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Cover Page Footnote

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Writing the River: Imagination & “Academic” Writing

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In her book *The Making of Meaning*, Ann E. Berthoff (1981) writes that “Ideas in any field are not only what we think *about*; they are what we think *with*” (p. 4) and we should deploy imagination -- reclaiming it “as a name for the active mind” (p. 4) -- as a method of identifying what our ideas are and how they work for us. This notion runs parallel to those ideas proposed by Tuchman (1981) -- that imagination can help us stretch beyond the facts to find a

missing link to the “why of what happened” (p. 47) -- and Richardson (2005) -- that writing is itself a method of inquiry (p. 959).

In the early nineties, as a way to bring imagination back to the forefront of their college composition classes, Richard L. Graves and Susan M. Becker (1994) developed a writing workshop they hoped would tap into their students’ collective unconscious, supplying the group with a single topic that each student would then grapple with based on personal experience. They describe the results in “Let the River Run: Exploring Personal Archetypes through Writing.” Since the Saco River has appeared in many of my own narratives, and because I wanted to test Laurel Richardson’s (2005) assertion that writing is a method of inquiry -- “a way of finding out about yourself and your topic” (p. 959) -- I decided to give their prompt a try. The following narrative, an exploration into my earliest experience with the river, is the result.

The Saco River runs from the White Mountains to the shore in Maine – and there are many wild and beautiful spots along its path, but there is one in particular that holds significance for me. There are two waterfalls -- rushing, roaring things most of the time, dead calm at others -- that sit side by side like two old married people who haven’t spoken in years but who belong beside one another; near the base of these two dams is a quiet place, secluded and always cool in the summertime. My grandparents’ home was separated from the river bank by a few skips across a narrow road, and I learned how to swim in this gentle elbow of the river; first I dabbled in the shallows, my small child’s soul delighted and shocked by the water’s cold and inviting wetness, and then later I made daring leaps into it from a great height.

On an early June day when I was about twelve, I found myself sitting alone in my grandparents' kitchen; they had gone to the Russell Pasture to work in the garden, and I was supposed to be doing homework. I was writing out answers to insipid questions concerning a story I'd read, and I was bored. The windows over the kitchen sink were open; the sound of the river was in my ears, the smell of it in my nose. At that moment, I was inspired: this day would mark my first swim of the season. I put on an old bathing suit and hurried out the back door, grabbing a towel off the clothesline on my way across the yard. The day was brilliant and warm and, with a sense of sublime freedom, I left my books behind me in the cool dark kitchen. Crossing the road, I felt a momentary twinge of guilt, knowing my grandmother would be anxious if she thought I was swimming alone so early in the season when the water was still high and rapid; but the pull of the river was strong and I banished such thoughts to the back of my heedless brain as I descended the easy slope to the river's edge. I stood there feeling the spray on my face and watching all that water spiraling in great whorls fifteen feet below me, and I just knew how cold it would be. I held my breath and wondered if I would really leap in, as though I had no control of my actions, but then from somewhere deep within me came the impetus to jump, and I took the plunge.

The water, cold and dark, folded over me and drew me down and then even further down. I beat wildly against the current, struggling to claw my way to the surface. But something was wrong: I couldn't break free from the river's grasp. I was being sucked along and my fighting and flailing were useless. I was terrified, but clear-thinking. I adjusted my body in the current so that I was propelled forward, and then I relaxed, allowing the river to take me where it might, and just hoping that it wouldn't leave me at the bottom for all eternity. I

opened my eyes; it was dark and I was moving fast – faster than I'd ever before moved in the river. Bubbles streamed alongside my face, and I wondered with detached interest how long I could hold my breath.

As suddenly as I'd been taken, the river released me, spewing me upward, and I was startled and confused by the dazzle of the sky and the warm breath of the air. I had come a long way from the dams, and I was now bobbing down the river's middle. In the relative calm of this section of the river, it took me very little time to work my way to the bank; once there, I crawled into the weeds and lay shivering in the sun. I was amazed at how gently, once I stopped struggling, the river treated me. Surely, if I had continued to fight it, I would have drowned.

Along with that experience, my grandfather taught me to respect the river. Wearing a soiled undershirt with wiry gray hairs poking out of the v-neck, my grandfather used to sit with me on the riverbank and, although he never swam himself, he indulged my need to maintain contact with the water. Though normally reticent, my grandfather would often grow loquacious while we sat in that cool summertime spot with the leaves of spindly poplar trees above our heads echoing the rush of water. Nature imitates itself. He told me stories about the river and the people he'd seen come and go in this small town. My grandfather, though not prone to superstition, believed in -- and repeated to me as a cautionary tale -- a curse placed upon early white settlers by the native people who were far more in tune with its rhythms than I could ever hope to be.

Narrative was my grandfather's art, and the nearby pounding of water-over-the-dams created a backdrop of sound to his stories about people and about life, and they were vivid

with details that made them impossible to forget. His stories were unbreakable threads woven into the patterns of our conversations and often ended with some sort of epiphany that would linger, suspended over our heads like the voices of children playing outdoors, while we silently pondered its meaning. Telling stories of my own became as natural to me as swimming in the river – while I was aware of the subtle intricacies of the task, it came easily. Mostly, I told my stories to old people, my frequent companions as a child growing up in rural Maine, and they were the perfect audience.

Later on, after I learned to write, I recorded my stories in the rare notebooks I found in the backs of neglected desk drawers. When the story was good, the words came quickly, and my hand, yet unaccustomed to the newly acquired skill of writing, would stumble over letters and punctuation. I wanted nothing more than to record the flow of words as they came to me. Buoyed by the current of imagination, I could sit alone for hours, drifting wherever the narrative took me.

Somewhere along the way, I was denied the easy ebb and flow of words. In school, there were protocols and rules that felt like too-tight clothing. Public school, it seemed to me, was all about boxes, square and rectangular boxes. The schools, the classrooms, the desks – all contrived sharp lines, straight and rigid. The report card I clutched at the end of every year showed a grid next to subjects and behavioral expectations, each box displaying a neatly printed letter or number penned in red ink. Even the class photos depicted our smiling boy and girl faces, each wedged into a tiny square, each separated from its adjacent neighbors by white borders. We were like the classroom aquariums, and every classroom seemed to have an aquarium – one with dull looking fish that swam from corner to corner, one with a drab guinea

pig or two, one with a lonely hamster burrowed beneath mounds of musty shavings; but more often than not, the aquariums were empty, dusty placeholders in dingy corners.

The unrelenting geometry of it all made me feel deflated. But I was determined. There simply had to be more than what the teachers were telling me. Reading and writing assignments were like the school's weekly trips to the Y: it was fun to romp in the pool with the other kids, but it wasn't the real thing, and I knew it. The chlorinated water, confined within the limited and prescribed boundaries of the pool, was safe and easy; there was no challenge and no risk. But the old people in my life and the river were still there. I continued to sit at the river's edge with my grandfather and, although he repeated stories I'd already heard, they were still alive, and I listened avidly, thrilled and delighted, swept up in the eddy of words and stories, stories and words.

Graves and Becker (1994) note that their students' compositional discoveries fell into a handful of archetypes: River as Metaphor for Life, River as Confidante, River as Physical Entity, River as Healer, River as Teacher, etc. (pp. 60-62). Perhaps because the topic of writing was already in my mind, it didn't take long for my own extended metaphor to emerge.

I have always used writing as a means of discovery -- of myself and my place in the world and also of thinking. Unlike many people whose ideas seem to spring effortlessly from their minds to their lips, my ideas take a more meandering path, and I rarely sort them out fully without exploring them on the page first. Imagination, then, is crucial to my own understanding of my own ideas and thinking and words and language are a natural extension of that understanding. "Writing the River" -- in the most informal of capacities -- validates imagination

as a tool for discovery. Until I sat down with nothing more than the seed of the Saco River in the palm of my mind, I had no way of articulating writing as a natural, wild, and even dangerous endeavor. The exercise bears out what Sondra Perl (1994) observed in "A Writer's Way of Knowing," that writing can bring out from what is unformed "a great clarity, a fresh articulation, and at times a creative surprise" (p. 77).

I could extend the metaphor even further into my undergraduate and graduate studies, where I became -- unknowingly -- fully inculcated, *a la* Patricia Nelson Limerick (2015), by the myth of academia. Like Limerick's buzzards, my feet were "wired to the branch" (p. 204), and I reached always for the "unintelligible prose" I thought revealed my own "sophisticated mind" (p. 199). To lean on my own metaphor, I had drifted far-far away from the ebb and flow of the river that raised me only to find myself smack in the middle of the rectangular confines of a rigid and chlorinated pool. I should have known something was amiss when I shared my work with my grandfather and he mistook the poetry I was writing *about* for what I was actually writing. He could identify with the poetry, which was vibrant and alive, and so he assumed that must be *my* writing. The prose was turgid and strange, unrecognizable as an effort at communicating anything authentic, and I was embarrassed to disabuse my grandfather of his error.

Emerging from that miasma of academic prose took time, and I credit one professor -- a mentor, really -- who gave me the first nudge. In response to one of my final papers he wrote that I had mastered the form, that I could probably write any academic paper "upside down in a snowbank," but that it was "time to go beyond that." At the time, I had little inkling as to what he meant, but it was a phrase that stuck with me, pronouncing itself time and again over the

course of my career. It echoed in my ear when I first started teaching college writing and celebrated with my students when they conjured a just-right metaphor for an idea they were struggling to articulate; when I presented a paper at my first conference and found myself surrounded by the echo of important-sounding but empty jargon related to cultural criticism; when I worked with teachers on their learning autobiographies and found myself humbled and in awe of the depth of their intelligence and dedication. And the phrase has been my constant companion on my doctoral journey, where thinking about qualitative research and its entwined relationship with writing has been uppermost in my mind.

While I agree with Limerick (2015) that we might in fact be facing a writing crisis in higher education, that we have cultivated an attitude that the only acceptable form of writing is that which obscures and obfuscates, I think the greater crime lies in not using writing as a way to dis-cover thinking and to nurture creativity. The Academy has focused on writing as the vehicle for a product, one that confirms and displays intellectual prowess through inscrutable prose rather than as a tool for understanding and for connecting with the human beings reading at the other end, or even the qualitative researcher's participants.

Just as I used the river here as a metaphor for writing/learning, Richardson (2005) suggests that "metaphor...is the backbone of social science writing" (p. 962), a way to make discoveries and truths plain for our audience because figurative language hits us where it counts, "in our bodies" (p. 962). And yet, social sciences, according to Richardson, suffer from "acute and chronic passivity: passive-voiced authors, passive 'subjects'" (p. 963). But should this be the case in qualitative research? Our subjects are anything but passive; they are living, breathing, sovereign beings. I would argue that we are duty-bound to present them as more

than one-dimensional, that they deserve our best attempts to portray them and their circumstances in all their shaggy messiness. I found this to be true in trying to capture the rich and complicated life of the hospice nurse I interviewed. Even in the interview, I felt her life pressing against the unnatural confines of the situation; her life was so much *more*, and the boundless energy of it could hardly be contained in the square box of the interview format. To be sure, the human lives we seek to represent deserve more than the "censorious hold of science writing" (Richardson, p. 960).

The pull of the river is strong, drawing me back to it time and time again, reminding me of who I am even while allowing me to forget myself. The constant murmur of the river recalls the stories of my grandfather and all their wisdom; the swell of it every spring reminds me of imagination's own mystery. Neither the river nor imagination is easy: each is strange and unpredictable, requiring a strong sense of self to know when to use it and when to let it take control. But the richness of its possibilities cannot be understated. "Imagination must be rescued from the creativity corner and returned to the center of all that we do" (Berthoff, 1981, p. 27).

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