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Journaling into the Short Story: Helping Students View Literature as Life

Gloria Nixon-John

Moving into the fourth decade of my life caused me a great deal of anxiety. For one thing, I failed to see my greying temples (against the backdrop of hundreds of Clairol commercials) as a sign of anything positive. I saw my husband gaining some status and respect as well as increasing monetary rewards in his profession (law) while my biggest reward was seeing my students move on and succeed in a variety of fields. Combine this scenario with the fact that I had lost both of my parents in a matter of three years, that my daughters had gone off to college, and that my husband's hair was not turning grey, and one can understand why I was feeling some anxiety.

I was reluctant to discuss my feelings with friends and family as it seemed too self-indulgent. Then, as if from out of the clouds, a flier was sent to my home with a headline that read "Dr. Ira Progoff Conducts Intensive Workshop on Journal Writing ... An Opportunity to Place the Present Situation Of Your Life In Focus." (This might have been a religious experience had not the mailing label read "Occupant.") So off I went, out of curiosity as much as need.

As I reflect on the Progoff journaling experience, I can say that the experience was beneficial in two obvious ways. (1) It helped me reach new insights about myself, and (2) I was able to look at the here and now to see how this short run affects the long run.

Then too, my excitement over the Progoff method came at a time when I began to take my own writing more seriously and while I was teaching a creative writing course.

Prior to my discovery of the Progoff method I did have my students keep journals. Most of their

entries were more or less "free writes." In other words, I would tell students to write about anything at all, in any format at all, for a given period of time. This worked for many, but some ended up writing about nothing in particular, or they wrote blow by blow accounts of the latest films at the Bijou. I was frustrated with this situation because I wanted to engage all of my students, and I knew that allowing fruitful journal writing would result in what Donald Murray called "following a line of language" in an attempt to tap voice.

I also hoped that since the Progoff method led to a form of self analysis it would lead to more meaningful (at least more enjoyable) writing experiences for my students.

And so I set out to devise a unit using all twelve of the major Progoff entry prompts. I had to adapt some of the questions for use with a teen population, but I found that the general thrust of each question was workable in a high school setting. I also discovered that some of the questions could be divided into two or more questions. In general, I was able to use all twelve questions in one way or another.

Prior to the actual writing, I asked students to bring in a notebook of at least 100 pages. I suggested that they decorate their covers as I was certain that their journals would become an important volume—something they might wish to keep.

To give you a taste of the allure of the questions, I will share question #1 entitled "The Period Log."

Begin by writing "it has been a time in which" and then describe inner and outer events that come to mind about the most recent period in your

life, say the last three months. (This helps you place yourself within the rhythm of time.)

For the sake of time here, I am just going to give the reader a quick rundown of the type of journal entry that resulted from using this prompt myself.

The journal entry that I wrote from this prompt touched on my fears with regard to the aging process. It also dealt with my fears as to the direction of contemporary society, concern about the destruction of our environment, and the decay of certain values and certain structures such as family and neighborhood. I let the journal entry just sit for awhile. Several days later (as suggested by Progoff) I went back and read over the journal entry.

Then, because I am a struggling fiction writer, I decided to detach myself from the journal and write in the third person. In other words, I decided to view my life or my fears as story. The short story that resulted from my journal entry was a bit pessimistic, but as I progressed through the journal experience and responded to other entries with fiction, an equal number of upbeat pieces resulted. Basically, I discovered that when I responded to my own journal writing in the form of fiction, I was able to detach myself enough to include painful detail, to see patterns of behavior more clearly, and to look at some of my life goals in a more objective way.

"[W]hen students responded to their own specific journal entries, their writing became more interesting—and seemed more focused and much more realistic."

It was later, when I looked for justification for this method of viewing my life as a short story, that I discovered that psychologists often use this method in therapy. In Robert Coles' book entitled *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, he explains the value of suggesting to his patients that they tell stories from their own personal history. (A method quite distinct from the usual bureaucratic code of procedures in psychotherapy.) When Coles proceeded along these lines, he noticed that a dramatic change took place in his patients merely as a result of this procedural suggestion. More specifically, he discovered that his patients seemed more willing to share and more inclined to give more vivid/detailed accounts of their lives (12-13).

While I don't suggest that we turn our language arts classrooms into laboratories for experimentation on the psyche, I feel, as Coles feels, that "few would deny that we all have stories in us which are a compelling part of our psychological and ideological makeup" (21).

And I knew that if I could tap these stories that I would get to the stuff that good literature is made of—not the banal or circumscribed, but the liveliness and allure of personal voice. I knew also that if students were to view their own lives as story, as literature, that some magic would result that in essence would merge life with literature in the minds of these students.

The Progoff journal prompts served as the perfect vehicle to use to tap voice. Then, too, I discovered quite accidentally another benefit of this approach: when students responded to their own specific journal entries, their writing became more interesting—and seemed more focused and much more realistic.

At this point in time, it may be of value to see the way in which a student worked with this method. The student (Judy Howrylak, a high school senior) responded to the following prompt:

#4 - Roads Taken and Not Taken. Select one stepping stone that marks a time when you made a choice (avoid the most recent). Begin by writing "It was a time when" and record your impressions and recollections. This may help you sort out unresolved issues since "things we regret don't die—they go underground."

The following is the journal entry that resulted from this prompt (used with student's permission):

Judy's Journal Entry

It was a time of endless time. A time when I had to search hard for things to occupy myself. I usually spent my days playing Star Wars or James Bond with Eric, my best friend from up the street. We always fought over who would get the best gadgets. One particular day, when my school was out for spring vacation, I was left by myself with nothing to do. I decided to go exploring in the woods behind my house, and I went down the hill and followed the long winding trails my brother and I had made in the years before. I finally reached a dugout area that we called the campground.

I poked around for awhile, tossing aside leaves that had covered up everything last fall, when I discovered a hidden cache of magazines. Playboy, Penthouse, you name it—was there. I tore out

some of the cartoons to show Eric when he got home from school.

When he saw the pictures, his eyes got really big and even bulged out a little. He demanded to be shown the magazines. When in the woods, he grabbed a pile of the lurid photographs and began to tear them up while shouting, "Sin! Sin!" I watched him, confused. I can remember clambering after him over the hill while he ran off to get some matches to burn the rest of the magazines.

Luckily, his mother never gave him any matches, but she never let him go in the woods again either. Finally, he stopped coming around altogether. He never gave back any of my action figures. My parents replaced them with Barbies, and I met Ellie and Suzanne from up my street, my friends when they were feeling cordial.

I spent more and more time outside, undressing and dressing the dolls, or just staring out the window consoling myself with the fact that Eric never let me play the bad guy anyway.

Notice that Judy's journal entry could serve as the beginnings of a beautiful personal essay. But since I wanted to move into fiction because I knew the value of so doing, I suggested that she detach herself—that she write in the third person. I suggested that she explain more—give more detail, that she think also about cause and effect. I also suggested more physical description and that dialogue might be appropriate for the piece. I asked Judy to examine her confusion over Eric's reaction. Then, too, I asked her to slow the events and feelings—to look at this slice of her life very carefully.

The following story written by Judy Howrylak resulted.

Judy's Story

The last of the closing credits for "Bewitched" rolled past on the television screen before the girl picked up the remote control and clicked off the set. It was spring vacation, time for students to put aside academics and enjoy themselves.

This seemed wonderful at first, and the girl made exciting plans for her day off. But, now that the day had finally arrived, she was left with nothing at all to do. Her brother was still in school, and all of the other schools in the neighborhood were still in session. Right after "Green Acres," her mother had run out the door with her purse in one hand and her car keys in the other most likely going shopping for dinner at Eaton Market or flitting off to pursue another one of those mother

activities before picking up Marty, her little brother, at school.

"Her father often complained that the woods were becoming too overgrown with honeysuckle and wisteria that would soon need to be burned away. But for now, the woods was a haven for the girl and her friends."

At any rate, she was stuck until three o'clock and it was only noon. She was left to find some way to occupy her time. For a while, she wandered idly around the family room, fingering the ceramics on top of the television and drawing figures in the dust with her moistened index finger.

She gazed silently out of the window at the new leaves on the trees in the woods. It was a sunny day and even though it was a bit chilly, it was the perfect day for a walk in the woods. She smiled to herself at the thought of being the first of the season to clear the leaves away from the trails and open up the forest.

Soon she crunched over the hill along the narrow path that she and her brother had cleared in the years before. She stopped momentarily to pull a sassafras leaf from the overhanging stem of one of the trees. The good thing about this woods was that because of the wild growth, only small children and animals could navigate in it. Her father often complained that the woods were becoming too overgrown with honeysuckle and wisteria that would soon need to be burned away. But for now, the woods was a haven for the girl and her friends.

Within minutes, she had reached the hollowed out area that they all referred to as "the campground," and the girl sat down on the trunk of a tree that was downed in a storm. She remembered the first time she saw the campground several years ago. She, Marty, and Eric, her friend from up the street, were exploring the property behind the family's new house when they came upon the campground.

They were all quite impressed, and Eric even suggested camping there for the night. Since "Doctor No" was playing on HBO; after it was over, they would camp out in the woods and build a fire.

Suddenly, two big boys carrying BB guns crept out of the growth to stand before them. They were at least ten years old. "Get off our land," the taller one hollered. "We don't want your kind here." He

stepped closer to the girl, affecting a menacing expression and she noticed that his eyes were a near colorless green. She saw that they were standing next to a bright green stake marking the property line, and she laughed at him and said, "You get off. You're on our property."

"Try'n make me," said the boy taking a step closer.

Later the girl learned that this boy was Todd Bates, the meanest boy on the street, that no one messed with. But she was new, and even though at just seven she barely reached his elbow, she looked right up at his leering face and said, "You're just a big bully only telling us what to do to make yourself feel good."

This remark didn't make Todd very happy; and before she realized what had happened, Todd delivered a stinging smack to her backside. The boys then chased the three children through the woods until they finally escaped to the swing set where they stayed for the rest of the day.

Days later, the girl shivered at the thought of the incident, and put her hands out in front of her overalls as she stepped tentatively into the clearing. For a while she just poked around, moving aside all of the dead leaves and underbrush that had accumulated over the winter when she saw a bit of paper underneath the leaves. She moved them aside and pulled out a magazine. This wasn't just any magazine, it was a Playboy. She dropped it in astonishment. Recovering from the initial shock, she picked up the magazine and paged through it, pausing to tear out a cartoon that she planned to show to Eric when he got home from school.

Then, she heard a rustle in the bushes. She jumped back, and in her mind was an image of Todd Bates storming out of the woods with his gun to shoot her. She backed away from the pile of magazines as her cat came running out of the tangles of wisteria. "Sugarfoot, don't scare me like that!" she exclaimed, still shaking a bit. He purred contentedly and circled her ankles.

The girl decided it was time to go back, she had enough surprises for one day. She left the clearing and headed toward Eric's house.

Eric had quite a different reaction to the pictures. His eyes grew large and bulged a little, and he immediately demanded to be taken to the pile of magazines. As soon as he saw the pile, he began to tear the magazines to shreds that floated off through the clearing and into the woods. The girl even crumbled a few pages which she threw into the campfire area.

All the while Eric was shouting and swearing, "Sinners, sinners, they'll burn in hell!"

The girl stared at him, confused. Would she go to hell too? She turned towards Eric to ask him, but he was off and running through the woods.

"Wait, wait," she cried after him. "Where are you going?"

"To get some matches," he shouted back as the girl scrambled up the hill after him, the wisteria branches clinging to her, pulling her back.

Fortunately, Eric's mother didn't give him the matches; she didn't let him come back that day either. The girl slowly dragged her scraped body home where she flopped down on the sofa and turned on the television just in time for "General Hospital."

School ended for the year and the hazy humid days of summer began once again. Eric still didn't come around. It didn't matter as she had recently taken up with the two girls from two doors down who would frequently stop by with their doll carriages for afternoon tea.

One day, the girl was riding her bicycle down the street when she passed by Todd Bates' house. He was in the driveway playing with his friends.

"You're on my list," he called out to her, remembering the ongoing feud between the two of them.

The girl hastily turned around and rode back home without saying anything.

That summer she developed a taste for daytime television, and also spent much of her time staring vacantly out of the window, watching as the woods were enveloped in the searching tendrils of wisteria and the air became filled with the scent of honeysuckle.

Notice that Judy's fictive account has allowed her to portray not just her personality and the personality of those around her more vividly, but that she had to deal with the harsh reality that comes with making discoveries as well as making choices. There are also more players in the fictive version, and at the risk of being contradictory, Judy's fictive account is probably closer to reality than her journal account. Then too, working with fiction led the author to use more metaphorical language throughout and to conclude with a beautiful paragraph that seems both sad as well as hopeful and most certainly symbolic.

It is not surprising that the things I learn about myself as a person and a writer become useful in terms of tapping the writing potential of my students. William Carlos Williams in an interview with Robert Coles says "...their story, yours, mine—it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them" (Coles 30).

Judith Fishman reminds us that "telling a story is not only one of the oldest forms of

discourse but its features are clearly discernable, as the story moves between what William Labov calls the narrative core (the story itself, the chronology) and the evaluation (the interpreting, the attempting to say what the story means). We tell and write stories to create and strengthen social bonds: we want others to know what has "happened" and what those happenings mean to us" (xi).

In conclusion, I found that journal writing was a wonderful vehicle to use in order to create my own literature. I thought this vehicle would work in the classroom and it certainly did. It became a natural way for students to respond to their own lives in a literary form. Then too, responding to the Proffoff prompts allowed students to delve into a need that Frank Kermode sees as basic to survival, the need to "make sense

of their span through fictive concords with origins and ends such as give meaning to lives..." (7).

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