward self-disclosure. Friendships and affective bonds are built as mutual respect and trust grow. Increased confidence and trust among group members results not only in a greater willingness to share but also in a greater courage to explore. (p. 45).

This developmental exchange process also promotes “both recall and the ease of translating experience to the written page” (Birren & Deutchman, 1991, p. 44). However, guided autobiography is not a course on writing (p. 83). The written component is merely a tool, albeit an important one, to facilitate reflection and scrutiny of one's past, allowing each elder, at his or her own pace to “delve deeply into the banks of memory” (p. 57). In addition, the written component allows each participant to rehearse.

He or she can plan what will be shared with the group, homing in on the experiences that were most important. Without this opportunity, the account of

memories might ramble, and the person's time to share with the group might be taken up by less meaningful recall. (p. 57)

Therefore, after reviewing the guided autobiography process, the group decided that to use Birren and Deutchman's method as designed was not appropriate because as one elder put it, "This is a class in writing, not in talking." However, Mr. N. argued that Birren's thematic approach would be helpful because what he needed help with the most was how to "be able to pull a story strand out of the spaghetti bowl of life."

The elders had already determined that writing chronologically or answering a series of pre-existing questions was neither effective nor efficient. Ms. J., who was then 87, had complained that "going decade by decade will take too long. I may be dead by the time I get finished. Mr. N. agreed with "Some parts of life are just plain uninteresting and if you write a chronological autobiography you feel under obligation to include them." Ms. B agreed. "Much of life is boring much of the time. I don't want to waste time writing about that!" Neither had they liked the fill-in-the-blank memory books. Ms. B. said, "Answering a list of questions leaves no room for the creative process."

Akeret (1991) has warned those who want to share their life stories about "the severe limitations of this Q&A approaching to locating memories" (p. 75)

On its own, [a list] promotes a linear, non-associative way of thinking; once a question is answered, the tendency is to go on immediately to the next one rather than to see what linking thoughts and memories come to mind. [A list] is nothing at all like a story. It hasn't the shape of feeling of one, and ultimately has no genuine authorship. In fact, it is not even your own list; it is simply your responses to the questioner's list. (p. 75)

Ms. B. went on to explain that story recall is not linear. While she is “theoretically more comfortable writing about a single memory at a time, but inevitably one memory triggers another and another.”

For instance, while writing about my grandmother sitting on the front stoop of the house on the farm quoting Longfellow's "Hiawatha," I thought about the ramp-pump below the bluff and the spring where we got drinking water, picking strawberries for market, lighting the house without electricity, classical music from a wind-up record player, the Christmas tree with real candles that we lit only once, and so on. All of this at a single sitting writing about one pleasant memory!

Storyteller Donald Davis affirmed that being willing to explore such memories is the key in creating personal and family stories. “Making a story is like making a quilt. First you gather scraps of material. Then, you put the scraps together to create a pattern.” (personal communication, 2004). According to Davis, the traditional way of teaching writing starts at the second step in which students are pressed to develop a fully formed plot with Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end. Davis has pointed out the flaws of this approach. “Even a master quilter could not make a quilt out of nothing. Neither can you build a story out of nothing.”

Therefore, Davis advised aspiring autobiographers, whether working in the oral or written medium, to “keep a ‘scrap’ notebook of people you’ve known and places you’ve lived. Write in this notebook every night and follow the memories as they return. Watch for patterns and a plot for a story may naturally emerge. Then you can put the quilt together.”

Our group eventually arrived at what we came to call, The Wisdom Tree, as one elder called it, a “blueprint, not a prescription,” for approaching a life time of stories.

*Imagine your life as a tree. The roots represent ancestral stories, the trunk represents the*

*core, or essential life stories; the branches stand for the important people, places, and pets. Finally, the leaves are little stories, anecdotes, poems, and jokes that don't fit anywhere else.*

The model was flexible enough to accommodate creativity yet provide some structure. Ms. E. pointed out that a person, like a tree, is “alive and growing. You can add another P if needed” and suggested a branch called “Possessions.” Another wanted to write a vocational narrative and added a fifth branch, “Purpose.” Ms. P. pointed out that the Wisdom Tree was “like a website with links to click on. What I like about it is that I can go to any point and grab a story.” Ms. M. appreciated that the model could accommodate her poetry. “It’s the leaves I like best,” she explained. (See the appendices for stories generated using this model.)

Following Birren and Deutchmann’s advice that group sharing is a vital component of autobiographical express, the class agreed to come prepared to read their written story. They reported that the sharing was as valuable as the organizational model. Ms. A said, “You can go deeper than you think you are capable of. You come to a new learning about yourself and about the other person. It creates a strong bond. Listening to them you think, Wow we know you.” They found particularly helpful the way in which another person’s story triggered their own. “If I hear one story, 10 others will come up in my mind.” They were able to remember long forgotten details; for example, Ms. A remarked, “Leg makeup? It reminded me of an incident during World War II. You have called to my memory so many things I had not thought of in years.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Theoretical Framework

The social constructivist paradigm, as reflected in both theories of learning and psychology, serves as the reflexive lens for this thesis. At the center of my argument that applied storytelling can facilitate autobiographical expression is the premise that knowledge and meaning are not empirical realities that exists outside of the learner. Nor does knowledge and meaning arrive, decontextualized, in the mind of the learner. Rather, knowledge and meaning are actively created by social relationships and interactions with others. Just as storytelling requires a teller and a listener, social constructivism places a “dialogical emphasis upon both the contingency and the creativity of human interaction—on our making of, and being made by, our social realities” (Shotter, 1993).

#### Research Design

In this thesis, I attempt to make sense of my experience with applied storytelling in the continuing education classroom by casting it in narrative form. I selected autobiographical inquiry as a research design because I needed a reflexive mechanism so “research can then become a journey of personal development” (Settelmaier & Taylor, 2002, para. 40) while “writing promotes reflection and results in insights that improve practice” (DeLong, 1996, p. 6). This dual approach of research and writing helped me to develop a better understanding of my personal experiences with storywriting and storytelling as an autobiography instructor as well as a storytelling student.



Autobiographical inquiry is an appropriate research design for teachers. Far from being an objective empiricist who examines her carefully controlled materials under a bell jar, educators work not in laboratories, but in classrooms. Munns, McFadden, and Koletti (2002) have called the teaching environment “messy pedagogic spaces” in which “there are few neatly anticipated or realized lines of engagement” between students and teachers (para. 2). In such naturalistic settings, a reflexive methodology such as critical autobiography is not only appropriate, it is essential. In fact, Riessman (1993, para.2) has argued that storytelling

... is what we do with our research materials and what informants do with us. The story metaphor emphasizes that we create order, construct texts in particular contexts....Narrative analysis takes as its object of investigation the story itself.

To study one’s practice requires studying one’s self (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Pagnucci, 2004). In fact, Pagnucci has insisted that, for many educators, “there’s nothing else you could have done but tell a story. It’s who you are” (p. 17). The growing acceptance of story-as-self-study points to a larger trend “away from modernism and its assumptions about legitimate knowledge and knowledge production toward broadening what counts as research” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 13). Such narrative research has an important place in an educator's development and awareness and understanding of his or her practice (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data included my process notes, lesson plans, handouts, and exercises from the autobiography workshops with elders during a 10-year period of informal action research. Also included was a journal kept during my graduate work in which we were challenged to record how we developed our sense of self as a storyteller (Sobol, personal communication, 2003).

To better manage and analyze these layers of rich description, I superimposed what Delong (1996, p. 6) has called the “two overriding questions” [of action research] as I read, reflected, and wrote on my journey from teacher to teller.

1) How did I use applied storytelling to improve my practice? In each chapter, I provide an exercise and a story that was used to facilitate autobiographical expression.

2) What kind of evidence do I have to show the impact of my work? Throughout the thesis is anecdotal evidence of impact of applied storytelling techniques. The appendices also provide examples of stories written by the elders who attended these workshops. Therefore, this thesis is a “collaborative document, a mutually constructed story out of the lives of both researcher and participant” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000).

### Crisis of Representation

A legitimate concern of the autobiographical inquiry as research method is “... its invitation to present life as the smooth unfolding of a destiny, to create the ‘unified self,’ reading back into the past current beliefs and motivations as if they operated at the time...” (Johnston, 2003, p. 7). Therefore, I acknowledge that, while this traditional thesis template may imply “a wholly predetermined, tightly controlled, linear inquiry process” (Taylor, 2004, p. 5), most of my informal action research on which this study is based is

reminiscent of the Persian fairy tale of the Three Princes of the Isle of Serendip...who periodically would sally forth on to the mainland in search of one thing or another. While they never fulfilled any of their intended missions, they always returned with *other* discoveries or experiences even more marvelous. Hence, the term serendipity – the finding of valuable or agreeable things not sought. (Isaac & Michael, 1995, p. 244)

The writing itself was both an exploring and a being lost (Gallagher, 1983). My initial impulse was to include “everything.” I wrote pages of what was “not thesis” to discover what was. Novak (1994) has maintained this organic model of story construction is an acceptable alternative to “ceramic model” of writing, e.g., that a sequential approach to writing the beginning, middle, and end (Watts as cited in Novak, para. 1).

The act of speaking a story or of writing a story is part of the growth process of a story. Think of the story as needing to be written and needing to be told in order that it may grow. Further, think of the teller’s job in relation to the story to be more like a gardener rather than a machinist. Your job is to tend the story rather than construct it. (p. 1)

### Internal Validity

To ensure internal validity, I followed Bullough and Pinnegar’s guidelines for quality in self-study research (2001). A quality self-study is one in which the investigator negotiates a particularly sensitive balance between biography and history...such study does not focus on the self per se but on the space between self and the practice engaged in...tipping too far toward the self side produces solipsism or a confessional, and tipping too far the other way turns self-study into traditional research. (p. 15)

Hence, each chapter weaves autobiographical vignettes with conventional discursive analysis of theoretical frameworks within which they work. For example, I use what Fitzgerald and Noblit (1999) have called a “think scene – that is, “think how I [the researcher] can show this, not tell it” (p. 175). My hope is that these intertextual dynamics not only create a good story that engages readers but also – to the extent possible in a qualitative research – generalizes the work.

## CHAPTER 4

### DARK ENCHANTMENTS

In the beginning was frustration. At the start of every course, I heard comments such as these:

“I don’t have anything worth writing.”

“I can’t spell (or do grammar).”

“I can’t remember everything perfectly.”

“I could never write in school.”

Any of these internalized narratives can thwart attempts to turn life into life stories. More than any other instructional technique, applied storytelling can help elders “restory” this limiting self-talk and enable them to write more freely. Bausch (1984) explained the power of such restorying in his account of the old pastor who went to visit a young man sentenced to life in prison. As the prisoner lamented over his powerlessness to retract his crime and make amends to the victim's family as well as his own, the minister replied: “What you have done is most serious. What you need now is a new compass, a new way to walk. We must begin by teaching you some new stories” (p. 37). While restorying cannot change the facts of the past, it can change the way we see ourselves now and thus how we choose to respond to future events. Therefore, taking a cue from Bausch, I begin by first listening to their laments and then teaching them a new story.

#### The Exercise

*On one side of your paper, complete the phrase: “I’d like to write my life stories because...” Write quickly and don’t worry about spelling or grammar. Write the first thoughts that come to mind.*

*On the other side of your paper, complete this phrase: "I'd like to write my life stories but...." Write quickly and don't worry about spelling or grammar. Write the first thoughts that come to mind.*

*When you are finished, pass your paper to someone you don't know.*

### Reflection

I adapted this exercise from storyteller Gail Rosen who demonstrates the reciprocity of listening in a healing story circle by asking each participant to complete two cards. On one card is written: "When another person listens to my story, I feel \_\_\_\_\_." On another card are the words, "When I listen to another's story, I feel \_\_\_\_\_." After each person completes these phrases, the cards are then redistributed throughout the room and then read aloud. Like the Jewish story about the Forgotten Storyteller, when we hear our own stories coming back to us, we are healed.

I also begin by inviting each student to share another's responses, thus facilitating a discussion about this ubiquitous and limited self-talk. Much, if not all, of the first class may be spent on this exercise. Time spent now in processing these fears will expedite expression later. I explain the importance of revealing these hidden story saboteurs with a favorite family anecdote.

My children and I spend many summers camping in the Smoky Mountains.

Crowd control consisted of my father taking a stick and silently drawing a circle in the dirt around the perimeter of the camp.

Then he would stand back, survey his work very seriously and declare, "Don't cross this line or the Hide-Behind will get you."

"Papa, what's a Hide-Behind?" my children challenged.

"No one knows," replied my father gravely. "Because it's always hiding behind."

They never ventured beyond the line.

So too it is with these old stories elders hold about their writing story. Behavior follows belief. Unless they learn to recognize the lines of power that entrap, they will remain caught in the limiting belief, which can stymie or stop autobiographical expression. It is now time for a new story, one that will allow for growth, one that will allow them to claim their natural rightful place as wisdom keepers. To remind them of the value of story sharing, I tell a mythical story about story (Atkinson, 1995, p. 1; Cushman, 1993, p. 53), which is summarized below.

### The Story

Once upon a time.....there was a tribe who spent their lives telling each other stories...[that] kept people laughing when times were hard, frightening off the demons of loneliness and despair, and when times were good, reminded them that suffering was hidden in the sweetness like a pit inside a peach. But one harsh winter, a dark enchantment befell the tribe....shredding the delicate webs of stories. ...Almost no one remembered the old stories anymore, or wanted to listen to those few who did. ....Saddest of all, everyone had forgotten that they were all storytellers, each with a bellyful of precious tales to tell...

### Commentary

Cushman's story allows elders to *experience* the power of story, not just receive information *about* the power of story. Tannen (1989) has maintained that such experience is possible because a story is more than words. Her involvement theory states that getting listeners involved invites them to do "some of the work of making meaning" and "become participants in the discourse" (p. 17).

Then, there's the very structure of this piece with its signal phrase "Once upon a time" that echoes fairy tales of childhood, of books and bedtimes. It conditions listeners to relax, and

enter a realm of timelessness. Indeed, most of the elders do enter the storytelling trance, “a mildly altered state of consciousness in which the world narrows down” (Sturm as cited in Parkinson, 2003, para. 11). When the story about the day the stories died is over, I stop and let the silence speak, a technique necessary “to give the audience time to catch up” (Ellis, personal communication, 2004). As they rouse themselves from the trance, I ask, “Can you name the evil wind that is keeping you from sharing your story with the ones you love?” As each response is shared, I incorporate the following factors and invite discussion about “de-storification” (Stone, 1996) of postmodern life.

#### 1. Shift from oral to literate culture.

Primary oral cultures, those "totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print," (Ong, 1982, p. 11) used "stories of human action to store, organize, and communicate much of what they knew" (p. 140). Such societies also relied exclusively on the back-breaking work of humans and animals to harness the raw energy of sun, wind, and water, yet, patriarchs and matriarchs could still play a vital role, even as their physical productivity was diminishing. When the old ones told mythic tales of heroic triumphs and humiliating defeats, courtships and connections, feuds and reconciliation, they provided a sort of wisdom glue that held the tribe together (Akeret, 1991). Bahti (1998, p. 10) has explained the role of storytelling in primary oral cultures.

During the long winter nights when the earth, plants, and animals, and people were quiet and resting, awaiting the sun's return, story telling was a regular, even nightly event. Young ones would gather around and listen to an elder, usually a man, tell a story....The old ones told the story as they had heard it from the old ones before them. Each generation saw to it that the oral traditions were passed on

virtually unchanged for uncounted years. As the storyteller wove his tale, he was also knitting a new generation into the long past, maintaining a cultural tapestry that the most advanced printing, computer or video technology will never match.

More than mere campfire entertainment, stories passed from the old to the young also played a practical role by contributing to the group's literal survival: how to make a canoe, where to find the game, when to plant the fields, how much food to store, when to declare war or keep the peace. Elders were valued because their memories held the key to repositories of knowledge, both secular and sacred. In a preliterate world dependent upon oral tradition instead of electronic transmission, elders were not just a valuable resource, they were the only resource.

Then, the waves of industrialization and literacy collided with the values of oral culture. The lure of factories promising wage labor meant younger members of the community no longer needed to know how to till and plant or gather and forage; instead, they needed to know how to work on the assembly line. Religious rituals were regarded as obsolete -- or prohibited by conquerors. Traditional stories ceased to be relevant; therefore, they along with the veneration of the elders who told them, all but disappeared.

## 2. Profound economic, social, and technological changes.

Even a welcomed event such as the arrival of gas and electricity meant families no longer gathered around the wood stove for warmth and conversation but retreated to the climate-controlled isolation of their individual rooms (Sobol, 1999; Stone, 1996). Similarly, air conditioning brought the demise of the front-porch as a family retreat from the heat. No more grandparent and auntie tales spun on the warm air while fireflies flickered in the distance and the porch swing creaked its accompaniment. Instead, professionals from the mass media form, remember, tell, and retell (or is it retail?) stories, and we interact more with our televisions and



computers than each other. According to Metzger (1990), Hollywood reduces the intricacies and paradoxes of real life stories to caricatures. Like snacking perpetually on potato chips and soda, an extensive diet of such media trivialization does not fill us. We may be surrounded by stories, but we cannot depend on them “for we do not demand that they be the fruits of lives deeply lived” (p. 54).

### 3. Segregation and stereotyping of older people.

Artificial divisions of nursery and nursing home separate the generations and prevent storysharing, thus denying younger people the opportunity to know their elders (Stone, 1996, p. 14). Children and teenagers are more likely to equate the aging process with a degenerative disease and believe the ageist notions that portray older adults as “unproductive, sexless, senile, poor, sick, and inflexible” (Schacter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995, p. 65). Madison Avenue reinforces this paradigm by portraying a culture obsessed with youth and physical beauty. We may value old linens and lace, but advertising tells us there is nothing glamorous about our own aging and it is to be denied and delayed at all cost. With no one to affirm their accumulated wisdom, elders feel disenfranchised and begin to question the value of their stories.

### 4. Self-limiting talk.

At this point in our discussion, someone usually points out that, while these larger societal stories do affect them, the cause of their personal de-storification lies within. We then re-examine the negative phrases from the earlier exercise by discussing what Goldberg (1986) has called “Monkey Mind” (p. 24) to describe the self-limiting chatter in our heads that leads to writer's block. Rainer (1997) has pointed out there are actually two different types of writer's block: the internal censor and the internal critic. Then to help elders externalize these negative voices I use props, two stuffed animals. I model what Monkey Mind might say, putting a

monkey on each shoulder.

“You’re not a good enough writer,” says Ms. Critic nastily. “You never could spell, and you always got bad grades in English. Your stories will be a joke.”

“Yes,” confirms Ms. Censor, “and, if you accidentally write something good, who wants to hear about your life anyway? Besides, I know all your secrets. You’d never be able to tell about that time when you were 16 and met that soldier...”

Elders laugh as they pass around the monkeys and sharing the internal chattering voices that limit self-expression. The monkeys continue to hold center stage throughout the series of classes. When one member of the group begins to apologize for or belittle her work, another member passes the monkey to her, saying, “I think you need this.” Sometimes an elder will pick up the monkey at the beginning of the class and say, “I couldn’t write last night because of this.” Another elder might answer, “Me either. What did yours say?” Some decided to buy monkeys to stack them on their computers or writing desks. “When I hear Monkey Mind, I just pick up the monkey and start throwing them.” Another reported, “I can think of it as Monkey Mind and not me.”

Although I am not a therapist, I believe this exercise creates a therapeutic by-product. It uses a guiding principle of narrative therapy that states “The person is not the problem. The problem is the problem” (White & Epston, 1990). Narrative therapists help their clients externalize “these stories so that self-healing resources inherent in the soul can speak to us of its neglected longings and make us whole” (Parry, 1997 p. 118). This linguistic practice of externalization helps clients reframe the stories they tell in order to separate the person from the problem (White & Epston).

Likewise, with this Monkey Mind exercise, elders help each other see that they are not

alone in their feelings of inadequacy. In fact, they express relief as they realize that other students have also come to class burdened by what Dewey (1938) called “mis-educative experiences.” According to Dewey, an experience is mis-educative if it “has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” or if it restricts “the possibility of having richer experiences in the future” (p. 25-26).

I believe that the traditional product-oriented approach of teaching writing has been particularly mis-educative in that it left a powerful – and usually unpleasant – message: Writing is done to impress the teacher with requisite form and formatting, not to express one’s self. According to Parson (1985), this outdated pedagogical approach “has been shown to be ineffective in producing capable [K-college] writers” (p. 9); my experience shows that it does not produce capable older writers either. Why does this traditional product-oriented approach fail? Parson suggests several reasons (p. 9).

1. It was not based on research or experimentation, but rather “sheer historical momentum of outmoded theoretical assumptions” (p. 9).

2. It shortchanged (or even ignored) ideas and meaning generated in the earliest stages of the writing process while insisting on mechanics and form of the end product.

3. It isolated the skill and drill of mechanics rather than addressing them in the context of writing.

4. It granted authority to the teacher who made all decisions regarding topic, form, length, etc.

This authority also entitled the teacher to serve as the sole audience or judge.

5. It meant students worked alone without the benefit of collaboration.

6. It insisted on single-draft writing, i.e., students had to create and correct in one sitting.

Why do these mis-educative writing experiences continue to haunt mature learners decades after they have left the classroom? Kenyon and Randall (1997) have argued that education is one of the primary systems of storying.

We are told what to believe, instructed in what is true, and informed about who we are...indoctrinated in certain principles, imbued with certain theories, and schooled in certain methods – we are literally discipline-d (sic) into a particular way of interpreting both the world and ourselves. To go to school is therefore to submit to having our lives storied for us. (p. 108)

Parry (1997) has pointed out that stories are internal texts “we tell ourselves and then believe as the truth” (p. 118). Even when these stories no longer serve us, we are reluctant to release these truths that we hold self-evident because they “uphold our identity” (p. 118). We accepted our teachers’ view of writing. These authority figures literally “author-ize” us by coercing; thus, we learn how to live within the confines of the “right” writing story (p. 93). Therefore, lecture alone will not help elders heal the lingering effects of their mis-educative experiences. For example, when the lived experience of an elder is such that previous writing attempts of years past are regarded as miserable undertakings that have resulted in feelings of shame and inadequacy, present writing attempts—no matter how motivated the writer—often generate those same uncomfortable emotions. Applied storytelling can. Such transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978) means “learning how we are caught in our own history and are repeating it (p. 101, as cited in Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 109). With applied storytelling, elders can then create a new story about their writing, one that says, “I am a writer with stories to tell.”

Not all elders have had mis-educative experiences. However, even if their lived experience of their former composition classrooms was positive, they needed the encouragement

and accountability of a community. Ms. M. said, “It doesn’t happen often in society where there is a place where we can go and share our stories. If I didn’t have this group, I wouldn’t do it.”

## CHAPTER 5

### TRUTH OR STORYTELLING?

Another major nodal moment in my teaching journey occurred during rehearsal for a reader's theater celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day. Two veterans each claimed a different lived experience of the same event: Mr. N., a retired sociologist to whom documentation was vital challenged Mr. F., a creative non-fiction writer, with "I was in the service, too, and I don't think it happened quite that way." Mr. F. retorted, "When I can't remember something, I just make something else up and go on. My motto is 'Never let truth get in the way of a good story.'" During the discussion that followed, I realized I needed to address the issue of veracity in autobiographical memory early in the instructional process. One of the major stumbling blocks to sharing personal experience stories is the concern about whether or not the teller will be perceived as fabricating the truth (Huhn, 1997). According to Ledoux (1993), the nature of truth is not just a philosophical question but a practical one.

Lifewriters will repeatedly encounter painful decisions about how much truth to tell and how to tell it. In the end, the decision we make about truth will influence our understanding of everything that has happened in our lives: the what, the how and the why. (p. 95)

To help elders face this challenge, I realized I had to help them become familiar with the role of memory and genre in their recreations of the past. I wanted them to understand that personal stories are not housed in the permanent collection of the mind's memory archive but continually gestate in the "inveterate fictionalizing of our memory and imagination" (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 2). Thus, every life history, in some sense, is a revisionary one. Freed from the tyranny

of truth, they can approach sharing their memories with less trepidation. To introduce this concept, I tell a family story of my own.

### The Story

My grandfather loved to tell me about the time he and his cousin, Will, attended a camp meeting. The teenagers were not particularly religious; but they were bored and “that was all there was to do in that day and time.” And entertainment it was: shouting, frothing, shaking (no snake handling that night). Then, on the long wagon ride home, the boys began to parrot those who had spoken in tongues, gesticulating garbled phrases into the night sky. Eyes gleaming, my grandfather would lean forward from his chair when he told what happened next:

Of a sudden ‘hit took him [Will] over. And he weren’t pretendin’ no more. He was carryin’ on so he commenced to foam at the mouth. Finally fell plumb out of the wagon. And he didn’t say nary a word all the way home. Just laid there kind of addle-headed.

Then he’d lean back, put the pipe back in his mouth and chuckle ever so slightly to himself. At least that’s the way my grandfather told it, I explained to the class. According to my cousins, who heard the story from *their* grandfather, Will, it was *my* grandfather who was seized by the spirit. Who was telling the truth?

Something extraordinary must have happened on the way home for both men to continue to tell the story for the next 70 years. The accuracy of the event is not as important as the story that allows my grandchildren to know their great-great grandfather and their Appalachian heritage. I may not have correctly recorded the facts, but I did tell the truth as my grandfather told it to me. My cousins are certainly entitled to their version. And if that doesn’t stop the muttering, I tell the class, then I remind my family of the old Russian proverb: “No one lies like

an eye witness.”

I then invite elders to share their own accounts of how events have been interpreted differently in their families. Now, primed with stories and memories, elders are ready for a written exercise that further demonstrates the difference between event and interpretation, which I adapted from the Education for Ministry curriculum (1975). To demonstrate how Genesis can be perceived as fact or fiction, students are challenged to write their spiritual autobiographies first as history and then again as legend or myth.

### The Exercise

*Divide your paper into three columns. On the left side, write *Historie*, the German word for the factuality of recorded events. In the middle, write *Geschichte*, which refers to interpretations of those events. First, under *Historie*, jot down a few elements of your life story that can be independently verified from sources such as a deed, marriage license, report card, or driver’s license. Then, under *Geschichte*, write a sentence or phrase that represents what the event meant to you: a feeling, a sensory impression, an observation. Now, pick one event and, in the third column, look at it from a family member’s point of view. How would that interpretation be different from yours?*

### Reflection

Under *Historie*, Ms. K. wrote, *Moved from Bronx to the South when I was 11 years old.* Her corresponding *Geschichte* entry was “Miserable. Lonely. Teased about accent. I hated it.” She explained that if her father had written a *Geschichte* entry, it might have read, “Was excited! This was the opportunity I had been waiting for – my own business!” Ms. K. certainly shared the event of moving with her father, but did not share his interpretation. Then, I explain that each of the *Historie-Geschichte* entries contain the kernel of a story, facts and feelings that can be woven



together to make the event more meaningful for the elder and more compelling for their readers. For example, the above entry served as a spring board for the story, “From Yankee to Rebel,” in which Ms. K. paints a compelling word picture of how she saw the move very differently.

### Commentary

This exercise invites even more stories and stories about those stories, featuring what one elder called “revisionist historians known as family members.” Another elder said, I don’t remember exactly how it happened, but I can tell you one thing: My sister is going to remember it differently than I do.” Taking the time to listen and acknowledge the difficulty of veracity is important, every family has a powerful “narrative environment” (Bruner, 1990) with its own preferred genres that determine not only which stories are allowed to be told within that system but also how they should be communicated: the tone, vocabulary, accent, dialect, etc. We learn early “whose stories possess authority” and who is entitled to speak and when (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 91). This code, whether implicit or explicit, determines what kind of stories members of that system can and cannot tell as well as who can tell them. Ledoux (1993) has pointed out certain family stories “often acquire the status of an ‘official’ version....Writing beyond this ‘propaganda’ about the less dominant parent (or the not-of-the-same-mold sibling) can be one of the major challenges life writers face” (p. 101).

Once elders agree that event and the interpretation of the event are not identical, they are ready for a brief overview on mind/brain research. While this discussion does not attempt to be comprehensive, it is vital; for without a new way of regarding memory, elders will continue to be stymied in their autobiographical expression. However, the biggest challenge I have discovered is not the summarizing the enormous body of mind/brain research but challenging the old metaphor for memory as camera. According to Kosslyn (1983), most people regard mental

images as “intracranial photographs” that are “stored in some greatly reduced form and projected onto an inner screen when we want to look at them” (p. 2). According to Lakoff and Turner (1989), metaphors have persuasive power because we have relied on to the extent they have become unconscious and automatic. Therefore, to help them change their mind about memory, I need to first help them change their metaphor.

Therefore, I begin this portion of the discussion by asking students to complete this sentence. Memory is like \_\_\_\_\_. Some regard memory as a camera: As the mind snaps its internal shutter, freezes the frame, records an objective account of an event. Then, it stores away the picture permanently like a photo in an album [another popular metaphor] just waiting for our retrieval. Others regard it as computer, with data or events, stored on the hard drive. To retrieve the file, one need only give the proper command. Both metaphors suggest that humans, like cameras or computers, should be able to reproduce a literal reproduction of the past.

Next I explain how, in the 1990s, technology demonstrated that remembering is more complicated than we ever imagined. According to Schacter (1996), there is no one place or area or structure in the brain that can be identified as memory. Instead, pieces of the patterns – not even the experience itself – are distributed widely across different parts of the brain so that remembering activates neuronal activities that resemble surfing the widely dispersed nodes of Web. Schacter has pointed out another discovery of mind/brain research.

We know enough about how memories are stored and retrieved to demolish another long-standing myth: Memories are literal recordings of reality. Many of us still see our memories as a series of family pictures stored in the photo album of our minds. Yet it is clear now that we do not store judgment-free snapshots of

our past experiences. Rather, we construct memories out of an interaction between prior knowledge and current incoming information. (p.5)

Korte (1995) also came to the same conclusion not through neuroscience but through the old-fashioned technology of storytelling. As he spent eight years interviewing subjects for *Seasons of Life*, a public television series that featured life stories, he wondered, “What is this stuff that these people are telling me? What are these memories? Are they true? Did the events really happen? Was the meaning that people now see in the stories present back then?” (para. 7). According to Korte, there’s a more appropriate metaphor than either cameras or computers. He says memory is like a river that

...changes with the terrain it flows through, the changing terrain representing the changes in life. And like a river, memory loses some of its contents and is added to periodically. . . It’s about the present, not the past. It’s what we use to create our very selves. (para. 13)

According to Korte, memory has two functions: archivist and mythmaker, both of which are vital to identity: “The keeper of the archives” works at “guarding the original records and trying to keep them pristine” while the mythmaker interprets these records and fashions stories from them (para 20).

A new metaphor of memory as a river still leaves elders with an essential question: Am I a mythmaker or an archivist? While a malleable memory may be beneficial to the art of storytelling, most of us want to know if the personal experience story we are reading or hearing is true. According to Donald Davis, a pre-eminent storyteller of personal stories, this question of truth is also “a question of genre” (personal communication, 2003). The key is to understand the distinction between what he calls biography and portraiture.

With biography, you must ask yourself, ‘Did they really say that?’ but with portraiture, the question is, ‘Is that the kind of thing they would have said?’ The litmus test of portraiture is to be able to tell this mythological account with the family member in the room who responds ‘Yes, that’s the kind of thing they would have said.’

However, Davis noted that when one “begins to make things up and the line to pure fiction has been crossed. It’s fine to tell those stories, but you shouldn’t tell them in first person as if they happened to you” (personal communication, 2003).

Unless, like Mr. F., you never let truth get in the way of a good story

## CHAPTER 6

### ONCE UPON A TIME

As is true for many teachers, one of my most memorable moments did not occur in the classroom, but several years later when a former student presented me with a gift, a small collection of life stories. Ms. K pointed proudly to the first story titled simply, “A Fairy Tale” and said, “I put this one first because writing it made the others possible.” It was then that I truly understood the power of personal myth and how it can transform learning. I now use Ms. K’s story to open the unit I call “Once Upon a Time.”

#### The Story

Once upon a time, there was a young girl of thirteen who had to leave her parents, her home, the country of her birth. How hard it would be to leave the fragrant daily smell of bread baking in the tiled wood stove that took up one side of the kitchen. She had slept on the top shelf of that stove when she was younger; it was the warmest place in the house during the long snowy winters.

But now the threat of pogroms by the Czar's army and the local Christians was too strong. Her parents had already sent away most of her brothers and sisters to America. The summer before, a young Christian boy from the town had come to her home and tried to force himself on her. She fought him off, but she had to be sent away....

Her parents took her to the railroad station with her carpetbag and a false passport. Her mother, tears streaming down her face, watched her board the train. This was her youngest child and the last to leave.

The child, Anna, was to travel with a group of people she did not know. They would be her “family” until they reached America. She would be in the company of strangers, not knowing what to expect.

Could there be apple trees like the ones she had climbed, wild mushrooms like those she had picked, the house made of blocks of ice cut from the river in winter and packed with sawdust to keep food cold in summer? Did people in America live in villages like the one she had known? Were the streets of New York really paved with gold, as some said?

No, it was different, confusing, crowded with people. Her married sister took her into her home, a small apartment in Brooklyn. Anna was able to speak to family in Yiddish, Russian and Polish –but no English yet.

She soon found a job in a sweatshop, sewing blouses – but she was happy. She was on her own. She was earning her own way, buying her own clothes, free to make her own friends, to learn English in night school, to meet writers and musicians and poets.

She had arrived in the new land and it was good.

#### Commentary

Strictly speaking, this story is not a fairy tale – it does not conform to a Proppian framework – nor is it autobiography in that the memory does not originate from Ms. K.’s direct lived experience. This imagined account of Ms. K.’s mother’s immigration to America is both biomythography (Lorde, 1982) and relational autobiography (Friedman, 1990). While biographies of the mythic self renegotiate cultural invisibility for the marginalized, relational autobiographies “assert a sense of shared identity with other women, an aspect of identification that exists in tension with a sense of their own uniqueness” (Friedman, as cited in Smith &

Watson, 2001, p. 201). In other words, Ms. K. has to first tell the story of her mother in order to tell her own.

Academic classifications aside, writing this story was a pivotal one for Ms. K., for it enabled her to produce many other stories of leavings and arrivals, of risks and discovery, each one woven with threads spun in this original myth. Like Genesis, this story is a foundational one, providing Ms. K. with an explanation of her own beginnings as well as a frame through which to interpret her life events. Here, Ms. K. has clearly succeeded in what Jung (1963) called “the task of tasks” – to discern the underlying myth of her life. This story may not be a fairy tale, but Ms. K. claims it worked magic and freed her from the dark enchantment. Therefore, in this chapter, I explore how Ms. K.’s story and the following exercise can help elder writers answer Jung’s challenge “What is your myth – the myth in which you live?” (as cited in Keen & Valley-Fox, 1989, p. x).

### The Exercise

*Write a short fairy tale based on your life. Try not to use an existing story as a template. As Rumi says, “Don’t be satisfied with stories, how things have gone for others. Unfold your own myth.” First, reread your favorite childhood stories and notice their timeless story structure: There is an initial situation, followed by a problem, or task that the protagonist must solve or address; there are trials and helpers to help overcome them. In the end, the crisis is averted and the hero is forever transformed. Now, look back over your life and frame it in the same terms. Begin writing with “Once upon a time, there was a boy/girl who...”*

*Tip: Instead of using the pronouns I or we, try using he/she, and they. Switching from the first to the third person will give you some objective distance through which you can see your life differently.*

## Reflection

Ms. K. credits this exercise as the one that enabled her to finally break through anxieties and hesitations about writing. "This fairy tale concept unlocked everything," she says. "Once Upon a Time" was adapted from Rainer (1997, pp. 42-43) Rainer uses it as an introductory exercise to help students "start feeling the shape of their stories before they write 450 boring pages" which, in my experience, is usually attempted as a sequential accounting rather than a story (p. 39). Without a sense of the mythic, elders will not experience the kairos behind the chronos (Taylor, 1996, p. 66-68) and will not be able to make meaning in memory. Without a sense of mythic, elders may quit writing (or never start), denying themselves and their readers their gift of story. Rainer has claimed that if we want to "understand how our own lives make myth," write a literary fairytale.

...you can't tell a fairy tale without including the basic parts of a story: In the beginning something happened so that a character had a problem and a need, thence a struggle ensued, but in the end there was a crisis that was resolved when a transformation took place. (pp. 39-40)

However, the exercise is deceptively simple. I found that it works better as a culmination to a larger storytelling unit on fairytales rather than an isolated writing exercise. For example, when I first began using it without laying the applied storytelling groundwork, many elders simply applied the plot elements of an existing tale to their lives. While that may have been useful to some, I wanted students to discover their own myth (Atkinson, 1995; Campbell, 1972; Keen & Valley-Fox, 1989; McAdams, 1993; Rainer, 1997, Taylor, 1996). Thus, rather than asking them immediately to write a literary fairy tale, I introduce this exercise by encouraging them to engage in some reminiscence research, to retell their favorite childhood fairy tale or to



bring in a current version to share.

According to storyteller David Novak, recalling childhood stories can put tellers in touch with their unique “body of text,” a term he uses to describe the external and internal stories through which we have lived or encountered in life, literature, or mass media.

We are, each of us, a body of text. We have stories about what has happened to us and we have stories we were told, read, or saw in movies. So if you want new stories – or a new way to tell old stories – grow them out of what is already within you. (personal communication, June 2004)

Giving each student teller a handful of octagonal cards, he urges beginning tellers to become aware of our own body of text and how that shapes our current storytelling practice. To reconstruct a body of text, Novak says to list one childhood story (whether from a television, book, or grandfather) per card. Then arrange and rearrange the cards, searching for connections among and between each story. For example, when I did this exercise, Little Red Riding Hood was adjacent to a card marked, Terry, shorthand for all my memories of my best childhood friend, the neighborhood “tomboy.” This card, in turn, was adjacent to Tom Sawyer because, like Becky, I joined her in exploits and enjoyed every minute. This exercise allowed me to enter what Novak calls the “landscape of story” and see my childhood as a place of adventure. Afterwards, I was able to create story “scraps” about growing up in a former estate – complete with an old mansion, sunken swimming pool, crumbling landing strip, and a haunted water tower. While I did not use Novak’s card technique in my classes, I believe that reminiscing about favorite fairy tales served as a virtual card layout through which elders could reconstruct their bodies of text in their imagination.

Ms. K., for example, remembered fondly Andrew Lang's many-hued fairy books. "We had all the colors and I read them over and over again," Ms. K. said. According to post-Jungian analyst Hillman (1979), fairy tales, indeed any story one was exposed to in early childhood, serves not just as entertainment, but positions the person to use the power of story as an instrument of meaning making in later life.

To have had stories of any sort in childhood ... puts a person into a basic recognition of and familiarity with the legitimate reality of story per se. One integrates life as story because one has stories in the back of the mind (unconscious) as containers for organizing events into meaningful experiences.

The stories are means of finding oneself in events that might not otherwise make psychological sense at all. (p. 43)

According to Lewis (1966), of all our childhood stories, a fairy tale has two special powers. First, it can "generalize while remaining concrete, to present in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but whole classes of experience" and, secondly, it can "throw off irrelevancies." We can find "resonant themes in our lives" by "identifying the stories that were important to us as children" (Lerner & Lerner, 1994, p. 3). Therefore, I was not surprised to see how elders also enjoyed comparing their fairytale memories with the sanitized versions of their grandchildren's generation. "The ones we had were gory," one elder grimaced. Another countered with the comment that fairy tales weren't meant to be family friendly. "They are supposed to have bloodthirsty giants and avenging stepmothers," Mr. N. insisted. This interchange led us to a discussion about the role of fairytales in children's development. Instead of lecturing, I let story do the work for me, telling the anecdote Tartar (1987) related in *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairytales*.

There was once a young boy whose pedagogically solemn parents resolved to do everything in their power to prevent their child from developing superstitious fears. They banned fairy tales from the household and saw to it that witches, giants, and other cannibalistic fiends were never once mentioned in the child's presence. All went according to plan until one night the parents awoke to the shrill cries of their son. Startled, they rushed to his bed only to learn that he was afraid of sleeping in the dark. They were even more startled after they asked the boy why he was afraid of sleeping in the dark, for the child's answer, punctuated by sobs, was: 'There's a complex hiding under my bed.' (p. xv)

We laughed and they told more stories about stories. Then I introduced the class to the basic structure of a wonder tale. First, there is an initial situation, followed by the introduction of a complication, problem, or task. The hero or heroine, after much struggle, successfully resolves the problem (Propp, 1968). According to Lerner and Lerner (1994), fairy tales help us to see that “the quest for individualization is a universal matter and that we all encounter certain difficult challenges and states of initiation.” In an archetypal way, fairy tales lay bare the vast territory of the soul” (Lewis, 1966).

Finally, after elders imaginatively and intellectually explore the archetypal zone of the fairy-tale, they are more prepared to see their own life mythically. This powerful exercise proved particularly helpful for those elders who wanted to move from technical to creative writer. “I have written all my life, but not like this. We couldn't use I or you. And we didn't dare use the active voice,” explained Ms. K., who had spent her career writing briefs for engineers and her retirement researching and writing environmental reports and calls to action. A master of expository and argumentative forms, she was new to narrative, struggling to transform more than

three-quarters of a century of memories into a palatable story, one that was as enjoyable for her to write as it was her children to read. Like the protagonist in *The Eldest Princess* (Byatt, 1994), Ms. K. was caught in her own story, a story of limiting herself to technical or political discourse. Reminiscing and retelling traditional fairytales helped her to see her life mythically and thus freed her to craft personal and family stories using fictional techniques. Ms. K realized, as did the Eldest Princess, that she was “a born storyteller” with the sense to see she was caught in a story, and the sense to see that she had the power to change it to another one (Byatt, p. 102 ).

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Because I taught in the continuing education environment, my practice was self-directed; I relied on intuitive pragmatism, informal action research, and input from class members. Therefore, writing this thesis has enabled me to produce what Whitehead (1989) has called a “living educational theory,” i.e., an investigation into my own educational development and influences that examined how applied storytelling has informed my teaching practice. In this final chapter, I want to examine a major influence in my transformation from teacher to teller: the storytelling program at East Tennessee State University.

Like Thoreau going to Walden, I came to study story deliberately. Instead of hoeing bean rows, I listened to countless performances, tellers ranging from pure beginners to mature artists, performances of folk tales, fairy tales, tall tales, and most of all, personal stories. Through these experiential modes as well as academic ones, I was repeatedly exposed to three critical concepts that, as I embraced them, would forever change my teaching practice.

1. Storytelling is a medium in its own right (Sobol et al., 2004). Although other media have co-opted the term storytelling, only storytelling is storytelling. Storytelling is not a product but a process, “a living art form that exists on the breath and in the heart of teller and the ear of the audience” (Elizabeth Ellis, personal communication, 2003). I began to realize the value of listening more to the personal stories of elders and lecturing less on how to write them. I experienced the psychological ‘uncertainty principle (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 1-2) of an applied storyteller.

Your skills in listening and caring can assist them profoundly as they weave life stories that are healthier and more livable. Not only that, but in so assisting them

you will likely be restoried yourselves. By a kind of ‘psychological uncertainty principle,’ the very act of intervening in their lives changes both them and you.

(pp. 1-2).

I also realized that storytelling is not merely the oral precursor for writing autobiography; in fact, this powerful art form could succeed where lecture had failed. Stories engage the heart as well as the mind. As John Bunyan wrote in the 17<sup>th</sup> century from a Bedford jail, a storyteller must be like a fisherman who must use not only his wits but

Also his snares, lines, angles, hooks and nets.

Yet fish there be that neither hook nor line

Nor snare nor net nor engine can make thine;

They must be groped for and be tickled, too,

Or they will not be catch'd whate're you do.

2. Writing isn't natural; storytelling is. In the storytelling program, professors modeled listening carefully and facilitated development of a “critical language for approaching and assessing contemporary story occasions with widely diverse audiences, tellers, and types of material” (Birch & Heckler, 1996, p. 91). Yet, I often noticed an unspoken urgency among my classmates to what I came to think of as “picking a polarity.” Were we to be seated on the front porch with Ray Hicks and Kathryn Windham listening to homespun tales of long ago, or are we to assemble in the salon with those who appreciate Carol Birch’s interpretations of Carl Sandburg’s *Rutabaga Stories* or David Novak’s archetypal musings? Birch and Heckler (1996) have called this attitude the “first great divide in contemporary storytelling” an inevitable consequence of “the conflicting value systems between oral and print cultures,” (p. 15). I realized this inherent tension between orality and literacy was also closely linked to my initial question as to why elders who can tell

their stories often cannot write them. Sobol (1996) explained how McLuhan and Ong framed this dialectic.

...oral culture depends on the ear, and fosters warmth, feeling, immediacy, interiority, tribal identity, synthetic and paratactic thinking and expression, submergence in the body of nature. Writing...depends on the eye and fosters individualism, detachment, cold logic, analytical thinking, the breakup of tribes, the evolution of national identities and emergence from the body of nature into an uncertain and hubristic separateness. (p. 202)

On the one hand, storytelling is not only repetitive but also relies on sounds as well as the words, e.g., paralinguistic strategies such as volume, intonation, speed, etc. The interaction between the speaker and listener, along with accompanying body language, also serves to further convey meaning. Storytelling, therefore, occurs in the present moment. Encountering what Sobol (1999) has called the “archetype of the storyteller” (p. 28), I experienced “moments of aesthetic arrest – Aha experiences” (p. 29) during performances – both as a teller and a listener – that I had never experienced in writing.

On the other hand, writing has no such linguistic leveraging, i.e., writing can report the words that someone says but not *how* they are said, and therefore, relies solely on word choice and conventions of grammar and punctuation. Writing and reading are solo acts that do not require the presence of author and reader although, at least in fiction, it requires the willing suspension of disbelief. As Jane Yolen quips, "Literature, of course, is an unnatural act committed by two consenting individuals – writer and reader" (as cited in Stallings, 1988).

I realized that what I had thought of as encouraging advice to elders – write as you speak

– only served to frustrate. Bloomfield (1933) was wrong: Writing is not speech surrogate. Cook (2004) used a quotation by T.S. Elliot to explain the relationship between oral and written media.

... an identical spoken and written language would be practically intolerable; if we spoke as we write, we should find no one to listen; and if we wrote as we speak, we should find no one to read. The spoken and written language must not be too near together, as they must not be too far apart.

3. Community strengthens story development. My sojourn at ETSU also taught me to trust my own gifts as a teller: One day in front of a live audience, I cast aside the perfectly scripted story of another's life and performed spontaneously one from my own, completing my transformation from teller to teacher.

Lane (1998) has described this epiphany this way.

There's a time in every storyteller's life when a threshold is crossed--when he receives a sense of calling, a quiet certainty about his vocation. Prior to this time he may have called himself a story-collector, a great lover of tales, a person even addicted to narrative, but he'd always shrunk from calling himself a Storyteller.

This was because he'd recognized the gift of telling as ultimately the gift of the shaman, the magician and healer, a gift that's never claimed, but only and always 'conferred.' A Storyteller is one who watches the stuff-of-his-own-being transformed into wonder through a shared process of listening and dying. (p. 158)

I realized then that it is the power of community that enables members to confer upon one another the gift of storytelling, whether oral or written. I noticed that elders who formed writing groups after the class wrote more often and more successfully than those who did not. I began to encourage those groups and taught the elders how to facilitate their own groups rather than



relying on the teacher. Writing one's life stories may be a solitary act, but I have come to believe that, as in storytelling, it is "solitary work we cannot do alone" (Progoff, 1975, p. 34). Metzger (1990) has explained what happens in a writing group as each member

... contributes to the community in which the work takes place, taking in what is offered, transforming it, and then passing it on. Our lives mean little without the rigorous exploration and revelation of self that we practice together. The honesty that becomes eloquence is a gift to everyone. (p. vi)

It is with gratitude for this gift that I end this tale.

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## APPENDIX A

### A Very Good Year

By Mr. F.

1932 was a very bad year, particularly for my family. My father had been forced to close his butcher shop, which he blamed not on the depression, but on his partner, Mr. Goldberg.

"He drove away our customers by keeping his finger on the scale," I over heard him tell my mother. "That's when he didn't have it in the till, the dirty !#^\*!!"

I was twelve years old.

He also said other nasty things about Mr. Goldberg and his heritage, and about Jews in general. "Money grubbers," are some of the repeatable words I remember hearing. And when I was 12 years old, whatever my father said was true. So I believed, like he did, that all Jews were bad. Except, of course, I couldn't tell one from a Gentile.

Besides Mr. Goldberg, for example, there were the Posters, Harvey and Sadie. They ran the local shoe store where we always bought our shoes in better times. They even came to our house to visit once in a while. And there were the Luloff's who owned the local grocery store. I didn't know any of them were Jews until my father yelled about them.

We ran up bills at the Posters' and Luloff's in these hard times until my mother could no longer face them; after that we either paid cash or did without. Mostly we did without. Finally, from sheer necessity my mother took over the breadwinner role in our family.

She found a part-time job in a school office, and on the side she baked bread to sell in the neighborhood.

Fortunately her bread, baked in a wood-burning oven, was quite a hit in the neighborhood. She slowly developed a regular clientele. One autumn day while she was off delivering a newly baked batch of her loaves, I broke off a chunk from one of the remaining ones and went out on our front porch to eat it. Still warm from the oven, with that familiar aroma only newly baked bread has, it was pure cake to me.

While I was munching away, along came Mr. and Mrs. Poster in their Willys-Knight Overland touring car. They were probably hoping to collect something on the bill we owed them.

Sadie Poster, built low and wide like her car, waddled up to the porch.

"Your modders home?" she asked.

"Nope."

She looked me over. I was wearing the after-school clothes my mother insisted I change into, ragged hand-me-downs from some benefactor from our church; my toes stuck out of holes of a ratty pair of sneakers. Mrs. Poster shook her head.

"Vot are you eatink" She asked.

"Bread."

"Vith nothink on it?"

"Yop."

Mrs. Poster shrugged. She probably thought: "No remittances here!"

"Ah, tell your modder ve'll come back anudder time," she said.

"Okay."

It was later that afternoon. The sun was setting and it was getting cold out. My mother had returned from her bread run, and she had taken me to task for breaking off the end of a loaf. "You know what God made knives for," she scolded. Then she sent me to Lulloff's for Veal cutlets and canned tomatoes, paid for by the bread money she had just collected.

About the time I returned from the store, so did those Jews, the Posters. With them they brought sacks of flour and sugar, a tub of butter, Crisco, gallons of milk, stacks of can goods, fruit and anything else they figured our family might need.

"Oz for you," Mrs. Poster said to me, "a jar of jelly."

She turned then to my mother. "And come to the store," she said, nodding toward me.

"He needs shoes."

And there went the perfectly good prejudice my father taught me.

## APPENDIX B

Uncle Bud

By Ms. M.

My daddy was the rock of my childhood. But there was another hero -- Uncle Bud, my mother's older brother.

He was stationed in New York City during World War I. While there, he met a wonderful Yankee lady and they were married after the war. He then became a transplanted southerner and remained up North for the rest of his life. But he never forgot his southern roots.

He and Aunt Irene had three lovely daughters a few years older than I. We visited them many times in the '30s and '40s and those are some of the happiest memories of my life.

In appearance, Uncle Bud was a slightly larger version of Tommy Lasorda. Outnumbered but adored by a house full of females, he appeared a gruff, long suffering, put-upon soul. In reality, he was a lovable, contented teddy bear.

Uncle Bud never appeared to take any note of the conversational hubbub going on around him; the only sure-fire way of getting his attention was for us to begin whispering. Suddenly he'd look up from his newspaper and demand, "What? WHAT?"

He had a remarkable trait: his ability to curse without ever sounding offensive. It just flowed naturally, "like water from a spring," as they used to say about Bing Crosby's voice. Uncle Bud used the words appropriately. For instance, while driving his Plymouth auto, if a pedestrian dared get in his way, he would stop, roll down the car window, and yell, "Good way to get your a&\* knocked off!" Then he'd roll up the window and proceed on his way without waiting for a reply.

He seemed to be well liked in his neighborhood in Queens. He loved to sit in a lawn chair

on the edge of the sidewalk, holding a Confederate flag, and demand that ladies strolling by salute the flag before he would allow them to pass. They always complied, laughing and bantering with him.

One of the greatest trials in our family was a visit from Aunt Clay, Uncle Bud's step-mother. She was a fluttery, whiny, high-voiced wisp of a woman who would swish a tissue over your window sill and simper innocently, "I found this little bit of dust. Where shall I put it?"

To the family's credit, none of us ever answered what we would have loved to say.

When Uncle Bud cursed, even mildly, she would warn in a syrupy voice, "Atwood! I'm going to wash your mouth out with soap!"

Aunt Clay always identified with everyone's physical complaints -- whatever ailment you had, she had also. We were all sick of her echoing litany of agonies and afflictions.

One day Uncle Bud groaned, "I have a sharp pain in my side. I'm always tired, but I have trouble sitting still."

Aunt Clay immediately chimed in, "I have the same symptoms. What on earth do you suppose is wrong with us, Atwood?"

Uncle Bud drawled. "Well, I went to the doctor yesterday and he says we have the Red Ass Consumption!"

Aunt Clay, mortified, fled from the room and was never again heard to mention any physical ailments.

My wonderful Uncle Bud passed away many years ago. Among the many treasured memories is one immortal phrase which has become a standard for every generation: When anyone moans and groans in discomfort, he is greeted with, "You probably have the R.A.C."

## APPENDIX C

### My Grandmother's House

By Ms. H

Mammy's house stood in the middle of a big, clean-swept yard, with plowed fields, pastures, and woods all within sight. The yard was shady, with trees in the right places to play tag, hide-and-seek, and cat ball. It also had big open spaces. You could drive up to the front steps if you wanted to.

Long ago the house had been painted, but now it had that soft-silver look of weathered wood, exactly right for the complexion of a grandmother's house. It had tall chimneys like those you see sometimes in old storybooks.

Any house that has been a home has a personality of its own. But if it has been a home to more than one generation, the traits are doubled or tripled and more deeply rooted. Such was my grandmother's house. It grew out in all different directions, and like a loving old mother hen, it reached out and gathered under its wings all members of the family who lived there --those who had never left and those who chose to come back. On weekends it stretched even farther and included visiting children and grandchildren.

The front steps were thick, wide oak boards with no risers, so we could see beneath them. Uncle Harold's old bird dog and I both knew the value of that space under the steps.

Big toadstools grew at one end of the first step where it stayed damp. And one time I saw a big, sleepy toad frog sitting under one like it was an umbrella - I really did.

A little farther back, up nearer the porch where the soil was loose and dry, lived in a colony of doodlebugs. Like many neighbors who try to outdo one another, each one worked to

have the biggest, deepest, and smoothest doodle house. The steps were just the place to sit and wiggle a straw in those smooth little craters and chant:

*"Doodlebug, Doodlebug, come up - your house is on fire."*

*"Doodlebug, Doodlebug, come up - your house is on fire."*

The Doodlebug came up and looked around, saw there was no fire, so she doodled back down under until she had her house smooth and deep again.

Every Sunday afternoon Mammy's front porch was full of uncles, aunts, and cousins laughing and talking. We children sat on the steps. If we started fussing, tattling, or misbehaving, we were told to run on and play. But if we sat quietly and did not draw attention to ourselves, we could hear all manner of family stories and jokes they told on one another. So we sat quietly and listened.

Sometimes now I can hear the voices and laughter of those days in my children and grandchildren, if I sit quietly and listen.

## APPENDIX D

### The Last Harvest

By Mr. N.

I arose early on July 14, 1995 in the cool of the morning as the sun rose over the white oaks behind our barn and shone across the rolling pastures beyond. The rays slanted over the barn roof and onto our garden in the foreground. It was the time I loved best to look over the garden and the wonders it produced.

The first rays glistened on the tomatoes, watermelons and cantaloupes. The pole beans, corn, and squash had passed their peak and were turning brown in the hint of autumn to come. The peaches had yielded abundantly, but a few remained. The muscadine grapes and blueberries showed great promise for an autumn harvest.

I normally felt exhilaration at this scene, but this morning I saw a garden that had passed its peak and was now completing its last run. After almost seventy years of gardening I was viewing my last - and one of the best - gardens I had ever grown. After four strokes and a serious back injury, the doctor and my wife advised me to sell our home in order to remove the temptation to work too hard.

I started when I was five years old by helping my father, one of the best gardeners in the Batesville community. Since then each spring, as sure as the sap rises in the trees, a gardening instinct stirs within me.

Early on, Dad taught my brother and me some lesson which, throughout life, have lived within us. He first taught us the difference between weeds and vegetables. Dad used to quote an old Irishman who came to farm in our community who said, "You must kill grass and weeds in



their infancy."

Another job was to pick up the Mexican bean beetles, Colorado potato beetles, and cut worms, which we placed in a can of kerosene. Thus we learned the natural way of insect control. We also learned the value of using compost or organic matter to enrich the soil. We had to clean the "whatever" from under the chicken roosts and place it in furrows laid off in the garden beside the seed furrow. Dad or one of my older brothers laid off the furrows until I was old enough. After the harvesting of the early spring crops (cabbage, broccoli, lettuce, and Irish potatoes) as well as the early summer crops (beans, corn, and tomatoes), Dad would plant peas or other legumes to enrich the soil as well as to harvest. After this, organic gardening came naturally.

Then there were the lessons in measurement and uniformity. Dad wanted the seeds spaced properly in the row. For example, if he wanted the beans five inches apart, he would cut two five-inch sticks. He did not expect each distance to be measured, but if he noticed our seeds getting too close together or too far apart, he used the sticks to show us. Dad also wanted his rows uniformly spaced and his tomato stakes in line and at a uniform dept. These lessons in measurement and uniformity came in handy when I worked as carpenter, an aviation metal smith, a navigation officer, a farm shop instructor, and finally a gardener in my retirement. Even today I am the sort who notices a picture on the wall if it is one-eighth inch out of line or a misplaced tomato stake or one of a different height. As I looked over my last garden, the rows were uniform, the stakes were straight, and the spacing was proper.

Another valuable lesson learned during my many years of gardening is giving. Since I enriched every square foot of the good earth I have gardened on, I have nearly always had an abundance of fruits and vegetables. This naturally led to the sharing with family, friends, neighbors, the needy, and anyone who has happened by our door.

This led to what I jokingly call tithing. That is, I take 10% percent and give the rest away.

Three years ago I was not so lucky. I finally decided to take the Master Gardener's study program. I was certified, but guess what? I had one of the poorest harvests ever! Of course, it wasn't my great increase in knowledge but rather the fact that we had a dry season. This year - my final harvest - I have been blessed with a harvest of plenty.

Gardening's ultimate yield has instilled in me, as well as in some of our children and grandchildren and others, a sense of wonder at nature.

I agree with Rachel Carson that for children and the parent seeking to guide them, it is not half so important to know as to feel. I believe it is more important for parents to pave the way to knowledge than to teach facts children may not be ready to assimilate. If we instill in children a sense of beauty, wonder, mystery, and excitement about the world, as well as about the garden, they will learn.

If I had one gift for each child in the world, it would be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life.

So as I harvest my last garden, I am still awed by the wonders of nature around me - the blowing wind, the falling rain, the bursting buds in springtime and the ripening fruits in autumn. I am sustained by the repeated refrains of nature - the assurance that dawn comes after night and spring follows winter.

## APPENDIX E

### Revolt 1920 Style

By Ms. J.

The high school was on the corner of Mitchell and Capitol Avenue, at the site of the present city hall, across from the Capitol Building. It had been General Sherman's headquarters in the Civil War and had been adapted to the needs of a school for girls.

When my across-the-street neighbor, Polly, and I started school, we loved the capitol, and every day for a week we walked up the circular staircase to the balconied walkway around the dome after school. From there we had a wonderful view of Atlanta and surroundings, including Stone Mountain, Kennesaw Mountain, and woodland.

In 1920, the building was crowded to the point that all freshmen were housed in Jackson House, a Greek Revival type in the next block down Mitchell. It had central halls with rooms on each side upstairs and downstairs, restrooms off the back porch, and a cupola similar to a widow's walk up a short flight of stairs from the second floor. We were told from the beginning that this cupola was off-limits. As is usually the case, I believe every freshman who ever housed in Jackson House slipped up to the cupola with friends. The tale was that an unfaithful wife had been murdered by her husband in this area, adding fuel to the fires of our curiosity.

My classroom lost its Latin teacher early in the year and we had a number of replacements before someone could be found to take us permanently. This meant we were behind the others in our progress.

A half-holiday was declared to begin at 11 o'clock on Armistice day, but because we were behind, we were sent word to stay on for a Latin lesson at noon. Indignation ran high at

this evidence of injustice, and being 20 strong, we egged one another on and soon had a full-blown Latin revolt going. We wrote on the blackboard "Down with Latin," we ran up and down the stairs to the dread cupola, we shouted, and in every way we could we showed our displeasure at being treated so shabbily.

Suddenly someone at the window called, "Here comes Miss Matthews!", and we reacted just as quickly in eliminating every trace of rebellion as we had in rebelling in the first place. Several hands erased the blackboards, the door to the cupola was quickly closed, every voice quieted, and in the few minutes it took Miss Matthews to reach the room, every girl was seated calmly awaiting the Latin lesson.

That was it. Student revolt is not a new thing, but the difference in how our revolt ended and how some others ended is significant.

## APPENDIX F

### Don't Zip It!

By Ms. B.

I was more than usually addled that morning, having been up all night with a six year old throwing up. After getting my son off to kindergarten, the sick one and the three year old settled to watch cartoons and the baby down for a nap, I had a quiet cup of coffee and surveyed my domain. The kitchen was a disaster and there were the usual mountains of dirty clothes waiting.

At this particular time, my husband and I were big on making rice wine and I had several gallons in need of siphoning. At best, siphoning is a very sticky job so I decided to start on the clothes, siphon wine, and then clean the kitchen in that order.

Washer loaded and running, I placed the empty jug on a tall stool and put the full jug of wine on the counter and started the siphon. As clear wine began to fill the lower jug I loaded the dishwasher and began to clear the floor for mopping.

Disaster struck!

When I picked up the baby's jumpy chair, its foot firmly hooked under the leg of the stool with the nearly full jug of wine on top. The stool tipped, and the jug majestically somersaulted to the floor crashing wine and glass shards in all directions.

As old houses often do, the floor had a slope toward the stove and refrigerator. Frantically trying to keep the mess from under them I threw towels and anything else that would keep the wine dammed up. I grabbed the mop and mopped. I picked up glass shards from all over the kitchen. The place stank to high heaven and shortly so did I.

Just as I got the goop under control, Daniel, my kindergartner, arrived home from school.  
It was afternoon.

He had a strange look on his face and for some reason I did not think the goings on in the kitchen had anything to do with it.

"Daniel, are you all right?"

"No."

"What is it?"

"I got my dally wacky caught in my zipper."

"You WHAT? Did you get it out?"

"No."

"Oh my God," I thought. "What do I do now?"

I picked him up, trying not to bend him and laid him on the couch so I could examine the problem. His foreskin was definitely and thoroughly zipped into his half zippered fly.

"When did this happen?"

"At first recess." He had been zipped into his pants for over two hours at school.

"Didn't Sister Maureen do anything?"

"She said one of the older boys could zip it for me but I said no and she fussed at me for not playing and I asked her if she wanted to make it bleed."

Sister had not looked.

Daniel was a very literal child and no one thought to ask if he had gotten himself unzipped.

I was afraid of doing permanent damage should I zip him out so I tried to call my husband. He was out to lunch. I tried to call the pediatrician, also out to lunch but his nurse said to take Daniel to the emergency room.

Of course, my husband had the only car.

"Don't zip it" was Daniel's only plea.

I looked up and down the street for a neighbor with a car and spotted a neighbor's Studebaker in her drive. I called her to take us to the ER and another to watch the other children.

Carrying Daniel as straightly as I could I got him out to the car but misjudged the height of the door and whacked the edge of my left eye on the door. It had swollen shut before we had gone a block.

So there I was, coming into the ER, with eye swollen shut, reeking of rice wine and carrying a small boy who would not bend in the middle. The resident, who spoke little English, looked startled; he was not sure who was the patient.

I placed Daniel on a gurney and explained the problem, acting like the eye and the stench were normal. Daniel advised the doctor, "Don't zip it."

I said, "Daniel, you cannot go through life zipped in your zipper. We must get you out and we may have to zip it. I will be here with you and I will hold your hands because I know it will hurt but it must be done." I took his hands in mine and the doctor unzipped the zipper.

Daniel shrieked to high heaven.

Fortunately, once unzipped, he was only bruised, not maimed for life. A little numbing ointment worked wonders. As we walked out of the ER, he was holding my hand still. He looked up at me and said solemnly, "I hope I never do that again."

## APPENDIX G

### Life, I Do Not Want to Leave You

By Ms. J.

Like the father she adored, she found she could not accept the literal and often fanatical interpretations of the Bible sternly preached in that day. Once she came home from Sunday school, went out in the back yard, looked up at the sky, and said, "God, I do not obey you because I fear you, but because I love you."

Then she stood waiting to see if a thunderbolt was going to strike her dead.

Later she found that two strands ran side by side in her family: On one side there were blind faith, ministers and wives of ministers. On the other side there was doubt.

She expressed her feelings about religion in several poems.

I have heard the logic and reasoning

Of sages old and wise,

And it has left me questioning

And doubt...

What is it in me that leaps breathless,

To meet beauty?

All the creeds and sermons

Of a thousand ministers of God

Cannot move me like the sun

Dancing silvery

On green leaves swinging with the wind.



They wanted her to join the church and asked her to talk to the pastor. He said, "The only way to endure this vale of tears is to know that a life of joy awaits you when you die."

She replied, "This is no vale of tears! I would not have missed life for anything. It is joy, it is real, it is magnificent, and if it is all, it is enough."

The minister was greatly perturbed; she was reading from a different script.

Life, I do not want to leave you.

I think there can not be another world

Where Spring comes down each year in a whirl

Of shimmering beauty; where the bright

Eyes of children grow starry with each joy, and night

Brings love, a song of fire in the veins,

And sunlight flickers soft on wooded lanes.

I like things to hear and to touch and to see,

And immortality is all so shadowy...

I do not want to leave you, Life.

## APPENDIX H

### From Yankee to Rebel

By Ms. K.

Life in the Bronx tenement was an adventure. The apartments were small and dark, but the old, three-story stone building showed signs of former elegance in the wide stairway with brass handrails. In the basement was the super, a recent immigrant from southern Europe, who had to be yelled at to turn on the heat in the fall or fix the plumbing. Quiet requests went nowhere.

Next door was a girl my age, Pearl, who was held up to me as an example because she practiced the piano an hour every day, without fail. She was not my friend. Upstairs was my best friend, Jean. I was her example because I sat up straight when I read. She was nearsighted, I was farsighted.

Outside was freedom. First came the daily warnings: “Don’t play in the street; you’ll get run over.” “Don’t take candy from strangers.”

We were never offered any, except once, and I think it was a joke. Two well-dressed men approached us on the sidewalk. “Want some candy, kids?” They held out a bag. We stood there speechless. The men looked at each other and walked away.

And finally, “Don’t get in a car with strangers.” Nobody we knew even had a car. The subway was all we needed to get to the public library.

The sidewalk offered all kinds of possibilities: hopscotch, which we called potsy, and jumping rope for girls. Rollerskating. Two kinds of handball: one played against the walls of the tenement, the other played against the front steps—a greater challenge. In the side street – the

forbidden street – there was stickball, mostly for boys.

For a special treat on cold afternoons, kids scavenged bits of wood and coal and built a fire in the gutter. We gathered potatoes from home and put them in the coals. After a time – no one had a watch – we fished out the potatoes and gingerly, blowing on singed fingers, broke into the charred outer layer. Those potatoes (we called them mickies) gave up a steamy goodness that could never be matched by potatoes cooked in a kitchen.

When it snowed, we couldn't wait to dive into the snow. When our mittens got soaked, we'd run upstairs, put the mittens on the radiator to dry out, warm our frozen fingers, and then charge out again.

Directly across the street was the school, PS 6, a formidable pile of old, gray stones. To the side, a wooden fence surrounded the school yard. Board fences have loose boards. At recess every now and then, Jean and I would stroll over to the loose board, slip out, walk briskly with beating hearts, never running, and head for the neighborhood movie. For a precious dime we could have a delicious escape into fantasy land. We knew to get home at the usual time, and we knew no teacher called the roll after recess. We were never caught, but I felt like a criminal. It was a long time before we'd do it again.

So moving at age 11 to a little town in central Georgia was traumatic for me. There were no sidewalk games – in fact, no sidewalks except downtown. Then there was the language problem, the Bronx accent. At school the teacher had to translate between me and the other kids.

The first summer was hot enough for eating ice cream, but getting it was an ordeal. I'd head for the drugstore, and they'd see me coming – the man behind the counter and the others on the stools. “What'll it be?”

“I'd like a chawkalit cone, please.”

They chuckled. “What did you say?”

I’d repeat, “A chawkalit cone.”

“Say it again, little girl.”

The ordeal went on. The men loved it; I hated them. I finally had to switch to vanilla.

Friends were scarce, but there was one, a shy girl who lived out in the country, who invited me to her house. Her mother prepared mayonnaise and banana sandwiches on white bread. I had never imagined such a combination. At home, we ate dark bread and butter. They cooked vegetables until they were mush. We had them crisp, sometimes raw.

We two shy girls learned from each other, but I dreamed of escaping back to my real home in the Bronx.

## APPENDIX I

### Threshing Time in the Hills

By Mr. N.

What a pleasure it is to see, in early summer, the fields of wheat glowing amber and gently waving on the wind. To harvest it, my father or older brother swung a cradle – a scythe with a long handle on it – and cut the grain about four inches from the ground. At the end of each swing, he swept up the grain in his hand and deposited it on the ground.

My job was to follow behind the cradle and pick up the small piles until I had a bundle about eight inches in diameter. Then I picked out a small sheath of twelve or so stalks of grain, wrapped and tied them around the bundle. These bundles were made into shocks, or piles, to protect the grain until it was hauled up for the big thrashing day.

The community threshing ring was one of the most exciting events of the year – right up there with barn-raisings and corn husking bees. Before my day, four mules pulled the steam engine powered thresher from farm to farm. But by the '20's, one man, Mr. Earnest Brannan, owned a Case threshing machine that was powered by a belt pulled by an old Fordson tractor.

After the grain was dry and the farmers hauled it up to their barns, word went out that the thresher should arrive in the edge of the community on a certain date at a certain farm. Women started the day before to do their part – to spread a great feast for the sweating, itching men folk. Each tried to outdo the other with their best recipes.

After the thresher was set up, the tractor scotched in place, and the belt engaged, the men formed an assembly line. Boys brought the bundles of grain to one man who cut the ties and fed

the grain through the thresher, which seemed to sing a tune. The pitch varied depending upon the amount of grain going through.

Another man sat at the place the threshed grain came out to go into bags, which we called tow sacks. When a bag was full, he tied it. Another man took the bag and placed it on a wagon or stacked it to be moved later.

As the grain was separated, the straw went up a long shoot that was usually pointed into the hayloft of the barn. Lord, have mercy upon the lad whose job it was to get up in the loft under the hot tin roof in July or August to fork the straw back. This was especially true when we had a wet spring and the grain was infected with a fungus-like disease we called smut.

I remember one day in my sixteenth year when it fell my turn to fork the straw. The smut was unusually bad that year and I was allergic to it. As the thresher gained speed, I looked down from the door in the hayloft to see the first bundle go through. A great cloud of dust, straw and black soot filled the air. With the whine of the thresher, the chugging of the engine and the ever-growing cloud of dust, I realized this was going to be a long day.

As more and more straw made its way up the shoot and into the loft, I set to. The straw came up so fast. It was hard even in the best of times to keep up. But on this dusty, hot day, it was almost impossible. Part of the time I spent sneezing so violently I couldn't do anything. My eyes were stinging, every thread on my body was saturated, and my shirt was so covered with dust and soot that it looked like mud.

I began to weaken as the pile of straw grew higher. Being a survivor who never gave a thought to quitting, I almost panicked but, lo! the whine and rumble of the thresher and a great quiet descended upon Batesville. After recovering from another sneezing spell, I staggered to the loft door to see if the world had stopped and saw the thresher's belt had broken.

I dashed out of the loft, got a drink of water and washed some of the grime from my eyes and cleared my nose of the black filth. But, in half an hour, I heard the chug, spit and cough of the Fordson, then the rumble of the tractor. Next came the whine as the first bundle hit the turning sheaves.

I made it until the last bundle went through about noon. But during that long miserable morning, the die was cast. For years, our mother had said over and over, “Harold, you must work hard and get an education and amount to something.”

Though I grew up loving the soil, farming and the great outdoors, I reached a turning point that day as the sun shone through holes in the roof and highlighted bits of straw: I must be guided by my loving mother. I must get an education. I must amount to something. I must, for I cannot farm if it means forking back sooty wheat straw under a hot tin roof in July.

## VITA

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