

Chapter 5. Among the Ruins of Bethsaida: Reflections on Thirty Years of Teaching Creative Nonfiction

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Yesterday, like almost every day after teaching, I walked by the ruins of Bethsaida. Or rather, a few artifacts in a small, glassed-in hallway display and adjacent exhibit room.¹

For many years, the University of Nebraska at Omaha, where I direct the English department's Creative Nonfiction Writing Program, oversaw the archaeological recovery of that ancient city in what is now the Golan Heights of Israel. Dominating the exhibit is the stele (or arched stone marker) depicting the "moon god," a bull-faced deity with horns the shape of a crescent moon. The stele was originally located at the "inner gateway" to the walled city and dates back to when Bethsaida, founded in the tenth century BCE, served as the capital of the kingdom of Geshur. This Moon God, as the informational sign explains, was among the most important in Mesopotamia and reigned over darkness and simultaneously "created light, the sun, and the world."

Bethsaida was destroyed in 732 BCE by the king of Assyria, and subsequently fell under the jurisdiction of many different rulers and civilizations, many different gods. Jesus is said to have performed mighty works there, including healing a blind man and walking on water and feeding five thousand with only five loaves and two fish. It was the home of at least three of his disciples, and the place where he called on them to become fishers of men.

A few centuries later, floods and tectonic activity caused the Sea of Galilee to retreat south. The once vibrant city dried up, and in another few centuries, its location became so completely forgotten it was believed by some to be a figment of story and imagination. Until it was rediscovered beneath the sand and rock in 1987 by a scholar here at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Rami Arav. For years, Professor Arav enlisted UNO faculty and students to help at the dig site, and the exhibit includes a few of their journals and scrapbooks.

I was not among those faculty who visited Bethsaida, but yesterday I carried with me, as if in one of the cracked offering vessels at the foot of the Moon God, a sentence from a student essay I'd just read that made me reconsider the distance. It was written by a woman who had been physically abused by her

1. This essay originally appeared in *All Is Leaf: Essays and Transformations*, © John T. Price, and used with the permission of University of Iowa Press.

husband, and the line was: “After months of wandering in the rubble, I knew I needed to rebuild.”

You’d think after thirty years of teaching what is now broadly called “creative nonfiction,” I’d be more prepared for a line like that, which, divorced from the essay or from the life, is pretty ordinary. But such a divorce is no longer possible for me, if it ever was. That is partly a consequence of the history of my own education as a writer and teacher, which I hold dear, and which I sometimes fear will, like Bethsaida, be lost if I do not in some way commemorate it.

As many others have observed, creative nonfiction is a relatively new term applied to a very old form, which might loosely be defined as fact-based nonfiction that uses creative writing techniques. The label has been retroactively applied to such diverse historical forms as personal essays, memoirs, travel writing, nature writing, narrative nonfiction, lyric essays, speculative nonfiction, prehistoric cave drawings (the first graphic memoirs?), and multiple other sub-genres my students encounter every day, in print or online, but don’t think twice about.

Literary taxonomies certainly have their usefulness, but I tell my students that they should also think of literary forms, as with living creatures, in terms of how they behave and interact and reproduce—for art of all sorts does indeed reproduce and evolve over generations and centuries.

What do these forms have to teach us about certain ways of being in the world?

When it comes to creative nonfiction—or literary nonfiction, as some prefer to call it—my answer has a lot to do with the habitat in which I first encountered it. I count myself among the initial generations of university students, in the 1980s and 1990s, to be trained specifically to write and teach creative nonfiction. Not as a sideshow to our primary careers as novelists or poets or scholars or journalists or celebrities, but as our primary calling and craft, for which we earned advanced degrees and then occupied newly created teaching positions in creative nonfiction (the name that first achieved popularity during that time).

At the University of Iowa, when I first arrived as a freshman in 1984, the famous Writers’ Workshop did not offer nonfiction courses—not unusual in creative writing programs at the time. That was left to a group of visionary faculty in the English department, led by Carl H. Klaus, most of whom were scholars in literature and rhetoric. They shared, however, a passion for artfully crafted nonfiction and a growing desire to elevate it from an introductory exercise in composition classrooms, where it had been stranded since the 1960s, to its rightful place among the great literary forms. And to offer students a chance to study, practice and teach that art.

I was one of those students. As an undergraduate from a smallish Iowa town, I arrived on campus intending to study the sciences and go on to medical school, which made my grandmother very happy. I was also a big fan of the television medical drama *St. Elsewhere*, and wanted to be just like Denzel Washington—still do. And I wanted to heal people and be rich. While fulfilling those pesky general education humanities classes, however, I encountered, without knowing it,

several creative nonfiction writers who also happened to be scientists: Primo Levi (chemist), Rachel Carson (marine biologist), and Loren Eiseley (anthropologist).

Somehow, reading these people didn't feel like a required assignment. It felt more essential, like breathing.

The first opportunity I had to write creative nonfiction myself, outside of that introductory composition assignment, was in an Advanced Writing course taught by Professor Paul Diehl in the summer of 1987—less than a year away from graduation and (I assumed) medical school, where I planned to become a pediatrician. The previous semester, Professor Diehl's literature class on lyric structures in poetry had transformed my relationship to language, which, as an extreme though functioning introvert, had mostly been a source of fear and embarrassment. Professor Diehl apparently detected the small needle of potential in this student's unexceptional haystack, and invited me to join his summer class, which was a slight violation of the rules, since it was a graduate course. Here was an important, early example of the kind of teacher who is willing to risk dishonoring academic "rigor" that they might better honor the talents of their students.

That said, the graduate students in this class were all brilliant, dedicated nonfiction writers, and I sensed the first day that I was way out of my depth. During the next several weeks, however, I did my best to compose an essay about my ongoing job as a nursing assistant for children with developmental disabilities, some of them terminally ill. I had originally taken this job to boost my resume for medical school, but over the years, my experiences with these children had transformed me in profound ways I only first articulated on those pages. The essay was read and discussed—my first experience with serious workshopping—and the responses, in addition to improving the prose, invited me to more closely examine the personal reasons behind that work.

This is another of the many possible definitions of creative nonfiction: using memory and language to trace our ethical lives back to their sources. To cross the distance between the *then* and the *now*, uncovering meaning to share.

That process, with that particular essay, led me to revisit the stillbirth of my brother in 1974 and the feelings I had been carrying inside me, largely unacknowledged, since I was seven years old. With each child I worked with in that hospital, and all those imagined future pediatric patients, I wondered if, in part, I was making up for some personal failing I thought had led to my brother's death. I hadn't been good enough, and never would be.

Maybe it was time to let that go.

While I don't consider creative nonfiction writing to be therapy—there are other degrees for that—its cathartic, personally transformative dimensions should never be dismissed. I'm a living example. In the end, that class taught me a lot about the more technical aspects of good writing, which are valuable in any profession, as English departments frequently trumpet on their websites. But what it also taught me was less easily measured: that the practice of medicine is not the only healing art. A fragment of the human story, previously hidden,

revealed and shaped through artful writing by the one who actually lived it, for those who had not, might also claim that ability. For both reader *and* writer.

Soon after, to my grandmother's bitter disappointment, I dropped pre-med and applied to the graduate program in English at Iowa. At the time, their degree in nonfiction writing was called the Master of Arts with an Emphasis in Expository Writing, or M.A.W. Not an ideal acronym, but I have since learned to appreciate how creative nonfiction programs in their infancy often have to learn to live and grow, like hermit crabs, inside the calcified shells of more traditional academic structures. Until they are free to create structures of their own.

And that's exactly what happened. Over the next decade, the program would transform into one of the first stand-alone M.F.A. programs in nonfiction writing in the country, and I would be among its first graduates. We students learned much by watching our mentors, in the guise of both shepherds and warriors, strive to elevate the program to equal status among advanced degrees offered by our university, advocating for precious (and often jealously guarded) resources and faculty lines. It was a cause aided by the excellent teaching in the program, which resulted in excellent student writing and, later, excellent books.

Harder to measure, however, are the ways their teaching improved the quality of our lives, calling us to set forth and become our own kinds of fishers.

Which brings me to another professor of mine at Iowa, Richard Lloyd-Jones. A Victorianist by training, his primary professional interests were in rhetoric, composition, and the teaching of writing, for which he had earned national recognition and awards. I knew none of that when I signed up for his class in the fall of 1990, titled *Rhetorical Theory, Analysis, and Application*. I was 24 and, unfortunately, this would be the only course I would take with him, since he was nearing retirement.

On the first day of class, he invited us to call him Jix (a surprising intimacy during that era), and all I can say of my initial impression is that he instantly put me at ease. Perhaps it was the bearded, grandfatherly appearance or the pixie-ish smile that rarely wavered, even as he seemed to struggle to breathe. I would later find out he was operating with only part of a lung, due to a teenage bout with bronchiectasis. Every sentence seemed to cost him—but what sentences! They were brilliant and eloquent, yes, but I would also soon learn to appreciate their informing kindness and curiosity and good humor.

There was laughter in that theory classroom, which is no small accomplishment.

The text we used was *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, a huge tome with thin, semi-transparent pages that made reading them feel like riding a canoe on the surface of an ocean, constantly aware of the depths beneath the oars. Those were some tough waters for me—Aristotle, Locke, Cereta, Nietzsche, Bakhtin, Foucault, Cixous—but it helped to have such a knowledgeable and patient guide. I knew that during the next class, Jix would inevitably bring these luminaries back to earth with his go-to question: “*So why does any of this matter?*” During our often digressive discussions, that was always the

orienting issue for him: the application, the relevancy. And most of all, the ways we might use these ideas to become more intentional and helpful as writers, teachers, and moral actors in the world. Everything else was secondary to that quest.

This included, it seemed, his grading policy, which was never mentioned (that I can recall) and would have felt almost blasphemous in a class dedicated to the majesty and ethical power of language. I wrote my final paper on the rhetorician Kenneth Burke and received my first and only A+ in a graduate course. I can't recall why I was initially drawn to Burke, perhaps because the introduction in our book claimed he was "vigorously attacked by both literary critics and rhetoricians for muddling literature and nonliterature, poetic and rhetoric, language and life."

Much like our professor did every day in class.

I didn't appreciate it then, but that course was good preparation for the challenges facing me and other creative nonfiction writers and teachers in the years ahead, many of whom would be vigorously attacked for their own muddling of language and life. In the mid-1990s, even as *The New York Times Magazine* declared it "The Age of the Literary Memoir" and my fellow students were signing lucrative book contracts, there was sometimes an awe-inspiring backlash in newspapers and magazines against "the fourth genre." This includes a still-infamous piece in *Vanity Fair* by Michael Shnayerson, titled "Women Behaving Badly," which implied that popular memoirs by several featured women, some of whom focused on abuse, might be the result of unresolved psychological problems and/or a petty desire to take advantage of a hot memoir market.

Public criticism was also directed at teachers and institutions that offered courses in creative nonfiction, still relatively rare at the time. In 1997, on his show "Politically Incorrect," Bill Maher and his guests skewered college professors teaching memoir writing to students who, they claimed, had experienced little worth writing about. "An exercise in licking the mirror," they deemed it.

Even one of the candidates for the English department's first official creative nonfiction hire claimed, during his visit with students, that he preferred to get personal writing "out of the way" early in the semester then move to more "serious," research-intensive forms such as the cultural criticism he wrote—because, you know, it's all nonfiction. He said this without hesitation or apology to a group of people, ranging from their twenties to their fifties, who were seeking guidance on how to write effectively about personal experiences with, among other things, clinical depression and physical disability and the death of a parent. In contrast, his most recent area of serious research was Barbara Walters.

It is sometimes hard to explain to students in one of the many creative nonfiction courses currently offered in my department, and elsewhere, what it was like back then to be studying, writing and teaching this form while pursuing our degrees. Equally difficult to explain are the challenges that awaited some of us on the other side of graduation. Getting an academic job was no small thing, and still isn't. But then came the sometimes lonely task of building programs from virtually nothing, with little or no resources; founding and editing journals that published

nonfiction; organizing and funding (sometimes out of our own pockets) visiting author series; creating entire catalogs of new curricula; advocating for the genre (and for its writers seeking promotion) among colleagues and administrators who had little knowledge of the field; and working locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally to demonstrate the importance of personal stories as a way into social, cultural, and ecological knowledge and understanding. A way into witness.

Today, what seems normal to many in English and creative writing programs is to some of us from that earlier time a miracle—not unlike the loaves and fishes—but one that was the result of Herculean efforts by people we knew and cared about. Still care about.

Most importantly, in the midst of all that, we were trying to mentor our own students as they sought to craft meaningful, public art out of some of the most intensely private experiences. Over the years, I tried one organized pedagogy or another, but ultimately kept returning to what Jix and some of my other nonfiction teachers taught me: to humble yourself to the text and to its author. To fully immerse in the vision laid out before you on the page and to find within that vision, while acknowledging your own potential biases, the standards and expectations it has created for itself.

Then to do your best—through critical analysis but also informed compassion and improvisation—to help that piece live up to its potential, as you interpret it, to transform both writer *and* reader.

For that to occur, I was taught, the work should hold a deep urgency for the teacher, as it does for the writer—even if the writer cannot yet fully articulate that urgency, as I couldn't in that first essay about being a nursing assistant. The work, and the individual life that informs it, should be invited to enter the core of our being and take hold because, we must tell ourselves, this civilization, this world depends on it. Or at least the person seated at that desk in the third row does.

To be trusted with these personal stories and experiences, year after year, is a tremendous privilege, but on some days it feels like something else altogether.

Far from being a “voyeur” (as another 1990s *Vanity Fair* article called memoir readers), I sometimes think I resemble the shape-shifting alien in Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, himself from a lost civilization, who is transformed into the person most loved or hated by the humans around him, until he vanishes entirely under the weight of their desires. High up among those desires, I have found—and I felt it as a student also—is that the creative nonfiction teacher become the long-awaited ideal reader, the one who might not just offer technical advice, but also become the gateway to validation and perhaps publication. The one who will help ensure that their stories—and the life from which they are born—will not be ignored or dismissed or lost or forgotten.

How can I explain to those students or to anyone that their stories, published or not, are never lost? I carry them with me, always.

Just this week, there came back to me three of those stories, those lives—each written on the cusp of distinctly new eras in the history of a civilization. The first

occurred when I was purchasing a pastry at our student center, and it had some powdered sugar on it. I was suddenly reminded of the student in the fall of 2001 who wrote a personal essay about 9/11 and being middle-aged and sacrificing most of her personal life in order to take care of her aging mother. The week following the attacks, with all the reports of powdered anthrax, she opened two boxes of chicken potpies—the only dinner she could afford some nights due to her mother’s medical bills and other expenses—to find it full of a white powdery substance. She slumped sobbing to the floor, panicked that she would die in that kitchen, cooking potpies for her mother instead of having a life, and called the first response terrorism unit. They soon showed up in their hazmat suits and removed the suspicious substance, which of course turned out to be flour.

Not very long after reading that piece, I watched a local news report on some of the more “unusual” calls to the terrorism unit, which included the potpie incident, but not the story of the aging mother or the medical bills or the vanished personal life.

The second occurred when I entered the men’s bathroom on the third floor. I once again avoided the far stall, because a student of mine from a wealthy family in west Omaha had once written about how, after back surgery, he had become addicted to prescribed painkillers and then heroin—well before the national opiate scourge was described as such by mainstream media. This student wrote about how, in that very stall, he had injected heroin into one of his only remaining viable veins, which was in his penis. For him, it was the moment of complete ruination, when he realized he had “roamed in the rubble too long and needed to rebuild,” which he did.

Now I look on that stall much the same as I look on the remains of Bethsaida, with the sense that something at once horrifying and sacred took place there. I won’t step inside it.

The third occurred while in the midst of teaching a class, simply noticing a desk in the third row that had once been occupied by a quiet, middle-aged, middle school substitute teacher who wrote about nothing more dramatic than his love of teaching, community theatre, and family. A year or so later he took his own life. And yet I can still see him sitting there, hear the words of the essay he read on the final day of class—a work of art, a voice never to be heard again on this earth.

Is this any less important than the fall of empires?

When I think of personal writing teachers who began their careers around the same time I did (or even earlier), I wonder if their days are spent, like mine, roaming through the fragments of such stories, and the memories and wisdom and emotions they evoke. I wonder if we have become a kind of living archaeological site where, inside us, hidden even from ourselves, are the accumulated stories of all the students we’ve worked with, all the lives we’ve entered, however briefly, to witness both misery and miracle. Together, we have mentored thousands of these students as they toiled over their sentences, their scenes, their articulated

thoughts and feelings and experiences. I wonder if it is true that the life stories we read become in some way a part of our own, completing the grand exercise of compassion that we are told literature is capable of and which, as some of us believe, is its primary purpose.

If so, then over these last thirty years my life has been expanded thousand-fold, tearing down walls and broadening the boundaries of what I might, in some other vocation, have naively considered an individual self.

Within those expanded boundaries, I have vicariously experienced numerous awkward, funny, inspiring, sometimes disturbing family gatherings. I have attended countless funerals and weddings and births and doctor appointments. I have met and loved and grieved every kind of pet imaginable. I have journeyed to beautiful and frightening places, across oceans and in backyards, in old cars and new, in combines and semi-trucks, on bicycles and motorcycles and airplanes, some of which were dropping bombs. I have made love in too many places, in too many ways, with too many people, to possibly recall. I have been married and divorced and remarried and divorced again. I have been lesbian, gay, bi, trans and ace, and been loved as such, but also, as such, been beaten and ostracized and cursed and condemned to hell. I have remained celibate until the night of my sixtieth birthday. I have been a monk who studied wild turkeys, found faith and lost it and found it again. I've had visions of Jesus and Mary and Buddha, recited the Quran, seen the ghosts of ancestors standing at the foot of my bed, and worshipped trees and rocks. I've lost a teenage son in a car crash, adopted sons and daughters, been adopted myself and found my biological parents. I've given birth and had abortions, and been someone who wished they'd never been born. I've been paralyzed and suffered malaria, Lyme disease, breast cancer, cervical cancer—every kind of cancer—a variety of STDs, the full spectrum of mental illness, Crohn's and celiac disease and diabetes-induced blindness, and achieved a full body of tattoos. I've lost my job, worked three jobs, night and day jobs, labor and desk jobs, and still been hungry and full of dreams. I have felt the rage and betrayal and violence of racism. I've been sexually abused by strangers and family members and priests and coaches and employers and neighbors and friends. I have been incarcerated and been set free.

I have died and not gone into the light.

So it continues. With every personal story I read—such as this latest abuse story—there is this opening and excavation, the new words, the new life uncovering other experiences I've read about or remembered, other ways of telling and the new ways they make me see and know and feel. Every time, I ask: How can I help this newly encountered temple of prose draw strength from what has come before, and yet distinguish itself, build itself to the sky, temporary though we know it all to be? How can I assist this word architect in creating something that will last and be remembered by more than a few people in a classroom? How might that work of art unlock hidden rooms inside readers, that the vision can make a home there and do its necessary work? How can I—despite my own

limitations—make a home for that vision inside me, where I can preserve and honor it—honor them?

To do so means, within myself, to become transformed—to build and be destroyed and rebuild—with each essay or memoir I encounter. Each student.

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Now, if I were back in that graduate rhetorical theory class, this might be the point when Jix gently interrupts and draws me back to the text at hand, perhaps by Kenneth Burke (whose ideas have stuck with me, despite the decades and fuzzy grading policy), reintroducing the question: “Why does any of this matter?”

Being no expert in Burke, but encouraged by our professor to “make him our own,” I might draw liberally from the selected readings for that day, beginning with the selection from *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), where he asks, “What is involved when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?”

Burke’s answer involves clarifying the “resources of ambiguity” that lead to “transformation” and “alchemical opportunity,” all while acknowledging that, unlike in some “theological notions of creations and recreations”—including perhaps the miracles of a Moon God or a Christ—“in reality, we are capable of but partial acts, acts that but partially represent us and that produce but partial transformations.”

Nevertheless, such partial representations and symbolic acts—including, he argues, literature and “personal statements about the loveable and the hateful”—cannot be dismissed as “nonsense.” When skillfully rendered, they can lead not just to “persuasion” in a reader, but “identification.” They are, in themselves, “real words, involving real tactics, having real demonstrable relationships. And as such, a study of their opportunities, necessities, and embarrassments would be central to the study of human motives.”

I might then move on to the assigned selection from *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966), specifically Burke’s theory of the “terministic screen”—a selected or received “nomenclature” that “necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others” and therefore shapes, even determines, our individual and collective “reality.”

Clearly the ruins of Bethsaida—or more accurately, the way they have been organized into a grammar within this exhibit, within the “symbolic environment” of a hallway located physically and culturally within a metropolitan Midwestern university, and received and interpreted by a white, cis-gendered, middle-aged, middle-class professor—have become a terministic screen through which I have come to view the “reality” of my actions as a teacher of creative nonfiction writing. This terministic screen has helped me articulate, but also seemingly contain, an individually experienced reality that, like all those which have come before, in countless civilizations, alive and dead, is ultimately partial, inarticulate and uncontainable.

It has likewise done so by directing “attention” away from certain channels and their competing notions of “reality.” This includes deflection from what Burke identifies as “the very scientific ideals of an ‘impersonal’ terminology” which, as in the case of the Hitlerite Empire, “can contribute ironically to such disaster: for it is but a step from treating inanimate nature as mere ‘things’ to treating animals, and then enemy peoples, as mere things. But they are not mere things, they are persons—and in the systematic denial of what one knows in his heart to be the truth, there is a perverse principle that can generate much anguish.”

“Indeed,” he continues, “the very ‘global’ conditions which call for greater identification of all men with one another have at the same time increased the range of human conflict, the incentives to division. It would require sustained rhetorical effort, backed by the imagery of a richly humane and spontaneous poetry, to make us fully sympathetic with people in circumstances greatly different from our own.”

Is this why the writing and teaching of creative nonfiction matters?

Is it—or can it be—a richly humane, spontaneously poetic antidote to the worst within and between those of us who belong to what Burke calls “the often-inhuman human species”?

“Why not?” Jix might say, with that pixie-ish smile.

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Across the distance between that class and this hallway, between that unfortunately deceased teacher and his temporarily living student—between the then and the now—I might introduce yet another, final terministic screen, a more recent discovery at the Bethsaida dig site, which is not mentioned in the hallway exhibit.

I read about it last year in *UNO Magazine*, a short article under the title “Finding Romeo and Juliet.” It included a photo of two entwined skeletons, an archaeological uncovering that was “the first of its kind in the region, and possibly only the third of its kind in the world—two teenagers, buried together in an apparent embrace.” Although UNO Professor Rami Arav, the director of excavations, clarifies that they have “no clue who this couple is or why they were buried together”—did they have experiences “worth” writing about?—their skeletal remains were named after the famous romantic couple because they were discovered during the week of Valentine’s Day.

As Burke might say, regardless of original motivations, there is now established a “real” relationship between the symbol and the recipient of the symbol, between the bones and the people at the dig site, and now me. A relationship with new (but equally mysterious) motivations that are now open to new (but equally partial) interpretations, one of which might be that those bones have been granted a sympathetic story of intimacy and identification because, in the end, that is what we hope for ourselves and for those whom we love.

To that I would add my own, more selfish hope: that to every discovery of artful, personal witness, the written words of which might be seen as yet another mysterious collection of bones, readers will grant a story of caring between a teacher and a student.

Regardless, Bethsaida may soon face yet another extinction. Professor Arav has retired from UNO, and our faculty and students no longer work at the dig site. By wintertime, I was recently told, the exhibit I have passed for the last five years will be moved to a college out east and some of the artifacts returned to the Ministry of Antiquities in Israel. The physical memory of this ancient city, its fragments and bones, its stories, will be lost to future generations of students and faculty walking these halls. Bethsaida will no longer be called, daily, into their consciousness or conveniently offered up as a terministic screen through which to view and partially understand human experience. Its sacred stele and offering bowls will be placed within another temporary civilization, another walled fortress of learning and sacrifice, another hallway—another symbolic environment—full of its own opportunities, necessities, and embarrassments. Its own stories of misery and miracle, ruin and rebirth.

Meanwhile, the Moon God will quietly vanish from this portion of the world's darkness, like all those before and after, whether they be deities or students or teachers or friends.

But their light, I can assure you, will remain.