Looking Back Together: Phenomenology and Nurturing the Reflective Lens in Student Writing

by

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This past summer my family and I set out on a challenging trek in Gros Morne National Park. We would hike the park's namesake, a foreboding 800-meter dome of ancient seabed, the highest point in the Long Range Mountains of western Newfoundland. We walked an hour through gnarled tuckamore – centuries old white spruce tortured and twisted to form an impenetrable canopy just a few feet over our heads. The thin peat at our feet was veined with a network of hardened roots. Shards of white granite scree pushed through the black loam like skeletal remains– a charnel house to commemorate the millennia of unimaginable geological forces. The shadows were deep and silent; the wind swept over us, but was unable to find a way in. It was a series of these elvin gullies interspersed with spongy open bogs that brought us to the base of Gros Morne Mountain.

We began our ascent through a chute on the western face. Car-sized angular boulders of pink granite emblazoned with rosettes of rusty lichen made the going tough. At first the children, aged 9 and 11, were excited and chattered incessantly. In short time, however, they fell silent. Each of us peered up – concentrating on choosing the best path– the one of least resistance. The tight single file into which we had naturally fallen on the trail to the base was now diffused by the challenge of a rocky chute. We were four, united in goal, determined to move forward, yet each individual forging his own way.

Then an interesting pattern emerged. The climb was frequently interrupted when one of us would turn and look back down the mountain, at the boulders over which we had just clambered, back to the base, to the trail, to the highway, to the ocean kilometers beyond. Each one climbing forward, yet looking back. It struck me as a perfectly natural human response – this looking back. But why? What was in that looking back? After all, our goal was the summit. Sure, the momentary lapses in climbing allowed us to catch our breath, to rest and enjoy a sense of accomplishment. But we could have rested while looking to the mountaintop – eyes forward. However, each time one of us stopped, we all turned as in one motion. Looking back offered a different perspective; the opportunity to see an easier route through the boulders we may have missed. Perhaps turning back enabled us to track our progress and judge the distance we had covered? But this was as easily done by looking forward to our destination. Why did we seem to orient ourselves to the ground over which we had just traveled? Why are we drawn to the past?

Yet there are times we are cautioned about looking back, "Don't look down; Don't look back! Keep your eyes on the top." I am reminded of a summer job in a paper mill. I am climbing 50 feet to a catwalk in the ceiling of a dark, steamy industrial building; below me is a hellish cacophony of roaring motors and the thunderous tumble of pulp logs. "Don't look back young feller," the grizzled foreman climbing below me barked just at that moment when the compulsion to do so was at its strongest. He, too, understood the need to look back.

Paradoxically, climbing Gros Morne mountain was all about looking back. When we had struggled our way to the top we would turn to admire the view. Down the mountain, down through time, each of us peering down our chosen paths.

In one sense I can understand our need to look back that day. After all, it is what we humans do. We look back to re-live experiences. We interpret the events, make sense of what has happened, make connections, speculate, weave stories. And all of this revisiting of experience is a manifestation of memory. The Queen in

Alice in Wonderland says, "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards." I would have to agree with her. Looking back guides our way forward. In a life, as in a career, there are times when we are more likely to turn around and survey the landscape behind us. Memory informs the future. It provides a depth of field.

After many years working with adolescent readers and writers I find myself turning to look back quite often these days. Eighteen years is a long trail with innumerable twists and turns, ups and downs, hundreds of morning bells, thousands of checks in the register, and millions of encounters with students in the moment to moment contingencies of the classroom that define our experience – the molecular stuff of a teaching life. These swirling atomistic experiences shape our lives and are given shape by our lives. Most experiences dissipate – lost in synaptic suspension. But some become memories that explode on our consciousness. They are often accompanied by a sensory acuity that allows the moments to be re-lived. These moments can be responsible for the teachers we have become. Writing about these moments brings them back to life, albeit a new life. Many would call this type of writing memoir. I am not comfortable with this word. It connotes something formal, sweeping and grand. Larger lives than mine seem worthy of memoir. Some writers use memoir and autobiography interchangeably. However, William Zinsser writes in *Inventing the Truth*,

> Memoir is defined as some portion of a life. Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing, memoir assumes the life and ignores it. By narrowing the lens, the writer achieves a focus that is not possible in autobiography. Memoir is a window into a life. (1987, p. 8)

In a sense, a life narrative presents an experiential window on which reflection is possible. It is through this window that meaning can be found. And it is in this sense also, that memoir and personal narrative contain elements of the phenomenological. At its simplest, phenomenology is the interpretative study of human experience. It is the exploration of phenomena, where *phenomena* refer to experiences as human beings experience them. Any event, situation or experience that a person can see, hear, touch, taste, smell, feel, intuit, understand, remember, know or live through is a suitable topic for phenomenological reflection. The goal of such reflection however, is not egocentric, idiosyncratic descriptions of life experiences, though this may be the beginning of a phenomenological investigation. The aim is to arrive at meaning, a commonality of human experience that leads to understanding in the lives of human beings. It is for these reasons that I am drawn to phenomenological reflection as a means to allow my students to reach for meaning in their lived experiences. In this paper I will explore how phenomenology may inform and enrich the teaching of writing and how it may provide a way through the problems and complexities associated with teaching the personal narrative in secondary schools.

Leading students through language to literacy has become a complicated affair. Pushed along by the confines of curricula, the canon, standardized testing and fragmented scheduling, I am pulled by the need to hear my students' voices. I know literacy is not found in the course reading lists, or in the mind-numbing array of learning outcomes in provincial curriculum documents. True literacy is an affair of the heart. It means reading and writing what touches our students most deeply. It means, primarily, having my students make meaning of their lives, inside and outside the classroom. Mine is a curriculum in which reading and writing come together as students focus on their lives and make meaning of life experiences. The challenge is to allow this to happen while remaining academically rigorous and thereby credible to students, parents and colleagues. I know I can't be all things to all people. Teaching is about making choices and I choose what I deeply believe to be most essential about literacy and work from there.

I know the power of memory – the very human need to (re)-member a mountain hike or a conversation with a friend. I remember to make sense of the past and I do it all the time. My students do it too. Their memories are the raw material out of which they make meaning. By bringing their lives to a text, they can foster a deeper understanding of their cultural and natural world. This deeper meaning can lead them away from the text and the classroom and out into a world they will meet with more insight, sensitivity and thoughtfulness.

John Kotre (1995), in his fascinating book, *White Gloves: How We Create Ourselves Through Memory,* calls for a dramatic shift in our basic beliefs about autobiographical memory. Kotre challenges the widely held idea that we make ourselves out of our personal histories and our personal histories out of memories. Research shows that a solid majority of people believes every experience in their life is stored somewhere in their brain; even if they cannot remember a particular incident, they assume that some special technique can bring it forth – "in its true, original form." But a new breed of researchers is saying this isn't so. It turns out we make our memories out of our sense of self. Autobiographical memories are usually stories and always constructions. We know we can't remember everything, but we do remember some things and not others.

It seems that we select, arrange and even invent memories based on who we are. We can sound like a politician on the witness stand, ("I have no memory of that.") when events don't fit with our sense of self. Randy Bomer (1995), writing about time and memory in *Time for Meaning*: *Crafting Literate Lives in Middle and High School*, says the anecdotes and epics we hold in our memories, the life stories that become objects of meditation for us, are little allegories that hold our sense of self. He believes that it is only in our stories about ourselves that we get to think of ourselves as characters, "as somehow observable objects" (p. 169). As soon as we tell or write a memory, the memory is folded into the telling. Though we gain the story and can tell it again and again, we lose some of the feeling of remembering the original experience. The memory is replaced by story, and we have made ourselves over again.

Edward Casey (1987) begins his comprehensive study of memory, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study,* with a lament. He writes, "The fact is we have forgotten what memory is and can mean; where once Mnemosyne was a venerated Goddess, we have turned our responsibility for remembering over to the cult of computers, which serve as our modern mnemonic idols" (p. 2). He points out that human memory has become self-externalized: projected outside the rememberer himself and into non-human machines. These machines, however, cannot remember, what they can do "is to record, store and retrieve information – which is only part of what humans do when they enter into a memorious state" (p. 2).

Memory hasn't fared well in education. Its primary function has been to facilitate the recall of facts and information learned by rote. Snippets of poems, songs and the multiplication tables are 'burned' into our brains, but most of what we recite, rehearse and regurgitate promptly dissipates thereafter. Benjamin Bloom's famous taxonomy relegates memory to the bottom as the least important, the least complex, and the lowest level of cognitive functioning. His "higher order" thinking really connotes what is valued in our culture – higher means better or most important, most significant.

And yet, one may counter that the survival of our culture, in fact, the survival of our earth depends on those who remember – those who look back. Experience, knowledge and wisdom are gleaned from memory. Martin Buber wrote that, "Experience comes to man as ' I ', but it is by experience as 'we' that he builds the common world in which he live" (as cited in Britton, 1993, p. 19). Memory may well be the most important form of cognition. In *The Brothers Karamazov,* Dostoyevski says, "People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If one carries many such memories into life, one is safe to the end of one's days, and if one has only one good memory left in one's heart, even that may be the means of saving us" (1957, p. 411). We know from Psychology 101 that Erik Erikson claimed the primary task of adolescence to be self-definition. It is the beginning of interiority and the acquiring of a depth of field. From the inside this 'depth' becomes 'height' – a view of your life from the air rather than the ground. During adolescence we are able to assume a vantage point that allows us to see how discrete episodes in our lives interconnect, how stories *from* a life become a story *of* a life. Students in high school are also beginning to think about their thinking. The new thinking cap of adolescence can be powerful. Kieran Egan (1997) believes that at this stage in their development young people are open to, and capable of, what he terms 'philosophic understanding.' It is a type of thinking that exercises and develops the capacity to see patterns, search for the recurrent, perceive processes, look for essences and make ordering principles and theories. Egan, in *The Educated Mind,* believes that a person with a developed sense of philosophic understanding, "often seems the most effective at getting to the heart of the

matter, at being able to think about an issue clearly and then act on it decisively" (p. 134). Without sounding overly pragmatic, it is safe to say that clarity and essence derives from reduction. But Egan says such philosophic thinking generates schemes that are not rigid, but flexible and attentive to anomalies, schemes that reflect relevant features of reality. Where better to start the nurturing of this kind of search for meaning than with students' own lives. Adolescents soar into the realm of the hypothetical and see what could be; they envision the perfect world and say of the one they're in, "It doesn't have to be this way." Nor do *they* have to be this way. With their newfound ability to consider possibilities, teenagers can ask, "What if I were different?" Now they turn to the principle task of adolescence – forming an identity. We often answer the question, Who am I? with a list of characteristics. But it can be answered as well with a story – the story of a life.

When do we teach students how to gain access to their pasts? Where do they learn to pay attention to their lives and engage in the task of self- invention by choosing what has been important to them, by shaping and reshaping the raw material of their pasts? Is it possible to put into our students' hands the keys to unlock their own life histories? So often in school, student writing consists of simple stories and personal narratives of the ' My Best Experience', 'My Worst Nightmare' or ' My Most Embarrassing Moment' variety. We don't want to limit our students by such inane topic choices. What better way to help nurture literate lives than by having our students look inside for moments in their lives that are important to them, to reflect on these moments and then craft them into a piece of writing to share with others. As a teacher of English I must resist the 'pedagogy of preparation' – preparing students for the next grade, the next course, the next exam – a job, the future. I must value student experiences and see the lives they are living now as worthy of our efforts. Several years ago, John Dixon wrote: "Recalling experience, getting it clear, giving it shape and making connections, speculating and building theories, celebrating (and exorcizing) particular moments in our lives – these are some of the broad purposes that language serves and enables" (1975, p. 3).

The challenge is to help students develop the reflective angle – a lens of meaning that will enable them to see how different stories or even a single incident is linked to the rest of their lives. If such lived, experiential writing is not avoided altogether in high school as being too personal, it often degenerates into the 'personal experience narrative.' A simple story told from beginning to end. It turns into an 'all about everything that happened to me' affair or, 'this happened, then that happened and then... So much of what is produced in classrooms becomes tedious and boorish. Annie Dillard (1987) wrote of memoir, "You have to take great pains not to hang on a reader's arm, like a drunk and say, 'And then I did this and it was so interesting.' I don't write for that reason" (as cited in Zinsser, 1987, p. 36). In the second edition of *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading and Learning,* Nancie Atwell (1998) confesses to have given up on personal narratives. She reveals that her students grew bored telling what happened to them and bored listening to other students' experiences. She admits to tiptoeing around this kind of writing and when it all but disappeared from her students' portfolios she writes:

> I'll be honest: I did not miss them. Sometimes the work that went into crafting them – both the writer's and mine as the teacher – just wasn't justified in the finished writing. Sometimes there was no significance to be found in an experience; it was just one topic on a writer's list. He or she couldn't say why this experience was important, interesting, or worth writing about, and the ordeal of trying to turn a casual choice into a meaningful expression of something almost killed the both of us. (p. 372)

Atwell's renewed energy in teaching the personal experience narrative came through a genre she admits was new to her – memoir. She and her students read memoir, modeled good memoir writing and decided on the qualities that make a successful memoir. Out of her research and practice came a list of techniques for writing successful personal narratives. For the most part, Atwell's list of "Qualities of Memoirs That Work for Us" is a list that characterizes good writing in general, not just good memoir. On the difficult issue of having students find significance, importance and meaning in their experience, the very thing that frustrated Atwell and led her away from personal narrative, she simply says, "The writer's thoughts and feelings, reactions and

reflections, are *revealed,"* (my emphasis) and "A reader learns something about LIFE by reading about a *life"* (author's emphasis, pp. 391-392). Unfortunately, this statement doesn't tell us very much and provides little guidance for teachers to help students arrive at meaning.

I know intimately the frustration and difficulty of which Atwell writes, but the question remains, 'How do I help my students avoid these pitfalls?' The best memoirs explore a number of small, simple moments linked by a common theme and they invariably employ a reflective angle, a lens of meaning that links the lived experience and connects it with the rest of the author's life world. There is no handbook, worksheet, teaching strategy or "proven method" to help our students see the general in the particular, the big in the little, and thereby allow them to mine their experience for meaning and insight. It is difficult to have adolescents pay attention to the minutiae in their lives, the artifacts and sensory details – especially in the age of big screen TV and IMAX theatres. Students see very little in their own lives worthy of writing about – nothing as remotely interesting as what happens on their favourite sit-com or TV drama.

English Language Arts has been marked, for the better part of a century, by an on-going philosophical battle of sorts. This battle, in essence, has been waged over meaning. Adherents to New Criticism sought meaning with a bag full of tools. Separate out the messiness of the reader and his culture, the author and her culture, or any reference to the personal or real life and 'true' meaning can be arrived at. We need skillful students with knowledge of the necessary literary terms, forms and devices in order to discover the meaning in the text. Aligned on the other side were the proponents of Reader Response theories, particularly the followers of Louise Rosenblatt. According to her transactional theory, the individual life experience of the reader is inextricably entwined with the text. As Rosenblatt said in an interview in 1999, "Meaning *happens* during the interplay between reader and text" (my emphasis, Karolides, 1999, p. 164). Our high school English classrooms reflect the fallout from this battle. It is my experience that, with few exceptions, teaching in the final years of schooling (Grades 10, 11 and 12) is predominately teacher-centered with 'correct' interpretations of literature provided in the form of notes, with little or no group work or individualized instruction. Little attention is allocated to readers' responses to literature, but they are a gloss, given lip service, or seen as motivation to get down to the *real* work of 'making meaning' – interpretation of the meaning of the text that would make the New Critics proud. As for personal writing or 'creative writing,' as it is often called, in many high school classrooms it is simply pushed out. Personal writing is seen as too difficult to measure and manage. Besides the curriculum is already full of what must be 'covered' for the year-end standardized exams.

And meaning is lost.

Even in literature rich, student-centered classrooms that provide opportunities for authentic and relevant writing experiences, meaning doesn't just 'happen.' Leading students to discover meaning in their lives, to nudge them toward the big questions and have them connect their experiences with a text, is a daunting task. One for which there is little guidance. A few very special teachers rely on innate talent and passion. As for me, I search for help wherever I can get it.

Despite all of this, I believe it is possible to have our students pay deep and careful attention to particular moments in their lives. I believe we can weave together the separate strands of our subject to provide students with opportunities that will help them live more thoughtful, examined lives (while still preparing them for year-end exams). To stop and ask, 'I've lived all these days and moments – so what?' It may be an intimidating question for a sixteen-year-old, but it is a question that is our right and our duty to ask. To help me think about the possibilities that exist in leading my students into what Polyani and Prosch (1975) called "in-dwelling," and to provide a technique, or at least a way to think about writing and making meaning, I turn to phenomenological writing and the work of Max van Manen. I am not suggesting that we introduce our sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds to the phenomenology of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. But certain aspects of phenomenological writing, as explicated by van Manen (1997), may allow teachers to help secondary students reach for meaning in their lived experiences that goes far beyond the 'personal narrative'

in its scope and in its power to touch and transform both reader and writer. Particularly, I look to phenomenology's return to experience as a way out of the problems associated with teaching the personal narrative in school. van writes in his book *Researching Lived Experience*; "Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our every day experiences. Phenomenology asks, 'What is this or that kind of experience like?'" (1997, p. 9). A phenomenological text is oriented by a question that points to lived experience. It is a question in which the writer is deeply interested and in posing the question she hopes to draw the reader in with a sense of wonder.

In my own high school classes, it is with *the question* that I begin.

Jennifer, a Grade 11 student, scans her writer's notebook for an idea – something to write about. She stops at a page of notes and scribbles taken when our class read Yevgeny Yevtushenko's short story 'Red' and Stephen Spender's poem "My Parents Kept Me From Children Who Were Rough." She has roughly outlined a paragraph or two about being 'picked on' by a group of popular girls when she was in Grade 8. "I think I would like to write about this", she says as I walked slowly past her desk. I stop and she briefly tells me the story, it includes the image of a group of girls literally closing ranks, forming a tight circle, to block Jennifer from partaking in their conversation. I tell her it is a powerful image.

"So what question would you like to explore through your story?"

"I am not sure," she replied. " I was thinking, maybe, betrayal, what it is like to be betrayed, because one of those girls was my friend."

"That's a big question – so many aspects. What did Stephen Spender's poem say that made you think of your experience?"

"It's about power, how Stephen felt intimidated and fearful, but he secretly yearns to be with them. He wanted to make friends with his bullies. Maybe I could look at the question, 'What's it like for a kid to be bullied?' I know a lot people with stories to tell about that…and it happens all the time. Not the kind of bullying where some big guys pick on the smaller kids. It's not that kind. Sometimes it can be just a look…you know?" She seems excited and flips to a clear page in her handbook.

By focusing on a question, the writer is led away from the narrative, from simply re-telling the events, to "So what?, Why is this important?" The question leads naturally to wonder, and to reflection.

Jennifer's tentative experiential description and eventually the 'question' she chose to explore, "What is the experience of being bullied?" had its germination in response to literature. We live vicariously through the experiences of characters in novels. Poets are able to evoke feelings and capture human experience in ways that are truly sublime. van Manen (1997) writes; "Literature, poetry, or other story forms serve as a fountain of experiences to which the phenomenologist may turn to increase practical insights" (p. 70). The English classroom can provide a wealth of literature upon which students may draw. An open and rich learning environment allows students to draw upon their own reading and texts; be they music, art or film, each can provide a wealth of possible lived experiences and insights.

Jonathan is writing furiously. "How is it going?" I query. He is writing about an experience he had about a year before. He and his grandfather were in a small open boat on the ocean when the engine quit. They were, as he says using a colloquialism, "Burned down for gas." He wrote:

> *The sea was fairly rough. Pop tried to bleed the motor first but it was no use. I used the oars to keep our nose into the wind, but we were drifting fast toward the cliffs outside Bett's Cove. I wasn't scared, it was as if I had this magical faith in Pop to do something. He had fished all his life and had more stories of close calls to tell than I care to remember. It's strange because I felt*

> *we were lost, but I knew where we were. I had been in that spot lots of times before. However, now everything was different. We weren't lost, but to Mom and Dad and Nan, we were. We should have been back a half an hour ago. Then I noticed Pop sneak a look at his watch. He was thinking what I was thinking.*

"I want to write about the experience of what we do, you know, what people think about when they are lost. What keeps them going." Jonathan then tells me another brief anecdote about a friend who overturned in his canoe on a lake. "That guy's thoughts turned to his family and, strangely, he too said he wasn't afraid like when I was with Pop. "As a matter of fact," Jonathan said, "he lashed himself to the canoe with his belt, just in case, you know, they would find him if he didn't make it." We spoke about the three doomed adventurers in the non-fiction account of *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* (Wallace, 1982) we had studied that fall. Each character relies on private thoughts and fantasies to get them through the roughest parts of the ordeal. Jonathan remembered the turmoil of the main character, Brian Robeson, in Gary Paulsen's novel *Hatchet* (1987) and how the character remains focused on memories of his relationship with his mother to help him through his ordeal. Each story, or anecdote, offers Jonathan a broader horizon, a possible world by which he can explore his experience in more depth. I tell him I have a copy of Gabriel Marquez's *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* (1989) that I can loan him. Jamie, the boy behind us, is eavesdropping and adds, "What about that old guy in Harbour Round last year who went to check his rabbit slips and was never seen again?"

"Yeah, I remember," said Jonathan. I move down the row.

I have no delusions that what my students are doing is phenomenology. As a matter of fact, I do not even use the word. But I do know that by introducing my students to some of the methodological practices of phenomenological writing and reflection that are oriented to meaning, they acquire a sensitivity to language, a reflectivity that is open to experience. I have shared with my student writers excerpts from phenomenological texts accessed on the phenomenologyonline.com web site, and they entered into the experience of obsessive compulsive disorder, the lifeworld of an asthmatic, and what it means to communicate via e-mail. These high school students were at times fascinated by these encounters, and at other times impatient with the detail and rich description. Phenomenology requires we pay close attention to the words we choose. "Being attentive to the etymological origins of words may sometimes put us in touch with an original form of life where the terms still had living ties to the lived experience from which they originally sprang" (van Manen, 1997, p. 59). I have shared in my students' genuine excitement and perplexity to learn the etymological origin of the word, bully, is 'sweetheart' and that today's negative connotation may be linked to aggression through a now obscure term from 'scrummage' in Eton football. Students work hard to make their descriptions evocative to create a sense of presence and nearness (van Manen, 1997, pp. 53-54). I have had students interview family and friends and subsequently craft anecdotes containing sensitivity, insight and wisdom.

Mary Ellen was fascinated with how we experience our hands! She had written several false starts looking at nail polishes and manicures, nail art and jewelry. I was skeptical, not knowing how she would pull anything together that would be satisfying to her. I remember when she returned to class after a long weekend with the first draft of a piece that would eventually become something she entitled *Passages*:

> *As long as I can remember, even as a tiny girl, I was fascinated with my grandfather's hands. My grandfather was a fisherman and his hands tell his story. His fingers are thick and blunt from years of hard use. The skin is blotched, callused and leathery. The knuckles are huge, and the tip of his middle finger on the right hand is missing.*
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> *At the kitchen table one night, drinking his tea from one of Nan's delicate teacups, his gnarled fingers gentling the porcelain handle, he outstretched his hand and told me the story of the scars. When he was a boy cutting out cod tongues to make a few cents he severed the base of his left pinky finger, slicing the nerve and causing the finger to permanently curve slightly toward the palm. Miles off shore a jigger hook entered deeply the flesh of the palm. The barb made it*

impossible to pull out. So he had to push it all the way through. Cut the barb off with pliers and pull it down through his hand and out.

When he plays cards he lays each card on the table with a tremendous crack of his knuckles. It is loud and hurts my ears, makes me jump. He doesn't even feel it. Yet those hands that worked for long hours in frigid cold waters splitting fish soaked in blood and fish scales, are capable of great gentleness.

They have smoothed my hair and tenderly held my hand. They cradled me when I was hurt, and lovingly stitched my doll's arm that ripped when it had entangled in the spokes of my bicycle wheel. I have seen my grandfather's hands split hardened chunks of spruce and birch; I've seen them mired in axle grease, blood from a scraped knuckle oozing through. I've seen them carefully scoop the slush from my ice fishing hole to keep it clear. I wondered if they felt anything at all.

But now I know different. The other night I passed my grandfather's bedroom. His door was slightly ajar. He was kneeling by his bed, his little Bible with the thin pages in his hands. He looked small, vulnerable. As he lovingly placed the book on his night table I saw his hand tremble slightly.

I sometimes believe those hands remember. They know about the countless fish split, oars pulled, gears changed, heads patted, dogs stroked, axes sharpened and children comforted. And I think I understand why Santiago, the old fisherman in The Old Man and the Sea spoke to his hand. "Be patient, hand," he said, "I do this for you." And, "How do you feel, hand?" he asked the cramped hand that was as stiff as rigor mortis. "I'll eat some more for you."

Now I see the great hands tremble, the delicate turning of the crinkly yellowed pages and I feel his passage may soon be complete. This makes me very sad. I look to my own hands. I turn them over and I wonder, 'What will your story be?'

The emergence of a theme that arises out of my students' anecdotes, stories or literature manifests itself as a true discovery. On the other hand, I have had students who explore the experience of a sleepover or of talking on the phone, but who never really get past a superficial treatment of cute illustrations and 'kiss and tell' stories. But at least, these writers too are in control of their craft, pulling together lived experience, borrowing the stories of others, paying close attention to the meaning of words to arrive at some kind of meaning. Phenomenology lends itself naturally to the writing of memoir, for phenomenological reflection is not, as van Manen (1997) says, "*introspective* but *retrospective*. Reflection on lived experience is always recollective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through" (p. 10).

I believe my work with phenomenology and student writing is just beginning. Although my tentative attempts to incorporate some phenomenological methods into my teaching of writing have resulted in a way for students to evoke meaning in their reading and writing, I, too, am very much a student of human science research methods. It is a methodology I do not expect to master any time soon. And yet, I sense the potential of phenomenological writing to turn lived experience into our project – both teacher and students. Thinking of our lives as projects is what makes our short interlude on this planet purposeful – and thus keeps us alive. My challenge is to start now; to help students develop the reflective angle – a lens of meaning that will enable young writers to see how different stories, or even a single incident, is linked to the rest of their lives. Is it possible then to help young writers develop a phenomenological sensitivity to their lived experience? I think so. Do I expect to develop sixteen-year-old phenomenologists? I think not. But I believe it is possible to use the approaches of human science research to enable our students to capture and interpret the possible meanings of their experiences. I also believe that Language Arts teachers, with a strong orientation toward human science inquiry and experience in phenomenological writing that seeks to gain a deeper understanding

of our everyday experiences, will teach differently. I know that the reading of phenomenological texts and great novels, stories and poems can build into students (and teachers) possibilities for writing about their own lifeworlds. I also know phenomenology serves as a powerful stimulus for mining memories and unique moments for meaning; it will help my students see the general in the particular, the big in the small.

A teaching life is about journeys. In a quest for meaning we are lead down different paths. Invariably, we turn to look behind, over the ground we have traveled. We must make sense, and in so doing, make something of our lives. Streams of recollected experience run down a rocky chute in a mountainside to intersect, and at some point coalesce into pools of insight and meaning. It is an unending journey for both teacher and student. It is my hope that both will arrive as more reflective, thoughtful, sensitive human beings – human beings engaged in the unending pursuit of meaning.

Resources for Memoir: A Starting Place

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