

THE STORIES WE TELL: The Search for Meaning Through Stories


by


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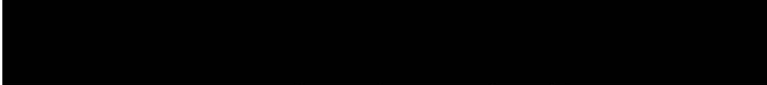
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We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

  
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### ABSTRACT

The heart of this thesis is a story. Like all stories it involves a journey. It is a journey of the way the author thought and perceived the nature of being in his lived story through reflection and awareness. Simultaneously, it is a story about story. The thesis is a story about the use of story for constructing meaning and understanding. The journey is through the interior landscape of the mind which the author has traversed in the telling. The journey has been transformed by the artifice of the storyteller and the craft of storytelling in order to be presented in the basic story structure of beginning, middle and end.

As in all stories there is an underlying tension throughout the piece which is resolved, if only temporarily, through the telling. It is a story which is demonstrative of the use of story in constructing meaning, as well as exemplifying the subtle, yet fundamental shift in the author's way of perceiving his questions: "Why did I become a teacher?", "Am I the person I'm supposed to be?," and of being in the world.

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DEDICATION

To my aunt the tailor and the story stone,  
and,  
Karon, Teiji and Willow.

When the bond between  
Heaven and earth is broken  
Even prayer is not enough;  
Only a story can mend it.  
*-The Baal Shem Tov*

## Foreword

This foreword was written after the thesis was completed. Consequently, it would appear to, but it does not, possess that oft sought after gift of being able to divine the future. As the title of this piece suggests, the author is telling a story. What is not suggested in the title is how that has been done. The storyteller in this piece has written a story about the use of story for constructing meaning *in the form* of a story. That is to say, the thesis is a story about story. It tells a story, and, the story is the journey that the author travelled in the writing. However, it is the heart of the thesis which is written in that way, as the section titled The Story attests. The preceding section, titled Introduction is not written in the form of a story. It is a narrative to the extent that it tells the reader about story and the storyteller and where the piece is situated. The reader should also be aware that the heart of this thesis, the story, is written in a storytelling style. It is a style that tends more toward oral language rather than the formal conventional language usually associated with a thesis. At many points throughout this telling authors have been referred to, by their full names, again in the storytelling style and as a mark of respect, which is a departure from the usual conventions associated with a thesis.

This foreword is to alert the reader to the sub-text of the piece as a story and enable her to see the journey and make connections. The implications of this story are implicit in the choice of stories and the reader is invited to draw them out. The truly good storyteller only sets the tale up and then tells it. To provide the interpretation of the story as well, strips it of its affective force and robs the listener/reader of that right and role.

Like all stories this one involves a journey. It is a journey of the way one can think and perceive the nature of being in one's lived story through reflection and awareness. It has a beginning, a middle and an end only in the sense that this is the artifice of the storyteller and the craft. And like all stories it has an underlying inner tension that was felt throughout by the author and I hope will be sensed by the reader.

The reader must listen carefully with what F. Kermode (1979) calls "circumcised ears" or with the "third ear" so that she can sense this tension, but also, to experience the subtle and, finally, fundamental shift in the author's way of perceiving his question(s) and of being.

And just as in many other stories this inner tension is resolved, if only temporarily, in some way through the writing and telling which has enabled the author to move along in his journey. It is the journey taken to what Florence Krall has called a unified view of the world. In the journey the author picked "something out," recognised it, communicated it to others in this thesis and understood it. And in that understanding there has been a remarkable "integrating effect" (Krall 1988 p.477). It is a journey tantamount to what Michael Novak (1978) called a "new standpoint," Jo Anne Pagano (1988) called "integrity," Madeleine Grumet (1988) called a "complete reciprocity," an "equilibrium" and what I call being in the point of power called now. It is a continuous journey, a movement to new views, new beginnings, middles and endings, and new ways of perceiving, understanding and being.

## Introduction

*Collecting stories is a constant paleontologic endeavour. The more story bones you have, the more likely you will be able to find the whole story. The more whole the stories, the more subtle twists and turns of the psyche are presented to us and the better opportunity we have to apprehend and evoke our soulwork.*

*-Clarissa Pinkola Estes  
(1992, p. 17)*

This thesis sets out to be an exploratory exercise rather than an explicative piece. It will be a narrative study in the sense that narrative is both phenomenon and method (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). "Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study"(p.2). Connelly and Clandinin in their research and discussions distinguish between the two by calling the phenomenon story and the inquiry narrative. To this author's mind it is all story but the distinctions may prove useful tools in the process.

The thesis will explore, through story, several questions: Why did I become a teacher? Am I the person I'm supposed to be? and finally, What is my story? These questions spring from my desire to construct meaning from the story I am living. The reason for using story to explore these questions,

...is that humans are storytelling organisms who individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2)

Add to this the notion that it is a

hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives. (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 37)

This thesis is a personal journey through some universal themes, namely, separation, alienation and power. Power is may not be the appropriate word in this context, but perhaps authority would be more accurate.

This thesis will be demonstrative as well. That is, it will be demonstrative of the process one could follow in order to ascertain some answer(s) to the questions posited in this exploration. The process being, of course, story and its uses.

Stories, myths, fairy tales, folk tales, fables *and* the stories of our own personal experiences, as well as the experiences of others, are that which provide a group or a culture with an organising structure for creating meaning. In the storied world in which we live “lives do not serve as models *only stories* [emphasis mine] do that” (Heilbrun, 1988, p 37).

A culture’s stories, myths, folk tales and legends provide it with an organising structure and belief system. These stories depict themes of eternal concern to

men and women. Myths and folk tales are universal and impersonal, yet “they touch us individually by articulating some invisible theme or drama that goes on under the surface of seemingly routine life” (Liebman, 1991, p.14).

When personal experiences are shared in the form of story, those stories also touch us and speak of those universal themes that are often of concern to men and women. Our personal stories move us back into our cultural stories through the universal themes which are an integral part of them. Our recounting of daily experiences or struggles may mirror the mythic themes of alienation endured by Prometheus or its more earthy telling in Bearskin (Grimm, 1980). In our work, in our relationships with others, through our seemingly routine endeavours we may mirror the universal theme of separation in Allerleirauh (Grimm) or the quest for acceptance and empowerment laboured at by Heracles in his 12 labours or the sense of betrayal felt by Hansel and Gretel (Grimm) when left in the woods by their father and stepmother.

Nations need stories, just as people do, to provide themselves with a sense of continuity, or identity. But a story does even more than that. Without stories as organising frameworks we are swamped by the volume of our own experience, adrift in a sea of facts. . . . A story gives us direction by providing a kind of theory about how the world works– and how it needs to work if we are to survive. (Postman, 1989, p.123)

We must have a story as individuals and as members of a group in order to construct meaning. In short, one must have a story to live by, and through the exploration of our stories we can, as Carolyn Steedman (1987) says “rework what has already happened to give current events meaning” (p.6) and understand the story we are presently telling into the world. If we tell stories back to ourselves or to others and explore them, we then inquire into their significance. We begin to see how the stories of our past experiences shape the story we are telling into the world now. This sets us on the path toward what I call the point of power, the present or *now*, where with the liberty of detachment and awareness, gained through the process of exploring our stories, the storyteller creates her story and herself. It is here that we can ask *What is my story?* and then answer it by the conscious choices we make from that place called *now*. To use story in this way requires

...the use of complex cognitive processes that both strive for and challenge a unified view. We are asked to be mytho-poetic in expression as well as critically self-aware and analytical, to distance ourselves from experiences while remaining radically grounded within them. Presented by these contrarities, one part of us often refuses to acknowledge what another part knows deeply. Indeed this is one real value in such research for it reiterates the challenges of life where each day we are asked to make objective decisions based on subjective judgment. (Krall, pp.476–477)

The magic or the power of storytelling, in the traditional sense, can then be accessed with awareness in the creation of our own life story. You can become aware of the story you are living and through that awareness you can affect your being in your story.

## Orientation

*The act of orienting or the state of being oriented; oriented-to cause to face the east; to align or position with respect to a position with respect to a reference system; from the Latin *oriens*, rising, rising sun, east, from *oriri*, to rise; from the Indo European root *er-* to set in motion. (The Houghton Mifflin Canadian Dictionary of the English Language 1980)*

It must be emphasised at the outset that this thesis itself is a story and that it, in turn, possesses and utilises the qualities and characteristics of a story. It is not rooted in objective, quantitative or scientific research aimed at articulating some general laws in order to predict and control the occurrence of phenomena, nor is it a disparate collection of meandering thoughts or recollections. This thesis is rooted in story, both the story it tells, as well as the stories told within that story. This thesis tells those stories from a personal, interpretive and generative place.

The caveat should be put forth to the reader that the 'heart' or the 'truth' of my research and writing lies embedded in the thesis and the stories told within that story with a review of the related literature and methodologies inextricably interwoven into it. To separate them would cause the garment of the story to unravel into a heap of tangled threads. There is a review of the literature and a discussion of research methodologies within this thesis, however, it is contained within the structure of the story. Just as the universal themes depicted in folk tales and myths are implicit in the story, so too, is the review of literature and methodology implicit in the telling of this story (thesis). The 'truth' in a story is that which informs the listener/reader. The truth in a story is what the listener/reader takes away from the telling.

If the research presented here must be 'situated' somewhere or define its 'orientation' it would have to lie in the area of phenomenological hermeneutics (facing the east!). However, it would be preferable to say that it finds its life and truth in stories, which has enabled it to wander into the narrative of phenomenological hermeneutics. It is phenomenological to the extent that phenomenology "aims to come to a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences" (Van Manen, 1984, p.37). And it is hermeneutic in the sense that hermeneutics has a fallibilist and pluralist view of reason:

. . . fallibilist in that it believes that no truth claim can ever be immune from criticism such that there would no longer be a need to carry on the conversation of mankind; and pluralist in that it believes that there can be no single , privileged rational method for deciding upon what is true. The goal of hermeneutics is understanding, self understanding and mutual understanding or agreement. (Madison, 1988, p.2)

Nevertheless, this thesis does not find itself situated solely in phenomenological hermeneutics. It shares some of its attributes and qualities but this thesis is situated solidly in story. This thesis does not use only, or all, of the methods of research from phenomenological hermeneutics. It is story that is both the phenomenon and the method which is employed the most throughout this piece.

Hermeneutics, both the word and the interpretive method, is defined by tracing its etymological origins to the Greek God Hermes. David Smith (1991)

in his paper titled *The Hermeneutic Imagination and the Pedagogic Text* states that when we are engaged in the activity of interpreting and understanding our lives and the world we

. . . are engaging in what the Greeks called “practical philosophy”, an activity linkable to the character of Hermes in the Greek pantheon. Hermes, as well as being the deliverer of messages between the gods and from the gods to mortals on earth, was known for a number of other qualities as well, such as eternal youthfulness, friendliness, prophetic power and fertility. In a sense, all of these features are at work in the hermeneutic endeavour to this day, as the practice of interpretation attempts to show what is at work in different disciplines and, in the service of human generativity and good faith, is engaged in the mediation of meaning. There is one further aspect of Hermes that may be worth noting, namely his impudence. He once played a trick on the most venerated Greek deity, Apollo, inciting him to great rage. Modern students of hermeneutics should be mindful that their interpretations could lead them into trouble with ‘authorities’. (p. 187)

The story which David Smith alludes to in this quote is the story of the birth of Hermes and serves as the very corner stone of his place in the pantheon of the Greek gods of antiquity. That is, he is defined through this story as an eloquent and gifted speaker who can use his keen mind and naive understanding, being so new to the world, to explore the validity of the truth claims asserted at by Apollo, thereby delineating the complex nature of his power and being. Smith (1991), when defining hermeneutics by way of tracing it back to Hermes, should use the whole story rather than just

mentioning some of his characteristics and attributes, although it does serve his purpose in a limited way. The whole story of Hermes' birth as, told in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (Morford & Lenardon, 1971, pp. 169–181), gives one a clearer picture of the power of story to inform us about the nature of hermeneutics as it is purported to relate to Hermes. The herald of Zeus, the divine messenger, often delivering the dictates of Zeus himself, he is

... cunning, and occasionally violent, a trickster and a thief. So it is not surprising that he is also the patron of interpreters. Sometimes they proclaim an evident sense, like a herald; but they also use cunning, and may claim the right to violence, and glory in it. (Kermode, 1979, p.1)

The story of the birth of Hermes is also demonstrative of the use of story for creating meaning and understanding and sheds more light upon what Smith(1991) speaks of in this quote. In a sense the story more clearly demonstrates what hermeneutics is attempting to do as well as what I am attempting to do. But it also raises some interesting notions about hermeneutics and its connection to Hermes.

The story explains many things on many levels. On one level the story explains how the lyre and song came to be in the possession of Apollo. The story also explains the similarities between the two gods; Hermes is the younger and is the patron of younger persons just as hermeneutics is "young" and challenges "older" established thoughts and ideas and is seen "to be the means whereby they effect a necessary subversion of the old metaphysics" (Kermode, 1979, p. 1). Hermes is the patron of travellers just as students of hermeneutics are travellers in the work toward understanding and meaning.

He is also the conductor of souls to the underworld, to the banks of the river Styx where the ferryman Charon might take them across in order to enter Hades. Hermes travels between several worlds of understanding and meaning, “between the dead and the living, but also between the latent and the manifest (god, one might say, of the third ear), and between the text, whether plain or hermetic, and the dying generations of its readers” (Kermode, 1979, p. 2).

Hermes, it seems, speaks a ‘truth’ in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*; he also exemplifies the nature of truth in hermeneutics where there is no absolute truth-claim but rather the desire for “understanding, self understanding and mutual understanding or agreement” (Madison, 1988, p. 2). Story seeks understanding and we see this in the story of Hermes, as well as in the story of Hermeneutics and its connection to Hermes. The goal of story is understanding and meaning, however, it is not understanding of a fixed or static nature, rather, it is more of a generative and creative kind.

In this thesis I write stories about some of my early childhood experiences and juxtapose them with stories of my early experiences as a teacher. The stories are both the story as lived and the story as told (phenomenon), and the story described and the story of the experience (method) (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

So why is this story worth telling? And is it appropriate for a thesis in Curriculum Studies authored by someone who is a storyteller and a teacher?

And what will it do to inform me as a storyteller and as a teacher, and how will it inform others? Florence Krall (1988) quoting Gadamer said:

...our past influences us in 'everything we want, hope for, or fear in the future', and only as we are 'possessed' by our past are we 'opened to the new, the different, the true'. (p. 467)

Krall (1988) goes on to pinpoint the answer to the question of whether this story is appropriate or not. She states:

The proposition presented here is that thoughtful recovery of one's educational experiences can be an effective method for identifying and understanding broad curricular and pedagogical issues. ( p. 467)

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) point out that they regard

... teacher's narratives [stories] as metaphors for teaching-learning relationships. In understanding ourselves and our students educationally, we need an understanding of people with a narrative of life experiences. Life's narratives [stories] are the context for making meaning of school situations. ( p. 3)

And finally, the telling of my story as an effective way of constructing meaning and understanding about "broad curricular and pedagogical issues" also demonstrates the importance of story. Krall (1988) quoting Edith Cobb points out that she [Cobb]

. . . concluded that creative potential and genius reside in all of us, develop potentially during the latency period in our childhood, and take form when we express our self-knowledge in some external way. 'Our individual lives,' she said 'are of enormous worth to each and every one of us and every