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# Stories and Self-Reflection

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## About the Author

Kate Waites is a professor of English in the Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences Division of Humanities at Nova Southeastern University, where she teaches classes in literature, writing, and gender studies. In addition to her numerous contributions to *Women in World History* and the *Encyclopedia of Women's Autobiography*, she has also published articles on women's life writing and images of women in film in the *CEA Critic*, *Auto/Biography*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, and *Literature/Film Quarterly*. Her most recent article, *Babes in Boots: Hollywood's Oxy-moronic Warrior Woman*, is featured in the newly published Routledge Press book, *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*. She published her first work of creative non-fiction based on her experiences as a young woman in a Roman Catholic convent as *Particular Friendships: A Convent Memoir*, which earned her an invitation from the Broward County Library Foundation to be one of its 19 honored writers at the Literary Feast of 2007.

## Stories and Self-Reflection

by Kate Waites

was invited to deliver this lecture—my "last lecture"—as if it were, indeed, my final opportunity to address a college audience. Assuming I did have but thirty minutes remaining on planet earth, the truth is I wouldn't be talking about too much of anything. If I were still mobile, I might invite you to join me for a run in Treetops Park or a sandlot baseball game with my grandkids. They are especially fond of a scrappy game of baseball, or any competitive activity, really, that involves a ball—a propensity, I suspect, inherited from their Nana. And, if I were confined to a bed and still conscious, I would be glued to the TV so I could root for the Philadelphia Phillies against the Tampa Bay Rays in the 2008 World Series with one raised fist while holding the hand of my beloved with the other gentler hand. In other words, I'd like to think I'd be fully engaged in a silly, seemingly trivial but life-affirming activity. It's ironic, though, isn't it? We devote ourselves—or what my mother used to call our "living life"—as in, "I never saw anything like this in all my living life" and I never got around to asking her what other kind there might be—to its affirmations: nurturing relationships and pursuing personal, educational, and professional ambitions. And yet, the singular lesson life teaches us is that we must let go. Ironically, what we cherish and fight for, and what we should cherish and fight for, are the very things we must learn to surrender in small ways and in the ultimate way.

The notion of the final surrender persuades me to take up the conceit you've proposed, and in what remains of my thirty minutes I would like to offer some observations on the relationship between philosophical inquiry and spirituality. For many, spirituality connotes religion, which is

associated with a particular faith or belief system. However, the *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us of another meaning: "The quality or condition of being spiritual; attachment to or regard for things of the spirit as opposed to material or worldly interests."



Figure 1 - Mom and Aunt Laurie

I have always been interested in the life of the spirit, by which I mean being attentive to seeking truth, examining reality, and exploring the big questions such as life and death, which also happens to be the college's annual theme for 2008-9. Socrates, the Greek philosopher and teacher of Plato, believed in the power of discourse—of raising philosophical questions and engaging in dialogue—so as to get closer to the truth which, he reasoned, began with self-knowledge, as expressed in this dictum, "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Plato, *Apology* 38a).

The search for truth speaks to the soul—or the things of the spirit—as well as to the mind, and even though rational inquiry and matters of the soul don't usually walk hand-in-hand, each can inform and enrich the other. I am enamored of this notion of living the examined life, because it prompts me to burrow into the heart of reality and to be critical and self-reflective. But then I am equally fond of my Aunt Laurie's expression, "Don't fly in the face of God." My aunt Laurie urged this old Irish adage upon me this past summer as we grieved the passing of my mother, her younger sister. I was wrestling at the time with the cruel irony of having made haste to return to my ailing mother's bedside only to be left stranded in the cold anonymity of the Charlotte, Virginia airport. While the sudden inclement weather held me hostage, my mother was moving on, surrendering, as Dylan Thomas so aptly describes it, to "the dying of the light." Don't question God's will, Aunt Laurie cautioned me as much as herself as she, too, coped with the quirk of fate that sees her—the oldest of eight siblings—standing last and alone at age 92.

While mourning my mother's death and preparing my thoughts for this last lecture, I've been pondering both expressions—that of Socrates who encourages me to examine reality, death, and my "self"—as well as that of my 92-year-old Catholic aunt's advice not to question, in a word, "God's will." In the months before my mother died we watched her disappear, like a balloon growing smaller and then tiny as it drifts away and into the clouds. Yet in spite of nursing her in her last weeks, I was denied the privilege of witnessing her final precious breaths, a letdown that tasted of bile. I never got to say a proper good-bye to my mother—my anchor, my oldest and dearest love—so eager was I in her last months to hold her here with us, as if to say: "Stay with us, Mom. We need you!" I coaxed her to eat, to get up and move around, to recall episodes from earlier periods in her life and our childhood, when all she really wanted was to let go—of food, of movement, of everything that tied her to earth, including us. Plainly, too, in my mother's dying

and her death I have found myself faced more squarely with the imminence of my own, so I am grateful for the serendipity of this unique occasion to render my "last lecture." It affords me the opportunity to examine the fresh experience of my mother's death and reconcile Socrates' injunction to probe and examine with my Aunt Laurie's counsel not to question.

While considering this "last lecture," I naturally thought back to my first one. It was 1979, the class was freshman composition, and the words abject and terror best describe my state of mind. My foray into college teaching was less by choice than by default. I was the kid in high school who, the nuns informed me, "tested clerical," meaning I should think about being a secretary because I wasn't college material. I wondered if I should set my sights even lower after I nearly failed a typewriting class because I couldn't get the hang of typing without peeking under the blue cloth draped over the keys. Despite my inauspicious introduction to academics, however, four memorable years in a Roman Catholic convent gave me a chance to test my intellectual as well as my spiritual mettle, and some years later I found myself with a teaching assistantship that financed my doctoral studies and earned me a stipend in exchange for teaching freshman English at the University of Nebraska. This astonishing gift from the universe was the only way I could have afforded to continue my hardscrabble, heretofore part-time education. A married adult student with two small children at the time, we were living one meager paycheck to the next. I never considered being a teacher, let alone a professor. I knew only one thing: I wanted to study literature. Ever since my exposure in the 10th grade to the wondrous narratives spun by the likes of George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and Charlotte Bronte, I was hooked. My teacher, Sister Mary Bernice, did the introductions. She was a diminutive thing—soft-spoken, pale, slight, and with an air of mystique in her black robes and headgear—she floated rather than walked down the aisle of the classroom, like a dark butterfly holding her novel aloft: "Now, girls, what do *you* think Maggie Tulliver wants most in the world?"

"An education, Sister?" I tentatively offered.

"Yes, Miss Waites, very good. Yes," she sang. She lifted up the folds of her long robe and enormous brown rosary beads that hung from her belt as she twirled toward the front of the room, hoping to meet similarly delighted faces. I sure didn't see any, but she seemed happy to get any answer at all from this crowd of underwhelmed, bound-for-clerical work teenage readers. I, however, got it. I was transported and inspired, and my experience owed as much to her passion for teaching the stories as the stories themselves. As it happened, Sister Bernice also influenced my decision to join a religious order dedicated to helping the poor. Living the life of a nun from ages eighteen to twenty-two posed uncommon hardships and challenges, but it also served to enervate my passion for social justice issues. (As well, it posed a major personal conflict—but to know that story, you'll have to read my recent memoir, *Particular Friendships*, which recounts the experience.) Another benefit that came of my four-years of exile from secular life was the opportunity to attend college and major in English.

At the liberal arts college run by the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, I encountered another nun, one Sister Micina, whom all the college students—nuns and non-nuns alike—dreaded. Severe, aloof, and exacting, she terrified and challenged her students. I liked her. I was one of the few students who actually sought her classes out because her passion for literature was contagious. She nudged me (and, I guess, I needed nudging), always asking me to be more

inquisitive, to think more incisively, and to read more as well as more deeply. I was awed by her extensive knowledge of books and writers, and by the time I completed college, my own love-affair with literature was secured. With little regard for whether or how this path might end in gainful employment, I marked it and, piecemeal, I fashioned the cherished quilt of my education. Through the lens of the great writers—of Chaucer and Shakespeare, of Keats and Byron, of Dickinson and Emerson, of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, of Fowles and Faulkner—new meanings were revealed to me. Their stories captivated me, and educated me about the imagination and the search for truth; about human beings—their personal foibles and collective struggles and the existential crisis they invariably face. Stories such as Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* invited me to probe the darker recesses of the human heart. They intrigued me with their refusal to answer the enigma of life, and asked me questions about myself: who am I? Who do I want to be? What values guide my life? What parts of my self do I claim? What parts do I hide?

Because I was also a product of the social revolution of the 60s and 70s, I found myself especially attracted to the lesser-known work of women writers and their stories of oppression and rebellion. My interest led me to a concentration in Women's Studies—an entirely new and developing field at the time, and my exposure to it transformed the way I looked at the world, and the way I viewed my own life. Somehow, the poetry and stories I read that told of other men and women always turned back on me—on my own life's journey—even as they expanded my world view and deepened my understanding of human experience—of life and of death.

So what does this walk down the lane of my literary pursuits have to do with my first lecture and my last? With rational inquiry and the spiritual quest? With Socrates and Aunt Laurie? Everything.

Stories are at the core of who I am and, I think, of who we all are. We are enthralled with stories in books and on film. We imbibe the tales told by family members about where they came from and what it was like for them growing up. We relate stories to others about ourselves when we want them to know us and what we've experienced. And we come to the stories of others in order to make sense of this experience we call life.

Let me tell you a story about the meaning of stories in my life. When my mother passed away last summer, her death was not unexpected. She'd been ailing for months, and I started to get an eerie feeling when she stopped telling me her stories, which was odd because my mother was a treasure-trove of people's stories. My mother, the story collector, passed these stories along to her children and grandchildren, to neighbors and co-workers and, frankly, anyone willing to listen. We usually did not know the heroes of her stories. We just knew that whenever we talked to her, we could expect to hear about the 45 year-old co-worker and single mother of four with terminal cancer, or the 55 year-old bus driver struggling to make ends meet because of a down syndrome adult child and a wife who had suffered a stroke; or the neighbor raising her sister's two young boys because she was in drug rehab and the state wanted to place them in foster care; or the teenager at the school where Mom worked who got kicked out of her house by her mother after having reported that her father molested her.



*Figure 2 - Mom*



*Figure 3 - Kate and Mom*

Relatives, friends, acquaintances, and yes, even strangers, sensed mom's genuine interest and compassion, and they shared with her the most intimate details of their life. And my mom—with her well-honed listening skills and photographic memory—gathered their stories, strung them like pearls with the thread of her memory, and dutifully reported them to others as if it were her sacred obligation to do so. Although it was often frustrating to listen to the stories of people I did not know, I was always amazed by their insightful and faithful rendering that never came with judgment. Critical? Yes, sometimes. Condemnatory? Never. My mother manifested a gracious acceptance of life and people even when she was puzzled or distressed by the tales they told. Not until a short time ago when I was seeking details of my mother's life from her sister, Aunt Laurie, did I hear the story of how people's stories came to be so important to her.

The youngest girl and not yet big enough to do household chores in her family of eight children, my mother was dispatched on a daily basis by my grandmother to canvas their northeast-Philadelphia working-class neighborhood and gather the "news." During the depression years

neighbors were pummeled with hardships—jobs and homes lost, parents unable to feed their children, families broken apart—and a dutiful little girl traipsed the city blocks, talking and listening to people and collecting their stories so that she could go home and give her mother a full report. Her nickname was "Newsie," or, as Aunt Laurie further explained, the neighborhood reporter-social worker. That story gave me a newfound appreciation of my mother and my connection to her. I realized that even though my mom was not an intellectual, and didn't read or appreciate books, and never got past the 10th grade, and worked as a janitor at the local Catholic high school until age 80, like me, she, too, nurtured a love for stories.

The stories I consumed in books and later in films were not unlike the stories my mother absorbed and told and re-told. I, too, tried to understand rather than judge, because for me stories spawned self-awareness. They opened my heart to the human experience, even as they prompted me to probe the awesome adventure of life and its relentless march to death. Today finds me ever closer to that reality, not only because you asked me to consider my last lecture, but also because in my mother's broken, aging body in her final months I saw so clearly my own.

I will share another little story touching on my mother. This past summer was one of alternating hope and despair as her loved ones watched her rally from a terrible illness only to see her succumb to it. In her last weeks when she was confined to a chair and a bed, we tried to nourish her spirits and her body with our own need and desire to keep her here with us. My oldest brother was slated to celebrate 25 years of being a priest and it was imperative that she be there to witness it. After all, his priesthood had been the crowning achievement of her life. But as I lifted her in and out of bed and bathed her brittle body, I felt her letting go of all the things she had once been so fiercely attached to, including my brother's priesthood. In the time I spent with her I felt strangely trapped in the terrible mystery of death in life, of life in death, of death and life all at once. She cried at times because of her unaccustomed feebleness, and her inability to stand or sit without leaning on me or use a washcloth to tend to the most private parts of her body. She was dependent in a way I had never seen, and I yearned to reassure her. "Please don't feel badly about this, Mom. To care for you is a gift and a blessing for me." More than a gift and a blessing, these intimate moments with my mother have become part of my story, and her ultimate surrender, a lesson. Now I am left with the task of re-birthing my newly orphaned self and preparing my spirit to meet my own death. I do so with the precious knowledge that my love of the human story links me to this grand and memorable woman who shaped my sensibility.

I began this lecture by considering the seeming contradiction in the dual charge to engage the intellect so as to question, self-reflect, and examine in the search for truth, and to resign ourselves with grace to those things that we can neither understand nor control—to surrender. For me the two are compatible. Both enrich my soul. And even though I aspire to be a wiser and more evolved person than I am, I recognize that the true meaning—if not the truth—of this life experience is in the quest itself and the end result is not something we can achieve on this side of the grave.

This sensibility, comprised of love of stories and a desire to examine my "self," has informed my teaching, which is more vocation than profession because I fell in love. I fell in love with you, my students, and our collective enterprise to feed our mind and expand our vision and open our hearts to the social world around us, and the spiritual word within us. I am inspired by your

intellectual curiosity and by your eagerness to grow and improve yourselves and—not least these days—by the sacrifices you make to educate yourself. I am humbled by the way you look to *me* for knowledge; in you, I recognize myself at an earlier stage of my life's journey, even as I looked at my dying mother and saw myself.

I can only hope that until my last breath I may be found in the act of consuming and reflecting on the stories of others, or else creating life stories of my own—enjoying my friends, playing with my grandchildren, conversing intimately with my daughters, or walking at dusk with my beloved. But in the final analysis I pray for the gift to surrender gracefully and not "fly in the face of God."

The charge with which I would leave you is to lead with your heart. Open your heart to the stories of people and the world around you, but guide your actions with a mind that is ever curious and cultivated through education and continuing self-examination. As wisely expressed by the foolish Polonius to his son Laertes who is setting off on a journey in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

. . . to thine own self be true,/And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man. (I. iii. 78-80)

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