

## "What is a Word Worth?"

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One of the lovely and maddening things about writing memoir and personal essay is that, very often, every tricycle wreck and romantic break-up takes on epic proportions in the mind of the writer. The challenge we face is how to bring ourselves to an awareness not only of the "appropriate" or "meaningful" moment onto which we might cast a writerly eye, but to a sense of how the particular moment or event can be elevated into the realm of literature. To take a memory that remains with us because of its physical, emotional, or mental intensity and impose upon it greater meaning, to bring it out of the personal and into the universally relevant in the context of the human condition, is the GREAT LEAP we must make in order to succeed in the writing of personal history.

Often, in my opening remarks to a workshop, I will discuss my sense of what constitutes Literature-with-a-Capital-L. Risky territory, I know, but it gives the group a common base from which to start. I list a series of considerations that I believe are essential to the art and craft of literary writing:

- 1) The writing should demonstrate an awareness of the genre's tradition.
- 2) The author should demonstrate an awareness of--and ability to deconstruct--his or her personal, familial, and cultural mythologies.
- 3) Environmental elements should be observed and explored, including elements of landscape/setting, myth, religion, culture, and politics.
- 4) The author should demonstrate an awareness of audience.
- 5) There should be an intentional awareness and use of craft, including structure (linear, spatial, etc.), syntax, tense, point of view, voice, and tone.
- 6) The language, whether simple or complex, must sing.
- 7) There should be inspired and appropriate use of figures of speech and imagery.
- 8) The writing should take risks at the level of story, structure, imagery, voice, and/or language.
- 9) The author must bring his or her intellect to bear upon the narrative.
- 10) These elements together should produce a piece that demonstrates complexity, narrative layering, and resonance.

The last two of these points are the ones I would like to focus on for the purposes of this discussion: complexity, layering, and resonance are often achieved by the act of "bringing the intellect to bear."

Complex personal narrative--personal writing which demonstrates layering and resonance—can sometimes be achieved through the weaving together of two (or more) separate narrative lines. One example is Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge*, in which the author braids together her family's history, the aftermath of their exposure to nuclear testing, her vocation as a naturalist, her Mormon heritage, and the flooding of the Great Salt Lake. Chris Offutt's memoir, *The Same River Twice*, is another book which

incorporates more than one story line: the narrative of his coming of age, and a paralleling narrative of his wife's pregnancy and his own impending fatherhood. The structure is very methodical: one chapter takes us a step farther into the coming-of-age narrative, the next chapter a step farther into the fatherhood narrative, until finally, at the book's conclusion, the two narratives meet. Even as he relates the scenes and action of the story (the *horizontal* movement), Chris interweaves elements from every conceivable field: history, geology, anthropology, myth (*vertical* movement). What I most admire about Chris' work is the way he melds his personal history to the history of the place, his evolution to the evolution of life—how he brings them out of their separate spheres and into a shared universe with his use of resonating imagery, mutual language, and associative thought. He connects his individual experience to a larger current of thought and meaning.

In this writing prompt, the assignment is to pick a word that will provide a starting point for the melding of personal experience to intellectual contemplation. The word might be a noun ("Parachuting," let's say), although it can also be a verb ("To Fly") or an adjective ("Pretty"). Write three-to-five developed and detailed scenes from personal (or shared) experience that revolve around this word. Write these scenes, at least initially, in the present tense, which I find lends itself to a more focused and immediate remembrance of the moment or event. Most often, these scenes are ordered chronologically, although they may be framed by scenes that take place in the "true" present—the authorial "now."

Next, contemplate the word. Consider the word as it exists OUTSIDE individual experience. Research the word's derivation; its etymological history; its presence in historical and popular culture; its appearance in film, art, television, music; its religious significance; its mythological roots. Write two-to-four sections (short or long) in which you bring your "intellect to bear" upon the word. These contemplative sections should then be interjected between the scenes, so that the final essay takes on an A/B/A/B/A rhythm and looks like this:

Scene (white space) Contemplation (white space) Scene (white space) Contemplation (white space)  
Scene...

Ideally, the contemplative sections will be ordered in such a way as to resonate with the particular scenes coming before and after, thereby bringing memory out of the realm of anecdote and into the larger realm of shared history and thought. The chosen word itself takes on greater, metaphorical meaning. This combination also represents the "action and thought" that is necessary to any good writing—the remembered that leads to the "imaginative leap."

One Japanese student wrote a moving essay titled "Bath," in which she records her memories revolving around the ritual of the bath in her native culture, interspersed with scholarly contemplation of the history and significance of the bath, both in Japan and in other cultures. The scenes themselves unfold into the story of a young girl and her mother as they move from the comfort of shared experience and expectation into the more difficult terrain of individuality and separation, ending with the young woman, now in America, lying in the narrow tub, contemplating the maturation of her own body and the maternal, nurturing properties of water.

Anne MacAlpin Caylor wrote an essay in response to this prompt about her father (*Talking River Review*, Winter 1997). After the initial drafts of the essay, titled "Bagpipes," Anne found that by editing for flow and transition—leaving out a scene, moving a point of contemplation, combining sections—she was able to give the essay greater unity and tighter development. (This is often the case with these essays: the exercise works to inspire a draft whose structure can then be made more subtle to better serve the essay's goals.) The essay begins with a scene in the present, in which Anne is practicing the bagpipes while

walking the beach of her family's lakeside cabin:

*I feel the presence of both my parents in this place. The memories have smells here--in the pines, the woodpile, the shin-tangle growing in sunny spots, bacon frying on the wood cookstove, the musty window seats where blankets, sheets and towels are stored, the hand-made tool cupboard smelling of leather, old metal, peanuts for the chipmunks. I hear my parents in the sounds, the ashes of yesterday's blaze scraped through the stove's grate and the crackle of day's first fire. I hear them in the records from the twenties that they danced to when young. We play them every summer on the same 1910 wind-up Victrola that they used. Memories hide in the dusty cover of hundreds of murder mysteries, the favorite Rex Stouts and Agatha Christie's marked in Father's handwriting at the back, "Good one, surprised me again." I remember my father in the splash of cold water hauled from the pump--hear him call out that fresh spring water is on the table. I remember my mother in the endless sand swept from the floors, the cheerful curtains at the windows, the collection of antique choppers on the wall behind the stove, huckleberry pies in the oven, one side too dark from the uneven heat. And although I can't divest either parent from this place, I play for my dad alone. He is the Scot. And when I hear Scot, I hear bagpipes.*

She then takes us into a section that considers the origin and history of the bagpipes as well as her personal connection to the instrument:

*The Great Highland Bagpipes, or Piob Mor, were pipes of war. When the Highlanders weren't fighting invaders from sea or land, they fought each other--clan against clan.... We were told of the oppressive English, and my Scottish ancestry fought the English heritage from my mother right there at the table, the tatties and neeps claiming indigestion with the corned beef.... It was all set up then, so that when I heard the bagpipes in person, tears started and adrenaline surged.*

Although Anne had always been aware of her heritage, not until researching the word "bagpipes" did she learn the details of the instrument's etymological, political, and cultural significance. She was then able to tie this larger history to the particular details of her individual memory and experience. Finally, what we see is that the bagpipes are what tie her to her roots, as well as to her father, who is dying and for whom she will play the pipes one last time:

*I laid the pipes in his bony lap. The wind was brisk and chilly, and he had a blanket covering him. He stroked the African blackwood of the drones, blow pipe and chanter, almost reverently. He asked if the trim were ivory. I hated to tell him, "No, ivory was outlawed and this is synthetic." He talked about the different weavings of the MacAlpin plaid.*

*"Our plaid is beautiful, isn't it?" he asked. "This must be the modern weave. Tell me again how you got these. Play me one more tune."*

*It was the only time I played for him. He died two years later, and after his funeral, another bagpiper piped him out of church and, after the graveside prayers, piped my father's interment. We toasted him with fine Scotch whiskey and let the strange music fill our ears. I could not play for him then, but one day I'll go back to the Notre Dame cemetery where he lies with my mother.... Houses line the southern boundary; the golden dome and basilica's steeples are visible through the tree tops. Their grave is at the back, giving me a good slow march under the sheltering elms and oaks. Playing as I walk, I'll have time for one full tune, gracenotes blessing it into prayer. When I get to their tombstone, I'll stand before it, face to the west. I'll play "Blue Bells of Scotland." I'll play "Auld Lang Syne." I'll play "Going Home."*

The emotion that is present in this piece resides in the vivid telling and in Anne's relationship with her father, of course, but it also touches us in other ways, ways that are necessary for story to succeed as

literature: it brings us to a sense of our own quest for identity, our losses, regrets, and nostalgias; it moves us toward an awareness of shared experience. In this way, we expand our stories and validate the writing of personal history: If done well, writing our own lives is not a selfish act but an attempt to observe and articulate our part in the larger community--to bear witness to that which connects us.