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Of Nonfiction and Time

Robert L. Root, Jr.

Let's get past terminology as quickly as we can. If you teach composition, you're already teaching nonfiction. It's one of the ditsy vagaries of our profession that when we teach poetry we call it poetry, when we teach fiction we call it fiction, and when we teach nonfiction we call it composition. Maybe we call it composition so that we won't have to feel responsible for teaching nonfiction; instead of teaching students to write essays, memoirs, personal narratives, histories—the content of published nonfiction—it may be safer to teach our students to write unpublishable assignments—five-paragraph themes, book reports, term papers, impromptu timed writing. Maybe we call it composition because, compared with the terms for the other three literary genres, the term for the fourth genre, “nonfiction,” seems inadequate, especially when it sweepingly encompasses all non-literary fact-based writing as well. But, if you think about it, “composition” is also a pretty inadequate term. Best not to think about it.

Instead, try thinking about this. In *The Country of Language* Scott Russell Sanders writes, “Surely this is what most clearly distinguishes us a species, the ability to accumulate knowledge and to pass it on” (3). Surely one of our primary motives in teaching writing at all is to help our students acquire that ability; surely our ultimate goals in teaching students to write are not merely spelling conformity, punctuation proficiency, and mastery of academic discourses like the exam essay and the library term paper; surely we want to help them achieve entry into the conversation of the larger world, not only as respondents but also as contribu-

tors to its history and thought. If that's the case, then I can suggest some ways of teaching nonfiction that draw upon the essential elements of the genre without defining or confining the form and that draw upon some of the approaches we already use in teaching composition. That is, I can suggest some teaching ideas that don't essentially change our goals in teaching writing but do perhaps change our perspective.

Among all its other uses, we use nonfiction to retrieve the past, to preserve the present, and to predict the future. Whether their purpose is creative or scholarly, literary or academic, nonfiction writers need to be able to reflect upon what they experience and what they observe and to research the content and context of what they write. That is, they need to draw upon skills good composition instruction already fosters and apply them towards writing projects that more nearly resemble the nonfiction forms surrounding them in libraries and bookstores.

As it happens, we are living in an auspicious moment for writing nonfiction. The century has turned, the new millennium begun, and we have passed through another January that reminds us—as it does every year but especially in year 2000—that the month is named for the two-faced god Janus, who looks backward and forward at the same time. I propose letting our students develop their nonfiction skills through time capsule writing, a Janus-faced series of linked writing assignments which will model the ways nonfiction is already a part of what we ask our students to do.

Writing the Past: Referential Nonfiction

It doesn't matter whether the time capsule is real or imaginary, a project for the community or the school or a project for the student within his or her family. The beginning of a new century would be a good time to look back a century, to ponder where we were a hundred years ago. I've shown students the three-hour *American Experience* program *America 1900*, a recapitulation of events at the turning of the last century, and sent them to researching events and issues from that period and their aftermath. The time capsule writing of the past I have in mind might well connect with a plan of study like that, or it could just as easily stand as part of the three-part personal writing project I'm envisioning here.

As a way of understanding their own history and also as a way of anchoring the past to concrete consequences, I would ask students to write about where their families were in 1900, what the context of their lives was like, what their ancestors (or people like their ancestors in terms of occupation, social class, community and region) were doing. I take as my model here the opening of Ian Frazier's book *Family*:

The Twentieth Century began on a Tuesday. On that day, all my great-grandparents but one were living in Ohio or Indiana. Mr. and Mrs. Harry E. Frazier and their four children lived in Indianapolis, in a neighborhood of many vacant lots and telephone poles. Mr. and Mrs. Louis W. Wickham and their three children and hired girl lived at 237 Benedict Avenue, Norwalk, Ohio. The Reverend John Bachman and his wife and two daughters lived in New Knoxville, Ohio, where he was pastor of the First German Reformed Church. Mrs. Elizabeth C. Hursh and her three grown daughters and one son lived at 86 Greenfield Street, Tiffin, Ohio; her husband, Professor O. A. S. Hursh, lay in a nearby cemetery, beneath a \$200 monument inscribed with a Latin quotation and the years, months, and days of his life.

(3)

The rest of Frazier's book is an attempt to trace his family back to the first members to arrive in America from Europe and to trace the flow of his family forward to himself and his children. The theme of the book is similar to that of *A Scattered People*, in which Gerald McFarland tries to ascertain the paths his paternal and maternal ancestors took from their landing on the east coast of the United States to his birth on the West Coast. One branch of McFarland's family happens to be related distantly to my own, and I too have been engaged in backtracking from myself and my children at the end of the 20th Century to follow the thread of circumstance that led to my particular (and no doubt peculiar) appearance on the planet. This is the story we all can tell, and every one of us can tell a different story.

This writing of the past involves research—interviewing some family members, perhaps corresponding with others, investigating census records and old newspapers and history books, and perhaps visiting specific locales and sites important for familial history. What students will be capable of discovering will depend on where their families lived in 1900 and where they live now, how close their school is to an adequate research library with holdings in local history. But local public libraries and local public offices often have the best holdings for their particular community or region. Stephen Tchudi has pointed out such likely resources as local chambers of commerce and tourism promotional groups; community history societies; the archives and files of the local newspaper; family photo albums and diaries; school yearbooks, magazines, and newspapers; senior citizens; parents, teachers, ministers, lawyers, politicians, file clerks, registrars, surveyors, public utilities workers; town and community maps; newspaper photo archives; public institutions with their archives and honor rolls; buildings; parks ("Of Road Kill" 39-40; see also Ransford; Tchudi, "Museums"). An alternative to writing up a Frazier-like report on where the student's ancestors were in 1900 is a report on what was happening in the student's home community in 1900.

Now is a good time to look back a hundred

years and figure out what the world was like for the people in our families then. The assignment can be very specific—if specific information exists somehow—and it can be very general if it doesn't, drawing on more universal and common experiences to suggest unrecorded specific lives. At the turn of the last century, my maternal grandparents lived on farms in Niagara County, New York, and my paternal grandparents lived across the state in Cooperstown. As it happens, I can be fairly specific about what they and their families were doing, but if I couldn't, I could still use research on Niagara County and Cooperstown to say something of the lives of farmers, doctors, and small business people in those communities. Moreover, given the kinds of computer technology available in homes and schools, students might also be able to illustrate their reports with scanned in or photocopied period photos, maps, and records, reinforcing their text with visual representations of family members, family activities and sites, and local landmarks. The visual materials would enhance the composing process before it also enhanced the final draft.

The project offers a number of opportunities for sharing, whether only among the students or with the public. An anthology of student writing about 1900 might be made available in a number of ways: as a school or community website, as a school or public library exhibit as a writing fair at school or library or local history site as a program for public access television. It would help students connect to one another and to their pasts; it would reinforce a comprehension both of community ties and community diversity—some families will have come to where they are in 2000 from places that were very far away, or very different, in 1900.

Writing the past in this way draws upon skills of primary and secondary research typical of nonfiction writing. It draws on available evidence and fashions it into a narrative that attempts to make a specific time and place and certain characters come to life. It is a work of historical nonfiction, a bridge between reportage and academic research, made livelier through interest and imme-

diacy but nonetheless similarly substantiated. This assignment demands analysis of documents, synthesis of evidence, documentation of research, and powers of reportorial presentation. In other words, it demands what we expect of good referential writing, writing that, in Kinneavy's terms, is essentially designed to impart information to readers. In recent nonfiction, that's what popular histories like Dava Sobel's *Longitude* and *Galileo's Daughter*, Simon Winchester's *The Professor and the Madman*, and Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* do; it's what family histories like Ian Frazier's *Family* and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* do.

Writing the Present: Expressive Nonfiction

In my composition courses I have often moved my students from personal narrative about their own experiences to either papers on the narratives passed on in their families, or historical sketches of their hometowns. For time capsule writing I want to suggest moving in reverse order, because in this report on who and where they are as the new century begins, I'd like them to be able to draw upon what they know about where they come from, a background that writing the past gives them. In the assignment about family past they are in effect digging up a century-old time capsule and burying it again. In this assignment the report in the time capsule is about the students' own lives. It's a report about a work-in-progress but one that can draw upon the earlier report as a way to think about the immediate present. If we think of our great-grandparents' lives in terms of where and how they lived, what their community, their jobs, their daily lives, their backgrounds, their ambitions were like, how can we describe our own lives in regard to exactly these same things? It is a status report on what we know about ourselves for certain: who we are, whom we are connected to, whom we choose to be with, the conditions under which we live our lives, the familiar objects of our environment, the concerns of our age and our society. We can even reflect on why our status is the way it is.

In other words, this is a personal essay, an

act of narration and exposition centered on the author's experience; it is an incomplete memoir of a life to be concluded (hopefully) a long time afterward; it adds to reporting the art of reflecting, just as we would hope to get in memoir or personal essay. This is the essay that will tell the world of 2100 who we were, because anyone who completes this assignment will very likely not complete the 21st Century, when the start of the 22nd would be an occasion to open the time capsule.

E. B. White, in "About Myself," provides one model of this kind of status report:

I am a man of medium height. I keep my records in a Weis Folder Re-order Number 8003. The unpaid balance of my estimated tax for the year 1945 is item 3 less the sum of items 4 and 5. My eyes are gray. My Selective Service order number is 109789. The serial number is T1654. I am in Class IV-A, and have been variously in Class 3-A, Class 1-A (H) and Class 4-H. My social security number is 067-01-9841. I am married to U. S. Woman Number 067-01-9807. Her eyes are gray. This is not a joint declaration, nor is it made by an agent; therefore it need be signed only by me—and, as I said, I am a man of medium height. (73)

In this essay White uses all the numbers and forms of his life as a way to identify himself in his society. The piece continues through a long list of forms and numbers, and the tone of voice is declarative throughout, though not without ironic or mildly sardonic personal comment. Describing his state of health, he draws upon medical terminology: "My cervical spine shows relatively good alignment with evidence of proliferative changes about the bodies consistent with early arthritis" (73). He also copies legal language: "I have made, published, and declared my last will and testament, and it thereby revokes all other wills and codicils at any time heretofore made by me" (73-74). This approach to recording his existence in the documents of his life gives him broad leeway in subject matter. Of his childhood he writes, "I was born in District Num-

ber 5903, New York State. My birth is registered in Volume 3/58 of the Department of Health. My father was a man of medium height. His telephone number was 484. My mother was a housewife. Her eyes were blue. Neither parent had a social security number and neither was secure socially. They drove to the depot behind an unnumbered horse" (74). His deposition of information extends to the tires on his car, the ingredients of his dog's food, the various medicines he takes, his son's army identification number and mailing address.

"About Myself" is merely a jumping off place for investigations of one's own status. I have students write journal entries exploring photographs of themselves (the significance of the pose[s] they selected for their senior photographs is always fruitful—"Who do you think people see in your high school yearbook picture?") or examining the contents of their wallets or purses or backpacks ("To what conclusions about your identity do the things you carry around with you lead someone else?") or surveying the evidence of identity in an archaeological dig of their bedrooms or dorm room spaces.

The essential questions to answer in this time capsule self-portrait are: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I likely to be going? Again, with the power of the computer to add visual components to the words, students could illustrate their essays with photographs of themselves, their family, their friends, their habitats. But at the center of this writing is the expressive core of nonfiction, the motives Montaigne explained as underlying his own essays. He asserted, "I have set myself no goal but a domestic and private one," that of dedicating his work to relatives and friends "so that . . . they may recover here some features of my habit and temperament." He claimed, "I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice; for it is myself that I portray"(2). As Thoreau later reminded us, "We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking" (3). Whether students add their self-portraits to a school or community or family time capsule or simply produce it for their own personal histories, they need the oppor-

tunity to portray themselves and to be reminded that, not only in expressive nonfiction, they are always the first person that is speaking in their writing.

Writing the Future: Speculative Nonfiction

Maybe it's enough to look into the past and to survey the present, but part of why we bother to learn where we've come from and where we are is to discover where we're going, what options lie open to us. Nonfiction isn't simply a vehicle for recording and reporting; it is also a vehicle for reflecting and responding. When you're doing time capsule writing, your reflections often turn toward speculation.

This is one of those places where terminology gets in our way again: If we see non-fiction as a genre that is defined by what it isn't—it is “not fiction”—we lose sight of a fundamental relationship among literary forms. I think that nonfiction is the basis for fiction, not the other way around; nonfiction should be called something like “actuality” and fiction should be defined by what it isn't, maybe called “non-actuality.” Memoirist Kim Barnes makes an important distinction about a term like “story.” She says that story is “the way memory works.” Anyone telling us the story of his or her life would tell a story with rising and falling action, climactic moments, characterization, and dialogue. “Both fiction and nonfiction simply reflect the already existing narrative flow that's organic to the human race,” but the writer of fiction is more conscious of “the devices of fiction” being used to generate the story, while the writer of nonfiction begins with the story (where and when it happened) as a given and has “to get at something bigger,” such as the significance of the story (Root 173). I think that recording and reporting are the primary motives of communication, and that imagining the non-actual came about as a means of getting a handle on what was difficult to explain or interpret. Perhaps the need to speculate and imagine, to reflect and predict, to contemplate and create, led from expressing the actual to imagining the possible, the probable, the alternative way of knowing—led, in other words, to myth and legend, to epic, lyric, and dramatic, to

the growth and development of various other literary genres. Of course, I'm only speculating.

But I'm not asking for elegies or epics, science fiction or fantasy here. I'm merely suggesting that a time capsule assignment would give students a chance to write speculative nonfiction anchored to an actual world they've tried to recreate on the page already. I want them to have another opportunity to extend themselves beyond the narrative and descriptive elements of the information they've accumulated in the earlier time capsules and ponder the potential in the moment of their writing. The essayist Joseph Epstein writes that the “personal essay is, in my experience, a form of discovery. What one discovers in writing such essays is where one stands on complex issues, problems, questions, subjects. In writing the essay, one tests one's feelings, instincts, thoughts in the crucible of composition”(15). Epstein, himself a leading familiar and literary essayist, has said, “I can't just think my way through certain questions, I have to write my way through them” (Interview). This is a power in nonfiction writing that all writers count on. It is one that novice writers need to know about. Like the other “time capsules,” this speculative nonfiction is also an act of discovery, but instead of discovering the past or discovering the present, it may lead to the discovery of one's own intentions and aspirations for the future, one's own sense of both limitations and resources, one's most realistic goals and most cherished dreams, one's doubts and fears, talents and abilities.

I see three possible variations to this imaginative report, all of them grounded in who and where the author is, how he or she came to be there, what kinds of changes have already occurred in the life of this family over generations.

- One is to write in the imagined voice of one of the figures in the 1900 report, giving an account of what has become of his or her family over the hundred years between the beginning and the end of the century. This report covers the ground between the first two reports and speculates on what our an-

cestors might think of their descendants.

- Another is to write in the imagined voice of one of the writer's descendants, someone writing in 2100 about where the writer's life led in the portion of the new century in which he or she was active. Like the first possibility, this lets the writer step back from his or her own personal voice (although not from an imagined personal voice and certainly not from his or her own sensibility).
- A third possibility is to write a reasonable estimate of where the future will be taking the writer and what impact the writer's life will have on the future of the family and the community. This speculation, like the second one, allows the writer to contemplate not only desires and aspirations but also strategies for fulfilling them.

Perhaps this time capsule writing should be dialogic, a combination of two or three of these variations. Certainly the predictive time capsule would lead to discussions about the century to come, in both the personal and the community lives of the students. In a hundred years it would also give the students' descendants nifty material for comparison-contrast papers.

Our students are poised at the new century, uncertain like the rest of us whether they face a threshold or a precipice. I still believe enough in education, despite teaching in Michigan at the end of the 20th century, to believe that our students have some say about which it will be. I still believe in the power of discovery to provide understanding and in the power of understanding to guide life decisions. Writing nonfiction leads inevitably to discovery and understanding. I don't ask us to push our students in the direction of memoir and reflective essay because I want every one to be a creative or literary writer but because I want us to stop divorcing language from meaning, dissipating its powers of insight and discovery for the individual writer, no matter what his or her aesthetic ambitions. Students

ought to write as if they mean to connect to their own experience or understanding, as if they mean to connect to readers. As Patricia Hampl explains it, "You tell me your story; I get mine. It's a magical transference."

For some English teachers I may seem to be suggesting a radical departure from the syllabus, but most teachers of writing (I hope) who have read this far will see this essay chiefly as a discussion of nomenclature and a source of potential teaching ideas. Those teachers already teach composition and research as if it led to lively, meaningful, actual communication. If we see our subject as non-fiction, we have a means to re-envision the teaching of writing as something that connects intimately and insightfully with the most vital and vibrant parts of young writers, that helps them better comprehend themselves and their world, that empowers them to report and reflect and speculate. By writing about the past, the present, and the future to provide material for physical time capsules, they create intellectual and emotional time capsules of their own; like other nonfiction writers, they have the means to break through the limits of time in which we are all encapsulated to touch both the past and the future.

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