
Can the Path Be Found in the Divergent Stream?

by Michael Brien

On the first night of last fall's Composition class, a student very hesitatingly took the syllabus I offered him and asked, "We don't have to take this seriously, do we?"

I answered by offhandedly offering an abbreviated quote from Sandra Cisneros. "Writers are liars," I said.

He looked at me rather quizzically and accepted the syllabus from my hand.

Later, I asked myself what that moment of confrontation had meant to the two of us? At first I thought it had all to do with authority. Do as I say. There it is, in your hands, in black and white, struggled over during the summer, put together with thought, and afterthought, and some sense of anticipation. Yet, I had not anticipated this student's response . . . "We don't have to take this seriously, do we?" Do we?

Very early in his book, *Inter Views*, written with Laura Pozzo, James Hillman, noted psychoanalyst, is confronted by Ms. Pozzo with a statement similar in intent to the question my student had asked of me. Hillman responds by saying, "When I am asked a question directly, in confrontation, I am a coward . . . I need some kind of ruse between me and you in order to be sincere."

Had my glib response to my student been such a ruse? Had I too played the coward? Had my agenda been so inflexible that

there was no room to wander from it? Can we ever be so certain about where we tread?

Hillman is cautious as he continues his discussion. He knows not to confuse truth with sincerity. They are not the same thing. “Truth,” he says, “is revealed. It cannot ever be told . . . It has to appear inside the telling.”

Sandra Cisneros agrees. “Real life doesn’t have shape,” she says, “. . . real stories do. No wonder they call writers ‘liars’.”

Franz Kafka, too, had once said that confession and lie were the same thing. “We cannot communicate what we are,” he said, “exactly because we are it. We can communicate only what we are not, that is, only the lie.”

How often do we expect that truth take only one path? Quite possibly we have heard our fathers or mothers, and maybe even ourselves, utter, “It’s my way or the highway.” Yet, in getting a student to communicate effectively, we should not be expecting, nor be satisfied, that the student merely reiterate our “truth” in their responses. Instead, we should expect that their response be full of the knowledge of context and commitment, that it be a narrative that is full of passionate attention to character. We do need to be emphatic in asking for this high level of sincerity. The Fathers of the Eastern Church maintain the focus of their disciples with the simple phrase, “Wisdom. Let us be attentive.” Insincerity amounts to a student turning their back against the opportunity to learn wisdom.

I think the question this student raised for me was very similar to the questioning of James Hillman, Sandra Cisneros, or Franz Kafka. “Is this the only way I can come to know the truth?”

Laura Pozzo later chides Hillman to explicate himself. “How do you tell what is revelation and what is camouflage?” she asks.

Hillman answers, “Camouflage is revelation . . . because each person has his or her way of hiding. Camouflage is simply another way of revealing yourself.”

If I could, (and I am lucky because with each new class of students, I can), relive that moment of confrontation with this composition student, I would repeat Hillman’s answer to Laura Pozzo. “Truth is revealed. It cannot ever be told . . . It has to appear in the retelling . . . That is why,” Hillman said, “we listen to what is not said in psychoanalysis . . .”

One of the lessons that I assign to my Composition student deals with the mutual needs and exclusive differences of “facts” and “inferences.” I try to get them to understand that neither is less than the other, but together they draw a more complete picture of our relationships with each other. The educated guess and the physical reality serve the same purpose, to get at truth.

When Ernest Hemingway said that the written word was merely the tip of the iceberg, I believe he was reflecting on Hillman’s idea of revelation. The mountain of ice that we see rising above the surface of the water is indeed fact, but its inference to the greater mountain that lies below can only be imagined. Perhaps as educators, it is our job to enable our students to reflect on the tips of their icebergs in order that they can also begin to imagine the immensity of what may lie below.

My student’s question forced me to remove yet another “truth” found in Hemingway’s iceberg metaphor: That in our feeble attempts to qualify “truth,” both parties need to get out of the way.

Another one of my composition students, struggling with the choice of examples provided in the text from which she was to choose a topic to write on, said, “None of these makes any sense to me. I can’t relate to any of them.”

“Come up with one of your own, then,” I challenged her.

It was the intent, the idea, the search for truth, that was important. The examples given were not the only way to do it. They were not the only roads that led to Rome.

In the end, I cannot make the connections for my students. Their connections are already made. They exist only with them. I can only help them hear and react to the ideas that are already gestating in their spirits. I need to let them tell me their stories. I need to listen to their narrative, and challenge them to listen to it themselves.

Often, in my Composition courses, this takes the form of weekly private-reflection assignments on values-readings. When completed, these reflections are shared with fellow students. The result is a compilation essay in which the ruminations of four or five students are synthesized into a five-page critical essay. In reality, that final piece of writing has no single owner, it has been created by them all.

I disagree with Laura Pozzo, when in her unwavering banter with James Hillman, she insists that, “Patients aren’t poets.” I wonder if this isn’t the same paradigm many of us educators use to deflect our students’ search for truth in our courses. “Students aren’t ready to be poets, mathematicians, accountants,” we say. “Step by step, they need to follow our direction, and when the time is right, then we will have guided them to become poets, mathematicians, accountants.”

We should be as sensitive to their hopes, memories, and present wrestlings, as we ask them to be in wrestling with the “Great” texts that we require in our courses. In my Introduction to Literature classes, I invite each student to create their own voice in the various literary genres that we are studying. Practice the art of sharing your stories, your lives, I tell them. What right do we have to criticize, or admit defeat in trying to understand what the poet, novelist, or dramatist, is saying, unless we at least attempt to trace the symbols, utter the sounds, and commit some portion of our own testimony to paper?

In his short story, "The Storyteller," Saki (H.H.Munro), illustrates the wonderful, sustaining possibilities of immersing oneself in the telling of the story:

"Come over here and listen to a story," said the aunt
. . . The children moved listlessly towards the aunt's
end of the carriage. Evidently her reputation as a
story-teller did not rank high in their estimation . . .

In a low, confidential voice . . . she began an unenterprising and deplorably uninteresting story about a little girl who was good and made friends with everyone on account of her goodness, and was finally saved from a mad bull by a number of rescuers who admired her moral character . . .

"It's the stupidest story I've ever heard," said the bigger of the small girls, with immense conviction . . .

There has been a bachelor on the train listening to the aunt's vain attempt at capturing the children's attention. I think he, along with the children saw and tasted the staleness of her "truth." Challenged by the aunt to come up with better, the bachelor proceeds to tell his tale, letting it spin out of control, it seems, as he incorporates each child's incessant questions and concerns, until his tale is complete and embedded into the children's imagination.

Erich Heller has written that, ". . . The only real world is the world of human inwardness . . ." That's it, isn't it? Truth lies embedded in our imagination. Our only job as educators is to make our students hungry with the desire to feed on their imagination. In offering them both fertile pastures and divergent paths to choose from, we may all, in time, find that elusive center of understanding.