Noting/Negating/Negotiating Voices

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I spent two wonderful years (1987-1989) at the University of Alberta studying for the PhD degree in secondary education. Taught, and more importantly nurtured, by professors Parsons, Iveson, Oster, jagodzinski, and Craig, I was encouraged to explore and experiment. Above all I was supported in my conviction that educational theory and research need to be personal and political and prophetic, in my concern to examine the pedagogical enterprise creatively from the perspectives of autobiography and narrative and life-writing and poetry and journaling and story-making.

I am currently an assistant professor in the Department of Language Education at the University of British Columbia where I teach courses in English education, composition, communication skills, and issues of gender in language education. In my teaching and research I continue to be guided by the convictions that were nurtured at the University of Alberta.

Above all I speak and write out of my personal experiences, out of my emotions (my joy and pain), out of my understanding of myself and my world. As I respond to personal experiences in my writing and teaching, I disclose my world. I make sense of it. I reflect on people, places, and problems with personal pertinence, hoping that other people will see themselves in that personal experience, too. But this is not an easy task. While in my teaching and writing I am motivated by the desire to make stories, I am also challenged constantly by the difficulty of framing life in stories.

Beginning

What are the voices I hear/respond to/converse with when I am writing poetry? In order to examine this question, I wrote several poems and recorded my interaction with voices during the process of writing. In one of my favorite Norman Rockwell drawings, Norman Rockwell is drawing Norman Rockwell drawing as Norman Rockwell squints in a mirror at Norman Rockwell drawing. With a similar playful earnestness I listened intently to my writing and the voice(s) which operate(s) in it.

In my writing process I often like to get a block of words on the white page. I then have something concrete to react to, to question, to listen to, to expand and compress, to shape and sculpt. When I have words on

paper there is the sense of a dialogue between me and the words. The words have their own voices. I read and reread the words. I speak the words in different vocal arrangements. I listen to the words, in both the silent and the oral readings. There is no clear direction provided by the words. They do not address me, "Well, Carl, we think that you ought to employ our cousin Zeb and put some zip into the fourth line." But there is a sense in which the words speak to me and I respond, a growing conviction that one word is more effective than another, a surer confidence that decisions about lineation and structure are not only arbitrary but meaningful, or at least meaningful in their arbitrariness or arbitrary in their meaningfulness.

As I engaged in this self-reflective investigation of my writing process, I was also impressed by how significantly important time is in the process. Much of my writing is waiting, sitting and waiting for something to happen. And the waiting is not like waiting for a bus which almost invariably arrives on time. I wait and I do not know how long I will need to wait, or even if the waiting will be rewarded. But the waiting is never in silence because voices are abuzz all around me—remembered voices, biographical voices, editorial voices, doubting voices, traces of every voice I have ever heard or read or spoken or written.

Dialogue One

POTATOES
And my father met Cyril
outside the Caribou Tavern,
Sorry, Cyril, to hear about the old man.
Cyril's eyes blue like the bottle caps
on Blue Star beer smiled
at my father not smiling
(it's not every day a man dies).
Yes, Skipper, he's gone, gone for good
and you know, he left a whole sack
of potatoes and nobody to eat them.

How to begin? There is no image, no smell, no word, no voice, or more specifically none that demands attention as paramount—noisy din, cacophony, collage, amorphous shapeless field. Where to begin? Better to plunge!

As I write I remember my father telling me the story of meeting Cyril. I remember Cyril, too, and as strange as his response seems—irony? parody? idiosyncrasy?—I can hear Cyril's words. And I am reminded of how readily I expect people to behave in a prescribed way in the face of death. I am reminded of how quickly I presuppose responses. I am reminded of how frequently I am surprised when my expectations and presuppositions are contravened. I am reminded of how circumscribed is what I know, see, hear, speak, write, how demarcated and divided and made possible by my expectations and presuppositions.

Have I recorded a conversation between two men or reconstructed a conversation or invented a conversation?

I cut a line after line seven ("and smiling is hardly appropriate") because an internal editorial voice warns: Don't be moralistic. And the internal editorial voice is really the voice of the editor of an Ontario journal who recently accepted a poem for publication but wanted the last line chopped. He wrote that he thought too many last lines are moralistic. I wrote him that I thought the last line was whimsical and that I now realized that moralism and whimsy are essentially the same. I also wrote that he could chop the last line, he could chop any line he didn't like. "I don't care," I wrote. But I do care. I do not want the last line cut, but more than preserving the poem with the last line, inviolable to cuts, I want to publish the poem, and if publishing means chopping the last line, I will chop the last line, and what I heard as whimsy remains labeled (for one reader at least) moralism. And now, as I write another poem that editor—almost a stranger, I know only that he is middle-aged and a poet—stands over my shoulder and whispers warnings about moralism sufficiently loudly that I chop a line in the draft of this new poem.

I also change "bag" to "sack" in the second last line. I do not recall what word my father used when telling the story. Bag is now the more commonly used term, but Cyril, I think, would have used sack—the term used when potatoes were bought in 50-pound jute sacks. My playing with the choice of "bag" or "sack" is motivated by a desire to create an authentic voice. But how can I hope to create an authentic voice? I haven't heard Cyril since I was a boy; I have no memory of his speaking voice. And if I did, how would I transcribe it or re-present it or actualize it on paper? What accent, what tone, what face and body expressions complemented the words? I do not know and I cannot know. My quest for authenticity is in vain because it is undiscoverable.

It is not only Cyril's voice I cannot know. My father's voice telling the story several months ago is also forgotten. I recall only the line about the sack of potatoes. But my father is a fine storyteller, with a sense of timing, of pacing, of humor, of mimicry. I can hear his storytelling voice and I want it to inform the poem, but the poem has little of his voice. As I read it I hear his voice, but as others read it, how can they be expected to hear his voice? Instead, will they hear the voices of storytellers they know? Will they hear any voices at all?

As I write and rewrite the poem, a chorus of voices is heard—Cyril's, my father's, the Ontario editor's. And especially the narrator's voice. This narratorial voice is one often heard in my poems—whimsical, sardonic, distant, puzzled. At least that is the way I hear the voice, but I am intimately related to the voice and perhaps I hear it the way I do only because I bring much background experience to hearing the voice.

How to continue? First, how to begin is unknown. Then the words come, slowly and quickly, flowing and stuttering, and then only a trickle. How to continue? A sense that continuing is important, that awash in an ocean of textuality I could drown if I do not at least tread water.

Now come the harsh voices: You've just wasted the morning writing drivel. Your words are as welcome as moose droppings. Who needs them? Wouldn't you prefer to be hiking near the Atlantic Ocean? There are more important subjects to write about than a man who spends too much time playing darts in a tavern and can't even express an appropriate sentiment about his father's death. There is love and hate and war and immortality and God and disaster. Of course you have written about death—that's a big subject, but is it big in your poem? Everything seems so little in your poem, debased, reduced, rendered insignificant.

How to end? The nagging, relentlessly prodding voices: Always wanting to give up. See Carl run. See Carl run. For a mile or two. See Carl give up. See Carl give up before the finish line. Always wanting another cup of coffee. Always wanting to close off, to grow silent again, to pretend that you've written what you wanted to write. How many words did you need? Count your words, one by one, thank the heavenly muse for every one. Your problem is that you can't sit still long enough. Why don't you rush to the word processor right now and punch in these pages of piddling pooh, print them perfectly, and praise plentifully. Sure, recall the advice that a poem is never finished, only abandoned, and abandon this one.

How to continue? During the entire process of writing the poem I hear the voices of the curmudgeons in the balcony: Why is the poem so simple, so straightforward? Why doesn't he experiment more?

Reader's Digest would probably print this maudlin sentiment. And my reply to the curmudgeons: Stuff it, mumbled under my breath, but offered with a smile, Thank you for your advice.

Dialogue Two

A COFFIN AND A CHEVY

My father bought the '53 Chevy
(maroon and new), drove my brother and me
out of the city along the Trans Canada Highway
to cut a Christmas tree, parked on the shoulder,
left my brother and me, sank into the snow
like quicksand (my brother, only four, laughing)
before he was swallowed by the trees like darkness
and I was laughing at my brother laughing
and my father waved a hand, his mouth a tight line
and my brother jumped up and down in the back seat
while I pretended to drive away (for help)
but went nowhere and my father didn't come back,
my brother full of fear, no longer laughing,
and the air was thick with chewy toffee,

my father gone, my brother going crazy,
so I grabbed the ice scraper and jabbed holes
in the maroon velvet over me like the inside
of a coffin, no escape, and my father returned,
creature from the snow lagoon, bearing a tree,
a wide grin where the line had been,
and the car was a car, not a coffin,
my father was alive, my brother was laughing,
and my father looked at the neat triangular flags
hanging from the ceiling of his new Chevy,
said nothing, drove back to the city
in a Chevy once more a coffin.

This morning I have drunk too much coffee. The telephone rang—a wrong number. The mailman brought another bill from the public library for overdue books.

A lonely morning. I am growing tired of solitude. My mood is gray—a splendid mood for writing a poem. I once wrote a story that began: "On the morning after, I walked on the bluff above the harbor smooth like polished steel and the houses clinging to the rocky hills of Corner Brook were reflected in the still water and everywhere I looked my world was upside down and though not unfamiliar I felt only dizziness as I walked upright in an upside down world. Or was I upside down in an upright world?" In a writing class the story was criticized with scathing abandon, and I rewrote it and rewrote it until I was convinced that I wasn't improving it. So I saved the first two sentences (which I still liked and which the writing teacher said he liked) and discarded the rest. Now I want to use those sentences in a poem. I also have a scrap of writing in my writing-in-process folder that reminds me of an incident I'd like to write about. The scrap is: "My father bought the '53 Chevy car, maroon and new, and drove my brother and me out of the city, along the Trans Canada Highway to cut a Christmas tree."

Instead of beginning with freewriting, I plan to use these two scraps of writing and to build around them a poem. When I ask, How can I combine these scraps? I almost hear an audible voice proposing that the narrator's father is gravely ill, that the narrator is concerned about his father, that the narrator recounts the past and is filled with sadness and regret. It is not too surprising that the narrator's mood mirrors my own this morning.

But I am surprised by the relative ease with which I am reclaiming scraps of writing and utilizing them in another context. I am obviously involved in decontextualizing and recontextualizing, but it seems a remarkably unsingular operation, in fact like the writing process as I typically know it. I am certainly not hearing a spontaneous, inspiring voice telling me what to write. Even as I write, I am feeling the effects of my gray mood dissipating, to be replaced by a mood of amusement, almost exhilaration.

I am enthused with my sense of self-conscious discovery and control, self-consciously enthused. I am looking over my shoulder while I write about an I who I manipulate and/or who manipulates me. Mutual manipulation, interdependence, both speaking and spoken, both writing and written. My voice(s) are expressed/disclosed/manufactured/constrained/performed in language, and in language I hear voices (mine and not mine) expressed/ disclosed/manufactured/constrained/performed. But for all the tide of playfulness I enjoy as I listen to the voices of my evolving writing and my voice as I speak aloud to myself and inner voices that are rattling noisily in my thinking, I am still aware of a darker side. Over breakfast I had an unpleasant conversation with my son, and our voices—whining and reproachful—still fill the air, a stark reminder that a father-son relationship seldom operates smoothly. And those voices are like echoes of other voices that can still be heard across a few decades, my father's voice and my voice in hot arguments that eventually ceased in silence.

As I reflect on the writing of this poem, I am aware that I am writing out of self, out of personal experience, out of events and emotions that are important to me. What is the effect of the poem on me personally? Why do I feel emotional (almost a few tears)? I do not remember feeling much remorse about the incident—one of those stupid things that children invariably do. Perhaps there is something larger here. It seems that I want to say something to somebody. I want to be didactic. I want to act with decision and significance. I want to improve the world. At the same time I do not expect any success. Relations with my father, relations with my son, relations between fathers and sons will continue to be chaotic affairs, full of comedy and tragedy, and all the poems in the world will not change that. Yet I still insist on writing my poem—a kind of urinating in the wind with a shout amid the din. For perhaps what remains most important is refusing to lapse into silence, an antechamber to invisibility and nonexistence.

But for all my gray mood leading to pontifical proclamations, I still draw back from some of the directions that I might pursue in the poem. My initial enthusiasm for pursuing a narrative line in which the speaker's father is dying and the speaker is filled with regret and resolution to amend his past sins wanes. I do not want to suffocate the voices of humor, eccentricity, and playfulness with a heavy-handed sentimentalism, with an easy appeal to sympathy. In the poem there is a quirky narratorial voice that invites readers to help evoke the story by recalling other similar incidents, incarnating the essence of the story with the flesh of other stories. So I decide to delete the lines about the upside down world reflected in the harbor (I can always use the lines in some other poem) and to delete the dying father story. I also ignore all voices urging me to end the poem with a comment like "I want to tell him I'm sorry about the Chevy, but I won't." I even change the last lines from "said nothing, drove beside the Humber River/back to the city in silence like

death" to "said nothing, drove back to the city/in a Chevy once more a coffin" in order to sustain the playful mood, in order to avoid the persistent inclination to pontification, in order to negate the sonorous voices preaching that a poem deals with "big" issues and deserves words/themes like silence and death.

In the process I learn anew that writing opens up spaces for voices to be voiced and that as an author I authorize some voices and do not authorize other voices.

Dialogue Three

BUZZ
My father's best
friend Buzz
wanted to give
up working
in the mill and
become a dentist,
wanted it so
bad he couldn't
think about anything
else until he was
sure everybody
was plotting
against him
scheming to make
sure he could
never be
a rich dentist
and he smothered
his wife under
a pillow till
she wasn't breathing
and got sent
to the Waterford
where he's been
sitting in
a corner
reading
for the last
twelve years
and now
he's getting out
and my father
hopes
he doesn't
come to visit.

I like the colloquial voice, the matter-of-fact voice, the amoral voice, the straightforward voice.

I want a tone of breathlessness, an unfolding trail of words, one long sentence in short lines that end arbitrarily so that the reader is pushed on and on without pause. Then the period at the end punctuates the conclusion. Not only do the words cease spilling out, but the period is a sign that clearly announces the end, a wall to bang up against after tumbling through the words.

The poem was initiated in a freewriting exercise when I wrote a block of words with no attention to lineation or structure. Pleased with the effort, I rewrote the words in shorter lines, and then decided to rewrite it with even shorter lines. In some freewriting exercises I produce a block of words and then, like a sculptor, chop and chop away at the words until I am satisfied with the poem. For this poem the words came quickly and easily, and were like a lump of modeling clay to be shaped, extended, rolled, played with until I was satisfied with the shape.

Do my changes in the poem from block of words to a final version really achieve the effects of breathlessness I suggest? If so, how or why? What do my changes in lineation and structure do? Is it a convention that short lines signify a fast reading pace or a slow reading pace? I have chosen to end many lines after a modifier or a preposition or an auxiliary verb, thereby compelling the reader to rush on to the next line—a teleological momentum is generated.

Will other readers of the poem respond to lineation and punctuation and structure in the same way I respond? I doubt it. Does that mean, then, that other readers will hear (a) different voice(s) than I hear? Very likely. I hope so.

In the poem am I playing around with the tragic/catastrophic events of people's lives? The poem deals with insanity, murder, incarceration, broken relationships, fear, unfulfilled hopes. The words are impressed on the paper, flecks of carbon stamped by steel hammers. The words hint at a story (or stories), just a few stark details out of more than a decade of living for a family and a neighborhood. The words are no more than an invitation to readers to write the stories, to incarnate the words in an activity of conjuring, constructing, producing, actualizing, visualizing, identifying, imagining.

I do not want to be perceived as a writer who belittles human tragedy and catastrophe; I do not want to be perceived as a writer who sensationalizes human tragedy and catastrophe. But do I have any control over the way readers respond to my writing? Some? Much? Not much? I suspect not much. When a reader conjures (a genius summoning a genie) a voice or a persona speaking the words of the poem, the reader is significantly responsible for the voice(s) he or she hears. The reader is guided by the text as a series of signs to make meaning, but the meaning-making, rather than textually prescribed, is idiosyncratic and unpredictable.

But in the same way that I acknowledge the reader's privilege and responsibility for unique productions in reading, I would like the reader to acknowledge the writer's privilege and responsibility for unique productions in writing. Instead of responding to a poem by interrogating the writer, Did you *really* say/think/do *that*? or, I can't believe you are *that* way, the reader could recognize the writer's distance/difference from his or her writing.

The poem is enigmatic, coy, promising and holding back, tantalizing, playing. Or is it?

Even though I like the voice(s) in the poem, I am still hesitant to call the poem finished. A critical voice insists that the language is too plain, too unembellished, too prosaic. And I respond to the voice(s) by reading and rereading the poem. But my efforts to make changes ("become a dentist" to "be a dentist"; "so bad he couldn't think about anything else" to "more than anything else"; "to give up working in the mill" to "stop working in the mill") do not quell the critical voice(s). After further readings I remain surprised that I still want to make changes in the poem, even though none of the changes I make are satisfying. Perhaps the poem is weak and not worth any further effort. Or perhaps I am conscience-ridden because the poem came too easily. Perhaps I hear a critical voice full of neurotic compulsion that I can't gain control over. Perhaps I need to live with the critical voice(s), using what is useful, ignoring what is not.

Continuing

In my writing process I converse with myself, listen to the evolving writing, respond to the voices I hear, take notes on my ongoing dialogue with my writing, spar with internal and external voices of criticism and judgment, convene the voices of other writers for a sing-song, court the voices of memory, investigate how voice is constructed and influenced by the choice of diction, structure, and lineation, acknowledge how voices can be debilitating and empowering, confess how growth in confidence as a writer (and perhaps as a person) depends on writing through the voices of negation, explore the question of the source of voice, understand how writing involves the transcription of voices, the manipulation of voices, the marriage of voices, the dissemination of voices, the quelling of voices, the nurturing of voices, the celebration of voices.