

“This Small Matter of Paying Attention”:

A Dialogue about Listening to the Body in Narrative Inquiry

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A Dialogue about Listening to the Body in Narrative Inquiry

Introduction

This narrative inquiry takes the form of letters exchanged between two colleagues—a long-time professor of Education and a doctoral candidate, an established poet and an emergent one, an experienced narrative inquirer and a novice. During their dialogue about narrative inquiry, the two writer-researchers focus on the “narrative” or writing aspect of narrative inquiry, and pose such questions as: How does narrative inquiry depart from the “tried and true path” of research within Faculties of Education? How does writing act as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000); that is, how does writing help the narrative inquirer interrogate and discover new insights into her research subject? What does the researcher need to be aware of in order to write a narrative that has aesthetic, and not just informational, merit? How does the writer or reader decide whether (or how) a narrative has succeeded aesthetically?¹

This dialogue suggests some answers to these questions. It does so within the context of the writer-researchers’ ongoing poetic research and the place of the “body” in narrative inquiry. In other words, drawing from the writer-researchers’ own poetic research, this dialogue explores how recreating or embodying sensory experience is part of writing an effective narrative poem; how the reader’s sensory or “bodily” responses to such poetry suggest that the storied poems are well told; and how paying attention to one’s feeling-responses, or cultivating one’s “aesthetic way of knowing,” can do a number of things. For the reader, it can generate responses that can be the beginning point of a formal response (such as telling her own story). It can alert the reader to the conventions of storytelling and

storywriting and cause the reader to look deeper into the act of writing. For the writer-researcher, paying attention to his feelings, intuitions, curiosities, and energy levels while writing can help to guide him toward new insights and depths into the research.

Through its form, this dialogue models the type of narrative inquiry that it investigates. The writer-researchers not only discuss how writing is a method of inquiry, but they also enact this by using their letters to analyze aspects of their own poetic research practice and to discover the content and focus of this dialogue. The dialogue form is appropriate because narrative inquiry has been described as having the goal of “promoting dialogue,” and as a search for “better conversation...with ourselves as well as with our readers” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748). Canadian educational researchers have traditionally written up the results of their narrative inquiries in expository form, with the participants’ and researchers’ prose or poetic stories woven in at appropriate points (e.g., Clandinin et al., 2006). Part of the challenge of narrative inquiry is to develop forms more consistent with storytelling and dialogue. Using dialogue to conduct narrative inquiry and present its findings is still unusual (see Ellis & Bochner, 2000, for an exception) within a methodology that acknowledges many different forms of data representation², although does not yet practice these on a wide scale in its research reporting.

While we focus our discussion on narrative inquiry, we anticipate that our approach to writing has implications for other methodologies. All researchers use writing to varying degrees. Our dialogue models how writing can be used as a method of research. Writing as inquiry includes paying attention to the body. Attending to the small, taken-for-granted activities and concerns at the level of the body’s involvement with the textual actions on the page can benefit many kinds of research writing.

Woods Wolf Girl

A girl walks into the woods – she knows
what things mean. *Path*
is straight-ahead, no talking
to strangers, no loitering – *I'll have the kettle boiling.*

To get to grandmother's by tea time
the trajectory must be narrow.
It must lie still and open. The critical eye serene
across its page.

No sidebars, alleys, secondary routes,
no meandering off the main.
No role for change, for chance
or real-*er* life
to flood the path and muddy it.

Oh granddaughter, what dirty feet you have!

This small matter of paying attention.
Where *is* this deluge
coming from, wonders Little Red Riding Hood, ankle-deep

on a path flooded with *wolf*
who's saying *Pretty muddy this morning* –
who's staring at everything but her feet.

A little red body walks into the woods, a body
that needs to be on its way.

And when they're fully into the flowers,
their bodies fully bent –
his umbrella body springing up like that –
she's slurring her words: *oh my god*

but

after tea and cookies at grandma's
guilt's bingo-drum review of events as jarring, weird, uncanny
lands on its three-letter jackpot: *bad*.

Rain, Rain, Go Away. But there is no other day, there is

only the relentlessly unintelligible present and a girl
wading deep in its mess.

May 8, 2009

Dear Natasha,

In the beginning is an interruption. Logical thought interrupted by feeling, and what an interruption!

We want to talk about narrative inquiry, you and me. We agreed that I would start the dialogue. Where to start I wondered – on the path, of course, and the above poem tumbled out.

In these past years, I'm viewing more and more of my experiences in the world from Little Red Riding Hood's point of view. I want to articulate what it's like to meet the wolf, what happens *to her* on the path, how she responds (*how she happens*) to the experience, how her response changes her story. My sympathy for her at the point in the above poem is profound. She's a good girl doing what's she told and *oh my god* life intervenes. It's as if life throws into her path an external image that exactly corresponds with an unintelligible but sense-able inner impulse. Her inner wolf (I suggest sexual awakening can be likened to a wolf) meets the real world wolf. Ah, a life of thrust and ache has little chance of being tidy.

I'd like to go back to the idea of the path as *tried-and-true*. Academia gives us our research methods and the ethical frames in which they exist. Traditionally, academia values predictability.

To get to grandmother's by tea time

the trajectory must be narrow.

It must lie still and open. The critical eye serene

across its page.

Books make such excellent fodder for critical analysis, don't they. We can return to a passage again and again; it is always there, constant and unwavering. Indeed, much – often valuable – research follows a linear, cause-and-effect, course. Narrative inquiry is interested in the act of writing – in writing's many actions on the page. It accepts that words and phrases and sounds and images will interrupt, fortify, and undermine the researcher's sense of what her text is about. It accepts that research starts in *media res*; it keeps open the possibility of

real-er life

to flood the path and muddy it.

Narrative inquiry's response to articulating the day-to-day flux and change of experience is to look at it closely.

This small matter of paying attention.

Where *is* this deluge

coming from, wonders Little Red Riding Hood, ankle-deep

The reader of the poem is challenged to notice the language of the poem. In the line “where *is* this deluge coming from,” the poem asks the reader *did you notice the word flood three lines above? Did you notice that the path has become muddy?* So is the narrative inquirer challenged to notice not just the content, but also the language of her data, that is, the effects of the language.³ Narrative inquiry asks of the inquirer: Did you notice your diction? Your verb tenses? Their direct or indirectness? Did you notice your poetic phrasing here and your staccato list of nouns there? Where the writing is emotional, or distanced, or whiny? Where you turned a corner in your thoughts, your images?

Narrative inquiry treats the data, the document, as an aesthetic artifact, or, as I prefer, a performance. It is premised on a belief that stories – whether written or oral – speak volumes, and that not only the content (*what* people say) but also *how* they say it, informs the discussion. Form as well as content. Narrative inquiry uses narratives and poetry because metaphoric language (the language of *what if* and *let's pretend*) gives it the greatest chance at making various and often unpredictable emotional, imaginative and sensory impressions upon the reader. This is where the story of Little Red Riding Hood fits this topic so well. Little Red Riding Hood is a nuanced, messy story, open to multiple interpretations and yet memorable (we all know a version of this story!).

there is

only the relentlessly unintelligible present and a girl
wading deep in its mess.

Just as this girl character wades into her own story, and *becomes*, through living her story as I create it here, Little Red Riding Hood, so the narrative inquirer wades into her research data, keeping one eye on a possible, tentative outcome (grandmother's house and hot tea) and the other eye optimistically engaged with what is at present unknown and is only slowly becoming intelligible. It involves the multiple modes of engagement of such strategies as close reading, what if, let's pretend, openness to interpretation, emotion, imagination, cognition, as well as engaging able helpers along the way. It involves the excitement (and problems) of otherness.

a path flooded with *wolf*
who's saying *Pretty muddy this morning* –

If the wolf stopped there, if the wolf was an inanimate creature, the research project could carry on to a tidy ending. Feminism (broadly defined) could offer a critique of gender and power; critical pedagogy (again, broadly defined) could offer a critique of the power intersections of the social and class groups represented by the characters. But to the artist and to the narrative inquirer, the wolf, the text, the human body – have their own energies and impulses. Narrative inquiry views life – both the animate and so-called inanimate worlds – as reciprocal. Even while the narrative inquirer forwards the discussion, so he also keeps one ear cocked to listen. The world, in *talking back* (as it were), are the interruptions that complicate the research. They can both open it to greater relevance, or worry it into convolutions that are meaningful only to the researcher and therefore confusing to the reader. Let me give you an example of an interruption that potentially complicates the research. In the poem the girl hadn't counted on her body being part of the story, but she notices the wolf

staring at everything but her feet.

It's not her mind the wolf activates, but her body.

A little red body walks into the woods, a body
that needs to be on its way.

A twist in the plot: suddenly her body is talking more powerfully than her words. Narrative inquiry includes the body in the research equation. It views life as complex, and requires that the researcher see her work in relation to many aspects of her existence, as well as of her research. These include her mind and body; others; the natural world; and the particulars of her experiences in the world, and of her research.

Who in their right mind would take on anything this complicated, this messy,
Natasha?

May 15, 2009

Dear Cornelia,

When I first read your “Woods Wolf Girl” poem, I thought I recognized allusions to the “straight and narrow path,” a popular analogy for the Christian life used in evangelical and fundamentalist circles. I wondered whether your accompanying letter would talk about religious fundamentalism, something which is part of both of our backgrounds and, as we have talked about, which emerges in different ways in our poetry. And your letter *did* discuss fundamentalism, in a way. Fundamentalism isn’t always religious. It’s a way of thinking and experiencing the world that is reductionary; it simplifies experience to a set of core principles or rules; it paints the world in blacks and whites. As your poem says,

No sidebars, alleys, secondary routes,

no meandering off the main.

No role for change

In one of my first graduate courses in Education, I encountered descriptions of “scientific research” that suggested that there was a preferred way to research and to write academically. My classmates and I must have discussed the exceptions to rules that we no doubt encountered as we struggled to design our research studies. We must have talked about how it wasn’t always easy to classify our research as a certain “kind,” nor to decide which methods best fit our research questions. I don’t remember any discussions about the “messiness” of our research designs when they spilled out of the moulds prepared for them. But I *do* remember the gentle arguments I had with my professor about the writing of my research study. I *must* follow the APA style guide down to its last jot and title, she insisted. And first person should never, ever, be used in academic writing. Yet the processes of

writing and of narrative inquiry-- which are in some ways the same process--are more complex than was suggested by the prescriptions that I was taught in that class and others.

I enjoyed how your letter used “Woods Wolf Girl” as an analogy for narrative inquiry. As you know, I am writing poetry as part of the narrative inquiry that forms my doctoral thesis. However, I haven’t thought about what this poetry can teach me about the process of narrative inquiry, such as the way that narrative inquiry involves the body. *We are our bodies, we don’t just have them*, suggests Arthur Frank in his book, *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995, p. 33). “Narrative inquiry includes the body in the research equation,” you wrote in your letter. I want to explore this idea now, here, in my letter to you. *How* does narrative inquiry include the body? How does writing my poetry, writing this narrative dialogue, include the body?

Hmmm...Well, one possible answer is that narrative inquiry tells stories, and effective stories embody experiences, recapture emotions, recreate sensations; they help the reader experience something similar to what the narrator has or is experiencing through his body. Stories are told effectively when they “resonate” for the reader; when they evoke a feeling in the reader that “the experience described is lifelike, believable and possible” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 751); when they create an emotional impact and perhaps move the reader to think differently or to write or to perform some other action (cf. Richardson, 2000, p. 937). That word, “resonate,” is delicious. If stories resonate with the reader, they create vibrations, they echo; they ring within the reader. “Your poetry gives me chills,” several readers said of my poetry. Another told me, “I almost wept when you read.” These responses suggest that the story told by the poetry is well told.

So, narrative inquiry can include the reader's or listener's body in that the stories told as part of narrative inquiry create an emotional impact. But how does narrative inquiry include the writer-researcher's body; that is, how do my inquiries include *my* body? Well, narrative inquiry invites me to pay attention to my feelings and intuitive hunches when writing. For example, you and

I began this particular narrative inquiry with only a general topic for discussion; we agreed that we would let

Narrative study has been criticized as being more art than research: It seems based predominantly on talent, intuition, or clinical experience; defies clear order and systematization; and can hardly be taught (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 1).

the writing lead us and see what we discovered. I “knew” that, in this first letter, I wanted to address the question of how narrative inquiry includes my body. How did I know this? You mentioned that narrative inquiry includes the body in your letter to me. I happened to read your comment immediately after reading and journaling about a similar one made by Arthur Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995). This synchronicity was too marked to overlook; by drawing my attention to this topic twice in such a short period, my body was telling me that the topic needed my attention. Moreover, I felt energized by the thought of exploring the idea in writing; I was motivated to roll my desk chair over to my computer and begin to write. And I listened to my body, which is why I am writing about this now. I am “paying attention” to my body, to borrow a phrase from the first draft of your poem.

Hmmm. Listening to your body, paying attention to its energy and sense of flow, departs from the straight and narrow path of traditional educational research, doesn't it? Or at least departs from the *acknowledged* path of educational research. All effective researchers follow their hunches and feelings as well as their cognition, I'm convinced (cf. Eisner, 1985,

p. 27). But not many of them seem to be talking about this--or if they do talk about it, they don't foreground that part of their research process. The traditional story of "how to design a research study," as told by the educational textbooks for graduate students that I have encountered, has until recently tended to depict the research process as a linear one: identify your problem, compose your questions, follow these steps, analyze the results. Creswell (2002), for example, describes thoroughly the processes involved in narrative inquiry and summarizes them in diagrams and charts. These summaries have been useful for me as I grapple with what narrative inquiry is and how it should be conducted—they give me something to "hang on to," a starting place. However, Creswell's tidy presentation implies that the process of narrative inquiry is linear in nature, rather than recursive and complex as suggested by other

descriptions of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, pp. 4, 7, 10). In addition, Creswell's approach, coupled with his statement that there is a

At the completion of a narrative study, it is often not clear when the writing of the study began. There is frequently a sense that writing began during the opening negotiations with participants or even earlier as ideas of the study were first formulated. Material written throughout the course of the inquiry often appears as major pieces of the final document. . . . There may be a moment when one says "I have completed my data collection and will now write the narrative," but even then narrative methodologies often require further discussion with participants, such that data is collected until the final document is completed (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7).

"need for procedural guidelines" (p. 521), implies there is a preferred method for conducting narrative inquiry. His recent textbook (2007), however, presents "a general procedural guide" for narrative inquiry and states that "the methods of conducting narrative study do not follow a lock-step approach" (p. 55).

Narrative inquiry is growing in educational research, but the kind of narrative inquiry I've encountered so far seems to focus on collecting stories from participants, rather than

purposefully using writing to discover deeper insights into the research topic. These narrative inquiries focus on what the participants' and researchers' stories suggest about a particular educational phenomenon rather than on any new insights that the participants or researchers arrived at through the process of actually *writing* their stories. I just wrote myself into understanding what it means to include the body in narrative inquiry! Focused freewriting and ongoing re/writing are among the research methods that you and I are employing in this narrative dialogue. There is disorderly order as we follow the writing to see where it leads. Cognition is integral to writing, but it does not preclude being led in part by our sensory responses, or aesthetic ways of knowing.

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Notes

¹ Subsequent dialogues will explore such questions as: What kinds of writing can be used in narrative inquiry? For that matter, what *is* writing and how does it work? What are the narrative inquirer's methods? What techniques can narrative inquirers learn from poets and other creative writers? How does one evaluate a narrative—like the poem nested within this dialogue--which is written as part of a narrative inquiry?

² Richardson lists several examples of what she calls “creative analytic practices,” that is, ethnographic writing that moves outside the academic conventions and includes such genres as conversation, as well as fiction-stories, poetry, and drama (2000, pp. 939-930). Eisner (1997), too, discusses alternate forms of data representation in qualitative educational research. Like Richardson, Eisner acknowledges written forms such as stories and poetry. He also touches on visual and audio-visual representations such as pictures, film, and multimedia. Both scholars are American, and we wonder: do American scholars of Education practice alternate forms of data representation more widely than Canadians?

³ Not all narrative inquirers write their own narratives, of course. I am imagining here an inquirer who has written her own narrative.