

Stories

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Abstract

This article offers narratives constructed about life and about works of contemporary art. Through their stories, narrators can learn about themselves, and when they share their stories others can learn about particular people, how they live in the world, and aspects of being human. When people offer personally relevant narratives about the same work of art, others can learn varied ways of understanding that work; they can also learn varied ways individuals understand art, the world, and life. When shared with one another in groups, and when heard by individuals in the groups, personally revealing stories can strengthen the story-tellers and help build trusting and supportive communities within society.

Key Words: Art Interpretation, Narrative Studies, Art and Life

I

Once upon a time, in early September 2009, during my first meeting with a class of undergraduates at a university new to me, I passed out blank index cards and asked the students to write their names, e-mail address, and phone numbers, and to tell me something about themselves. To encourage them to write more rather than less, I smiled saying, "You can tell me the truth or make up things. I won't know the difference anyway." After checking the computer generated class list, I collected the cards and put them aside, and we began talking about the course, "Topics in Art Education: Art Writing."

At home that evening I read through the cards to learn about the students in the class. "I love to travel, and speak some Italian." "I have a Dachshund." "I am brutally honest, to a fault." "I hunt and fish and love the outdoors." "I like art but not its theories." "I'd love to travel and learn different languages." "I am married and have two kids." "I have been married for 11 years. I have a ten year-old son. I have 3 dogs and 4 cats. I have 2 fish and 3 hamsters." "I love sushi and very sweet wine." "I can make a popping sound from the Lollypop song." This card startled me: "I have a pacemaker. I'm slowly dying of an aging illness and I'm doomed to live in a wheelchair. But I love my life and would not have it any other way."

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I have a Pacemaker.
I'm slowly dying of a ~~an~~ aging illness.
and I'm doomed to live in a wheel
chair.
But I love my life and
would not have it any other way.

The class is about different kinds of writing and in the class I intend to have us more consciously blur the distinction between "fact" and "fiction." I wondered about Emily's card. There was no one in class in a wheelchair. Could she already be writing a fictional story about herself? If so, she was very convincing. I believed her story. I wrote her an e-mail saying I was interested in talking to her about what she wrote on her card, if she wished.

After the next class, a young woman came into my office and said, "You wanted to talk to me?"

I paused to remember, and then said, "Oh, you're Emily?"

"Yes," she said.

I showed her the class card she had written and told her I was interested in her story. Without hesitation and with unwavering eye contact, she revealed that she was a "genetic mess." Two years ago, doctors found herniated disks and a cyst on her spine. Her spinal cord was fusing together, thus she would become unable to walk, she predicted, when she reached her thirties. A year later, while doing procedures on her back, doctors discovered a heart murmur, a low heart rate, and a blockage condition that is progressive. As a child she had spontaneous bouts of paralysis, which required hospitalization. Recently at a concert she went into paralysis. Her friends moved her to a car and after the concert brought her to a hospital. A nurse discovered that her heart rate had dropped to twenty beats per minute during the night. Had it dropped below sixteen, she would have died. The doctors inserted a pacemaker. She also told me that she has cognitive difficulties, and is certified by the University of North Texas as a special needs student. I recalled her showing me that document the first day of class. I apologetically told her I hadn't read it. She kindly reassured me, saying, "It doesn't say much." Her condition is under-diagnosed. She has identified herself as having an "aging illness," because all of the specialists she sees usually treat elderly patients.

I told her of this article about narratives that I was beginning to write, and asked if I could reprint her card. She said, "Sure."

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"With your name on it?"

"Yes."

"Your email and phone number?"

"Well, not my phone number, but my e-mail is fine."

I asked her if she would be willing to write about herself during the semester. Her face brightened and she said, "Yes," but then hesitated.

"I'm a terrible writer," she explained.

I said, "Your first paper seemed fine to me."

She said that her ex-boy friend was in journalism and edited her papers, and that her mother and her present boyfriend also helped her with her writing. She said she gets things all mixed up when she writes and talks and that she makes no sense. I told her that she was making perfect sense to me, and that her unedited card was very clear.

I suggested, should she choose, that she transform all the semester's writing assignments into writings about her life. She balked, saying, "I don't want any easy-outs in the course." After a moment we both agreed that if she were to do this, it would probably be harder rather than easier.

I offered that if she did not want to reveal herself, she could write fictionally using her life as content. However, she said she's comfortable with being transparent. I told her that I believed if people were more open and transparent about their lives, we would have a more compassionate world. I briefly told her of my encounters with cancer and gave her "Three Art Educators in Cancer World" (Barrett, Smith-Shank, and Stuhr, 2008), in which Debbie Smith-Shank, Pat Stuhr, and I have each told our cancer stories. "Maybe you'll get some ideas from the article." She left with the cancer article, saying she would think about writing personally.

She discussed the idea with her mother and with her past and present two boyfriends, and all encouraged her to accept the offer to write about herself. She came into class the following week with a three-page essay about herself. This is her first paragraph, as she wrote it, edited only by Emily:

My life before the pain, the surgery, and all the doctors, I was a very active teenage girl. I was a part of a softball team, a soccer team, a basketball team, a cross country team, and I skated as a carhop. I was constantly climbing t[r]ees and helping people move very heavy things. I would carry in all the groceries, and go to all day concerts where I would crowd surf. In the future I had plan[n]ed on running in marathons, and competing in triathlons. As a career I had always dreamed of backpacking through the world and seeing first hand the landscape that helped form cultures and the lifestyles of people.

When Emily reached the part of her essay that described the deterioration of her body, she began to cry. I gave her time. The class was quiet. I asked Emily if she wanted me to finish reading her essay. She nodded affirmatively. I finished reading what Emily wrote. The class broke into applause. Emily smiled.

II

The following week, our class met off campus in the Sid Richardson Museum to experimentally write first versions of short stories about paintings that would reveal something about the paintings. The stories were to be fictional, but not "science fiction," that is, not too far removed from what is depicted in narrative paintings of the American West, that is, paintings of "cowboys and Indians" by Frederic Remington and Charles Russell. In groups of three or four, the students discussed the paintings among themselves, then each one wrote about what they thought was happening in the painting from one person's (or one thing's) point-of-view: for example a native-American shooting at a U. S. Cavalry man, a cavalry man shooting a Native-American, a wounded horse, a rifle carried by a gold prospector, a fallen tree. They then read their stories aloud to each other and to Museum educational staff members who were observing. Their writings were diverse. All were interesting, some were sad and some employed humor, and all were enlightening.

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We then discussed with the museum education staff issues of "fact" and "fiction" in the students' stories and in the painters' paintings. I want the students' stories to be entertaining but to be educational as well as, that is, stories that inform readers about the paintings and about life in the American West from different points of view. I passed out an assignment sheet for the students to consider while revising the stories they had begun: thoughts about title, first paragraph, main character, point of view, plot, and ending (Newman, 2004). The following week students are to turn in a draft of their stories, with an identified audience, and choice of the length of their stories. They will read them in class, engage in peer editing, and revise their stories again for their end of semester portfolios. The director of education has invited us back for a public reading of the stories when they are finished.

As the class dispersed from the Museum, a young female member of the class came up to me and quietly said, "I'd like to write about my anxieties from now on, but I don't want to share them with anyone else." I agreed and look forward to how her commitment takes form in writing.

III

To help get me through chemotherapy I read books about illness and recovery, such as *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal*, by Rachel Remen (2006), a medical doctor living and working with severe disabilities. Her stories are gentle and revealing and I found them encouraging.

I know that stories "heal," although healing has many manifestations. While ill, I selectively told stories of my experiences, feelings, and thoughts to Susan, my wife, family members, and to some intimate friends. It was hard to admit many things but I usually felt better during the telling and after. I quickly learned to be selective in what I told to whom. Some people are good listeners, knowing if and how and when to respond. Telling is especially healing when the telling is heard, and when it is not, I leave feeling isolated and lonely. I paid Patrice to listen to me, and she listened empathetically and with the knowledge of a psychologist and a cancer nurse.

One exchange was especially healing. Shortly after I had finished chemotherapy, I was secretly and embarrassedly in a deep depression that did not make sense to me. I was finished with the discomfort of the treatments, alive, in recovery, my cancer was in remission, I should have been elated, and everyone who knew of my condition seemed to expect that of me. Debbie Smith-Shank was then a visiting professor at Ohio State and I knew she had had cancer. She walked into my office one day to say hello, and I asked, "Debbie, were you depressed after you finished your chemotherapy?" She said, "I was suicidal." That brief exchange healed me from thinking I was crazy.

I decided I wanted to write about my experiences and asked Debbie and Pat if they would write too. Debbie was enthused. Pat was more cautious but agreed. I knew that from my exchanges with Debbie and Pat, that each of us have experiences that might benefit others with cancer and other illnesses, perhaps our caregivers, and maybe those who are healthy. I have since become more engaged in the emerging academic interest in narrative studies (Clandinin, 2007) and with some scholars who are pursuing narrative research within disability studies.

IV

While in chemotherapy and after, I involved myself in The Wellness Community, a free service provider for cancer patients and their caregivers. The Community employs counselors, yoga instructors, reiki healers, a qigong instructor, and was, as one counselor said, "a safe place to cry." For many years as an Art Critic in Education I have been showing art to students of all ages in schools, and to some community groups, to facilitate intelligent conversations about works of contemporary art and items of popular visual culture. I asked Community personnel about my trying such sessions with patients and caregivers. I conducted three sessions on three consecutive Wednesdays. Participation was voluntary, and about eight people attended all three sessions. Patrice accompanied me in case some participant would need professional help. I showed about six to ten reproductions of one artist

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each week, and asked, "What do you see?" "Can you relate what you see to your life?" We initially responded orally, and then we wrote paragraphs about one work of art, and then, if we wished, read our paragraphs aloud. All read. All listened. Following are the stories written about *Two Eggs*. The writers decided whether and if to reveal their identities when giving me permission to reprint what they had written.



© Rimma Gerlovina And Valeriy Gerlovin, *Two Eggs*, photograph, 2003. Courtesy of the artists.

As we go through life we have choices; to live and learn through the shadow side of life or the light of life. Perhaps the experiences of the shadow side are what are needed to get us to the light.--Patti Petrella, Wellness Community yoga instructor and caregiver.

I can see the present. I can see the situation we're in and what it looks like. But is that what the future really holds? The doctors predict my husband's death soon. But on the other hand, maybe there is hope. Maybe I can imagine another future--a more positive future. Which one

is real? Which can happen? Is there anything I can do to help?--Joan Wintermantel, caregiver to husband with lymphoma.

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In my health situation, I see the solid white egg as the decision to take chemotherapy. The other egg is radiation. The chemo egg weighs heavy with the veiled hand, not knowing how it will affect my life, my body, my family, my spouse, our love life, and my work environment. The sense of wonder in her face reminds me of how I felt once I absorbed the fact that I had cancer.--Barb Burkholder, cancer patient

Two claims; which is true? Can I really change my body through meditation? Can I really cure myself? If I think the right thoughts will I kill off the cancer cells? If I think the wrong thoughts, will I aid the cancer cells?--Terry Barrett, cancer patient

V

When counseling with Patrice while I was undergoing chemotherapy, I realized that I was not afraid to die but that I was afraid of becoming old. She suggested as part of my therapy that I face my fears by working with pictures with elderly people in a local community facility. I sighed with resignation and fear, and reluctantly said, "Yes." She said she would make the contact and set up some sessions. She would accompany me. When I arrived and saw the caregivers wheeling in some very old people, one who couldn't speak, and some who couldn't write, I was very happy that Patrice was there. I was beyond my comfort range. As a nurse and psychologist, she was not. We used the same format as with the cancer group: During a one-hour session, I showed slides by photographer Stephen Althouse, and asked the participants to say what they saw, to tell what it meant to them, and then to write a paragraph. These are two paragraphs they wrote about *Brick and Ivy*.

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© Stephen Alhouse, *Brick and Ivy*, photograph, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.

In these days, in my 80's, I am deeply involved in questions of life's meaning in the largest possible context. How do I find my place in the Cosmos? And how do I find language for the deepest of all issues? There is something ineffable in experience with Ultimate Reality that is perhaps more mystery than objective phenomenon. So the brick and ivy represent the permanent and the temporary, the Cosmos and the living, nature and human nature. And they are inevitably interconnected, interrelated and interdependent. Related integrally--integrity personified.--Greg, age 84

This makes me realize the fragility of our life spans--also impresses me about the durability of the stone contrasted with the ivy and changing life cycles. The human spirit's ability to withstand and overcome some of life's trials as well as the blessings, as expressed by the light as well as the dark: sunshine, shadow, hope and despair, optimism versus pessimism. The overall feeling is one of antiquity and eternal life.--Lila Brewer, age 94

The session went very well, from what I could tell by the participation of the participants, how attentively they listened while others spoke and read, from positive assessments of the host professional caregivers. The elderly seemed to enjoy the challenge of conversing and writing after some initial doubts, wonder, and then fascination about a set of photographs that was strange to them. They became confident about their abilities to engage meaningfully with images that did not meet their expectations of "art." They asked us to come back with more pictures to do it again and again.

I left with newly acquired comfort. These people are very alive. They enjoy one another. They laugh. They appreciate life. They want to continue learning. They have wisdom to offer. If I am able to write like Greg and Lila if I reach eighty-four or ninety-four, I think I will be okay.

VI

Earlier this year, for no stated reason, Sheri Klein, an art education professor in Wisconsin who has written about humor in art (2006), and with whom I erratically correspond, sent me this spontaneous e-mail (and later, permission to quote it):

May 7, 2009

Terry,

I recently had an experience with an Edvard Munch painting at the Art Institute of Chicago. It was the sick girl painting (exact title escapes me). The sick/dying girl is facing towards a woman who is grieving deeply.

I was looking at the painting for some time when suddenly I was not in the painting, but I was at the actual event--in the house--in the room. I could feel the cool breeze through the window. It was a very silent day; no sounds of birds, people, etc.--maybe the sound of the rustling trees at best.

My presence was not known to these individuals.

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The girl was dying and she was clasping the hand of this older woman--mother--grandmother--caretaker who was sobbing quietly, but very deeply.

The girl was telepathically sending the woman a message--for she was too weak to even speak--and she was consoling the woman about her impending death.

At once, I began to cry.

And I thought that is what great artists do--painters, actors, writers, musicians--they absolutely know how to make us feel.

And, that is why Munch is great--but I don't know how he did this!! This is the mystery.

I have only cried one other time--in front of a Renaissance painting in the National Gallery--because it was so so beautifully crafted and painted.

I am deeply concerned about a K-16 art education that does not place value on seeing, experiencing art works, and art making, and that de-values the role of aesthetics and beauty as part of the human experience.

Best,
Sheri

VII

I am not an art therapist. Nor am I a scholar of disability studies, as is fellow art educator Jennifer Eisenhauer (2007, 2008). I am art educator who has become newly and more broadly interested in narrative studies, especially about art and people. For most of my career (Barrett, 2004) I have been interested in interpretive narratives about works of art, mostly contemporary, and other artifacts. "What do you see?" "What does it mean?" I sought evidence and reasons from students of different ages and other viewers when they offered interpretations. I still do. Since my experience of cancer, however, I have become increasingly interested in "What does the work mean to you?" Jean Paul Sartre's distinction about meaning *in soi* and

pour soi, encountered as an undergraduate, is again in play for me. What does the work mean in itself; what does the work mean to me?

This shift of positions pleasantly troubles me. I believe, with Umberto Eco (1992), that artworks have rights: when interpreting something "it is not true that everything goes" (p.144). That is, there is what I call a range of interpretive tolerability that any artwork will allow. If I respect artworks, and I do, then I ought not make them mean *any* thing I would like them to mean. I believe that an artwork and its generative context limit the acceptability of the multiple interpretations that can be offered about it, unless one denies its presence. That is, "some interpretations are better than others" (Barrett, 2003, p. 225), better grounded in evidence, in closer correspondence to what is contained in the artwork than other interpretations, more enlightening and informative about the artwork, and so forth.

However, I also believe, with Richard Rorty (1992), that interpretations ought to change our lives. His position seems to privilege the viewer more than Eco privileges the artwork. However, I do not think that Eco's and Rorty's positions are incompatible. I believe the "stories" about artworks in this article respect the works by responding to them in deep and personal ways. I believe the artists would be pleased with the different meanings their works have generated in individuals in communities. The interpretations of artworks seem responsive to what can be seen in the artworks, meeting Eco's criterion, and they also seem to have changed people's lives, meeting Rorty's criterion.

By publicly telling her story of living with illness, Emily adds to knowledge of human experience through the particularities of one person's life. By publicly sharing their reactions to pictures, Barb and Joan and others dealing with cancer give us insight into both what the pictures can mean and how some people are living their lives. Sheri, in her book, shows us how to laugh in response to some artworks, and in her e-mail how to cry in response to other artworks. Some pictures expand our understanding of life, but only when they are accompanied by effective narratives. Some interpretations provide more meaningful insights into life than other interpretations. Narratives expand our knowledge of life, but only when they are shared.

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