

## Starting Down The Path

“When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner’s pick, a woodcarver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year.

You make the path boldly and follow it fearfully. You go where the path leads. At the end of the path, you find a box canyon. You hammer out reports, dispatch bulletins.

The writing has changed, in your hands, and in a twinkling, from an expression of your notions to an epistemological tool. The new place interests you because it is not clear. You attend. In your humility, you lay down the words carefully, watching all the angles....”

--Annie Dillard, **The Writing Life** (New York: Harper & Row, 1989.)

At the last Mountain Lake Colloquium, we performed an experiment. A room full of academics, teachers of would-be music teachers, took turns sniffing at a bottle of Calamine lotion, a jar of white grade school paste, a tin of shoe polish, a bottle of vanilla extract, a pouch of tobacco. They were then asked to write about what these fragrances caused them to recall from their earliest days. The results were surprising, evocative, tearful, intense.

In a second exercise they wrote about their personal experiences as young music students just getting started in the field. These scholars were asked to remember the habits and quirks of a particularly significant early music instructor, beginning their writing exercise with the words, “My music teacher always...”. The writing was to be sensory, not analytical. We were seeking scenes not summary; images not ideas.

As Annie Dillard suggests above, this kind of writing about experience – either from memory or imagination (or both) – is less a probing for patterns and meaning and more organic. It is a journey, the retracing of memory and experience through concrete detail. It does not derive from empirical research, survey or experiment. It is writing that does not declaim or even attempt to explain. It is simply storytelling -- long on action and short on analysis. It captures the voices and intonation of its principal characters without citation or footnote. It is shaped by a natural narrative arc, not by an examination of previous findings, the explanation of research methodology, and then the summary of findings. It is writing that does not submit well to abstraction or poster session.

In fact, what this kind of writing might mean is something the author usually figures out after she has written and rewritten it, shaped and crafted it into a full blown narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

You do not write such a story in a single sitting, but you do start from something as visceral as a smell or someone as impressive as that first music teacher. You refine the first draft

and subsequent drafts based on making the story sharper, clearer and more visceral. In so doing, you make the meaning sharper, but you do not ever directly state what you are coming to understand the story is about; you merely tell the story and leave room for the reader to make meaning of the assembled words, just as you did, following the path you have cleared through the woods with your words. You also know that the reader may not ultimately arrive at the same place as you did. They may also see other things along the path you've blazed because they bring along with them their own backpack of tools and experience.

As Flannery O'Connor wrote: "A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word of the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what the story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story."

Substitute the word "song" or "painting" for the word "story" in O'Connor's quotation, and you see that whether by words or brush strokes or notes, the rendering of experience in sensory form is the most primal form of human currency, exchanged daily. We make sense of the world through stories and pictures and sounds. We preserve our history and imagine our future most palpably through dramatic narratives.

However, in scholarly circles, stories are usually the *subject* of study, not a form of academic discourse. Scholars are trained to traffic in analysis, synthesis, and summary. Mystery is a thing to be solved in science; but the greatest of literary stories reveal mystery rather than resolve it. Collecting and telling stories, therefore, is often seen as an inappropriate way to gather or document findings from the field. We want theory, not practice. So why did we delve into the basics of creative writing at Mountain Lake?

I believe that there are important ways in which the daily practice of teaching and the stories of the practitioners could bring a special dimension to the discourse that takes place in the Mountain Lake Reader. Liz Wing has called to our attention the writing of Aurora Levine Morales, excerpted in a recent issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education (12/14/01). Morales explains it this way:

"When I was a child in rural Puerto Rico, the people around me ate produce grown on local soil, chickens that roamed the neighborhood, bananas cut from the stalk. It was unrefined, unpackaged, full of all those complex nutrients that get left out when the process is too tightly controlled. But during the last few years before we emigrated, advertising finally penetrated our remote part of the island. Cheez Whiz on Wonder Bread was sold to country women as a better, more sophisticated, modern, advanced, and healthy breakfast than boiled root vegetables and codfish or rice and beans.

When I call myself an organic intellectual, I mean that the ideas I carry with me were grown on soil that I know, that I can tell you about the mineral balance, the weather, the labor involved in preparing them for use.

In the marketplace of ideas, we are pushed toward the supermarket chains that are replacing the tiny rural colmado; told that store-bought is better, imported is best; and sold on empty calories in shiny packaging instead of open crates and barrels to which the earth still clings.

The intellectual traditions I come from create theory out of shared lives instead of sending away for it. My thinking grew directly out of listening to my own discomforts, finding out who shared them, who validated them, and in exchanging stories about common experiences, finding patterns, systems, explanations of why and how things happened. This is the central process of consciousness raising, of collective testimonio. This is how homemade theory happens." (from **Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios** (Duke University Press))

After my first experience with the Colloquium, I believe that Mountain Lake represents an unusual marriage of traditional scholarship with an opportunity to “create theory out of shared lives.” Mountain Lake is a special gathering that offers more than the chance for job scouting and the presentation of academic papers. It is a place where lives are shared and stories are told.

Our goal then, through this website and in subsequent workshop sessions, will be to study together the discipline of creative writing and to find fresh ways of incorporating some of its basic principles into the work that appears in the Mountain Lake Reader.

The three writers who have made their drafts available for critique offer us a chance to explore some of the distinguishing aspects of writing from experience rather than formal research. We hope others will submit pieces for critique as we continue the conversation and explore the blending of scholarship and story that makes MLR distinctive among professional journals.

--Georgann Eubanks, Director  
Duke University Writers' Workshop