

Storm on the Horizon: An Inmate Re-authors His Story

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Abstract: This paper presents the writing of an inmate, Whispers, who participated in a writing project taught by the author at San Quentin State Prison. The inmate was a student in a class called *Write Your Life* and it was in that class that he wrote *Storm on the Horizon*, a story he would author/re-author three times. Through the process of re-authoring he creates a story situated in the real world that ultimately helps him in rendering new meaning from his lived experience. Re-authoring his story allowed Whispers to explore varying perspectives that succeed in making his experience comprehensible.

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"Favorite things ... Adrenaline rushing, a bank robbery, a jewelry store. A high speed chase, escaping the cops where your heart hammers so hard you can see it outside your chest. Driving off road, airborne over ditches, trees, the smell of pine saplings torn by the getaway car, burning, heating against a red hot exhaust. Driving fast, racing, skiing, wilderness mountains, and a mountain stream, riding a bike and a cold drink of water from the stream. Spontaneous road trip." (Whispers, 2008)

This was the first piece of writing I got from a student I met in my prison writing class whose nickname back then was Whispers¹. He got that nickname because of polyps on his vocal chords that made him whisper. Even though he had surgery and the polyps had been removed everyone called him Whispers until right before he was released on parole. After he gave me this first piece of writing I was intrigued and wondered what he might write as we moved forward in the class together. [1]

1 Whispers was his prison nickname. His given name is David. In his writing or when he signs letters to me he refers to himself as David. In class we called him Whispers. He has now paroled and is called David.

I teach a class called *Write Your Life* at San Quentin State Prison in San Rafael, California. San Quentin is a maximum security facility. I started teaching at the prison when a graduate student of mine, Anita, who taught at the prison for a few years, invited me to visit her classroom while she was there. I did and not long after that I started teaching in her class, and then little by little I ended up teaching the *Write Your Life* class with her. The class meets once a week for two hours and the point of the class is to offer the inmates time to reflect and reconsider their lives with pen in hand. Whispers was in the class from the very beginning and came every week until he paroled. The objective of the class is to help students learn about their lives and build new understandings through writing narratives. This work derives from projects such as Wally LAMB's work with the women at the York Correctional Institution (see e.g., LAMB & the Women of the York Correctional Institution, 2003), Mark SALZMAN's (2003) documentation of his work in Los Angeles Central Juvenile Hall, Eve ENSLER's (1998) work with women at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York and the work of AARONS, SMITH and WAGNER (2009) in juvenile halls. [2]

This paper follows Whispers' progression in writing and rewriting a story titled *Storm on the Horizon*. This work is an example of life writing that is better encompassed in the term "auto/biography" (STANLEY, 1992). Auto/biography is a term used for all ways of writing a life, and also the ontological and epistemological links between them. Interest in auto/biography has been located, for the most part, outside of the social sciences. There has been some interest in auto/biography in anthropology (YOUNG, 1983) and in sociology (DENZIN, 2008; RICHARDSON, 1997). Research work such as this does not attempt to recover the past; instead it asks questions about the point of view from which a story is told. This work underscores the idea that the past, like the present, is the result of competing stories told about what happened, why it happened, and what the consequences were. However, when someone authors their life, it is their version, the version fully represented in what they write. This type of research "makes demands on the reader who is asked to place their own emphasis, make their own omissions, produce their own interpretations, and draw their own conclusions" (STANLEY, 1992, p.61). [3]

The life story research approach is process oriented and views a person's life as a whole. The idea of history in this sense can be understood in two ways: as an individual's own history of personal development and change as they process their life story trajectory; and as the amount of time that passes as an individual moves along their life course (MILLER, 2000). The life story approach embraces subjectivity and, in large part, is engaged in the interpretation of it. [4]

1. Literature Review

The *Write Your Life* class is based on narrative knowing. BLUMER (1969) argued that concepts are meant to sensitize us to the empirical world, not to construct it. Concepts can help us understand how stories develop and operate in the social context, but should not predetermine what we choose to look at or how we understand the empirical. For BLUMER, concepts were as much procedural as theoretical. Such is the case with narrative reality. The concept of narrative reality is both theoretical and empirical in specifying an analytic field and calling attention to an object of inquiry. Narrative is procedural in that it recommends an approach that can capture the complexity of narrativity. [5]

The stories of our lives and the ways we choose to form and tell them to others have a profound effect on us (LINDE, 1993). Narrative inquiry investigates the place that stories, both oral and written, have in the social world. BRUNER (2002, p.8) notes that "[n]arrative, including fictional narrative, gives shape to things in the real world and often bestows on them a title to reality." Much of the importance of story can be traced back to the work of DEWEY (1938) who claimed that the ultimate aim of research is the study of human experience. Narrative does not only serve to capture and investigate experiences as human beings live them, it is used as a method, and also a metaphor, to describe how simply *doing* research can serve as a meaningful lived experience. [6]

Because narrative is so intimately linked to human experiences, our own as well as others, it offers a deep type of knowing: self-knowing. Through the use of meaning, language, and thought (BLUMER, 1969) narrative writing can help articulate whole sequences of events. It allows for an examination of personal lived experiences that calls for an understanding of the world and ultimately of ourselves (BRUNER, 2002). We use language and words in order to make sense of our lives; words give meaning to stories, and stories give meaning to life (KERBY, 1991). In order to truly understand narrative and its purposes, the researcher needs to be fully prepared to place him/herself within the context of the story, or in other words, reexamine the relationship between observer and observed (KRIEGER, 1991; RICHARDSON, 1992). In narrative writing, the writer is not able to be an objective other/observer, but rather, in order to truly find meaning in the story, the writer must be prepared to relive and reveal his/her own experiences while simultaneously attempting to understand and to empathize with the experiences that he/she is observing (ELLIS & FLAHERTY, 1992; KRIEGER, 1991; RICHARDSON, 1992; RONAI, 1992). [7]

2. Life Writing

The roots of narrative research reside with the Chicago School sociologists who collected life histories in the 1920s and 1930s. THOMAS and ZNANIECKI's (1958) *The Polish Peasant* is often considered the first significant early use of life history. In this work, THOMAS and ZNANIECKI presented the *life record* of a Polish immigrant, Wladek WISZNIEWSKI, whom they paid to write his autobiography (p.1912). *The Polish Peasant* was followed by other Chicago School studies based on life history, especially of juvenile delinquents and criminals (SHAW 1966 [1930]; SUTHERLAND, 1937). These life histories were mainly focused on explaining the individual's behavior as an interactive process between the individual and his/her socio cultural environment. The early work practiced by the Chicago School displayed features that still distinguish the life writing perspective. For example, the subjects of histories were common people, only notable sometimes because they may have been associated with illicit or unrespectable activity (MILLER, 2000). DENZIN (1995, p.120) notes that "[t]he classic natural-history interactionist approach to life stories ... gave delinquents, prostitutes, alcoholics, drug addicts and immigrants traits, personalities, personality flaws and chances to tell their stories. It transformed subjects into sociologies". [8]

North American anthropologists used the life history method mostly as a way of recording American Indian cultures that were assumed to be extinct. In the 1920s, for example, life history became a rigorous anthropological method with the publication of RADIN's (1926) *Crashing Thunder*. During this early period anthropologists gathered life histories as a way of understanding cultural facts, studying individuals who were thought to be representative of their cultural group (LANGESS & FRANK, 1981). [9]

Feminist scholars in the 1960s and 1970s played a major role in the renaissance of life history methods and the study of personal narratives such as journals and autobiographies. As feminists critiqued assumptions of social science—that men's lives and activities were more important than those of women and constitute the norm from which women's lives and activities deviate—, these scholars began to treat women's personal narratives as "essential primary documents for feminist research" (PERSONAL NARRATIVES GROUP, 1989, p.40). Feminist researchers challenged commonly held ideas about what social science research needed to look like and about what social knowledge about society, culture and history was (BELENKY, CLINCHY, GOLDBERGER & TARULE, 1986). [10]

Feminists resisted the idea that life history and other personal narratives were primarily useful for gathering information about historical events or cultural change. Instead they introduced an interest in the subjective meanings that women assign to events and conditions in their lived experience. More importantly, these feminist lenses opened up new understandings of historical, cultural and social processes. [11]

3. The Write Your Life Class

The *Write Your Life* class is taught in H-Unit, a minimum security part of the prison. Inmates are placed in H-unit based on their behavior in prison, not the severity of their crime or conviction. We teach the class in a classroom with desks, and there are white boards. Once a twelve week session ends, there is a chance for new students to enroll. This class is part of the volunteer educational programs at the prison and is open to any inmate in H-unit. Students write stories from their lives and also keep journals that they exchange with me every other week. All student work is hand written since the inmates do not have access to computers. [12]

The structure of the class is: 1. Feedback on stories and journal writing that I am handing back; 2. quick write from a prompt; 3. introduction of new theory or review of material already covered; and 4. open sharing. During the open sharing part of class which usually lasts about an hour students share their longer stories by reading out loud. This is a powerful and social aspect of the class where meanings are constructed individually and in community. The group sets norms during the first meetings and we have agreements about how we respond to stories. For example, we agree that every story should be allowed to be presented and not censored. Students learn to respond to stories through the connection they make to them through their own experience or feeling or through theory. Generally, students do not write on the same topics, however, all the stories derive from their lived experience. [13]

Teaching in the prison setting is a unique experience that I highly recommend. Passing through two gates to get to my classroom, there are any number of ways I can be held up or out from teaching on a given week. Much of what goes on with volunteer teachers is regulated by the whims of the prison guards. This was beautifully illustrated one morning when I arrived dressed in a loose black t-shirt, baggy black pants and a pair of old leather walking shoes. My walking shoes had an open back, but I was wearing socks, and when the guard looked down at them he said, "Those are way too sexy to wear into the prison," and I was turned away for the day. My students call that getting "jammed up," and it happens quite a bit. [14]

Prison is a stressful environment and the *Write Your Life* class provides some relief from the stress to my students. The pedagogy of the class has focused on rigorous thinking and skills are only taught in the context of writing. Students who enroll in the class have a range of educational backgrounds. The majority of students have earned a GED diploma (high school equivalency) in prison, some are high school graduates and two students have been college graduates. [15]

4. Whispers' Story

When I started teaching the *Write Your Life* class I wanted to encourage students to begin by writing about their early life experiences. This was territory ripe for exploration and also fairly safe. It gave us all time to get to know one another and to explore writing styles and skills. Whispers began with stories from his childhood—a series of stories titled, *The Flintstone Ranch 1972-1976* which detailed his unconventional upbringing in rural Idaho. [16]

After eight weeks of writing stories from Idaho, Whispers came to class with a thick stack of papers. He placed 42 pages of legal sized paper with his stories handwritten on each page before me with this note:

"Dear Diane,

I put in over 50 hours writing this assignment in the last week. Three days back to back I wrote for 12+ hours a day—an experience as spiritual and cleansing as I've ever had. A new look and perspective on a life of extremes—at times very selfish, at times gracious.

I was so into it, I could not stop. Suddenly, at least five times, I choked with emotion. Twice bursting into tears hiding behind my papers in the dorm—then laughing happily at the freedom and release of it all. Then feelings so relaxed and at peace with myself, I have been floating on air.

Thank you for the motivation and the call to reveal. See you Wednesday!

David" [17]

At the top of the first page of the document that he gave me was written "Autobiographical Writing." Whispers had divided the last ten years of his life into 44 chapters. In this work he wrote in the third person making himself a character in his own life story. We had talked about the possibility of doing this in class (e.g., KETELLE, 2004). For Whispers writing in the third person gave him just enough distance to reflect on his experiences. One chapter caught my eye in the first reading of this autobiography. That chapter was titled *Storm on the Horizon* and I encouraged Whispers to rewrite this story. [18]

Whispers' autobiography was written as a metaphor for his life. By asking Whispers to re-author one story I wanted to continue to develop this metaphor and to think more deeply about just what we mean by "the story of my life." I could not ask him to re-author his entire autobiography, it was 42 pages long. So, I started by having him look more deeply at one story. By focusing on *Storm on the Horizon* it was possible to help him understand that we all live in different story-worlds (KENYON & RANDALL, 1997). Within those story-worlds we are all on different points along the plot lines of our different lives. We can at any time revise in endless ways our stories by relating them from various angles, in varying proportions, and in a variety of contexts. The storied complexity of any human being makes each one of us unendingly interesting. SACKS (1985, p.111) notes that "biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically as narratives—we are each of us unique." [19]

4.1 *Storm on the Horizon—First draft*

"The day had a strange feeling to it, a little off, David thought. It was an eerie feeling, slowly lapping and rising toward him like a child's toy abandoned on the Yangtze River. Maybe it was just the sadness of packing his stuff in boxes, moving it place to place, or the irritation he could sense in his friend Dino's voice. Whatever it was, it ate at him and he pushed it away ignoring it and again, driving away in the car, he was out of sync. A dark force—his mind flashed on it. He continued on.

He had just finished putted a new metal roof on Dino's house. He stopped at the ARCO station² and put a few gallons of gas in the Honda. From his cell phone he sent a text message to Darci, but no reply. He played a CD turning it up loud and listened to AC/DC's *Highway to Hell* as he drove slow and deliberate toward where he was going. He stopped at a friend's house to return some tarpaulin covers he had borrowed for the roof job, and then drove to the lumber yard to return some hardware he hadn't needed. He sat in the car for at least five minutes, thinking, warming in the morning sun, wondering what parking lot he might be sitting in on Christmas morning, for there was nowhere he could go. His exs and in-laws all knew he was wanted by the law and this kept him far away. The upcoming holiday began looking very lonely and bleak.

David went inside the store with his receipt and returned a mail box and some hardware, receiving \$33 in cash. He went back to sitting in the car in the lumber yard parking lot and counted the money. He had \$1145 and some change. He daydreamed of long road trips, total freedom and getting high. He called Darci again on the phone, no answer. She probably was not up yet, he thought, and left a voice mail to call back so they could make plans for a day, hopefully soon. David started the car and left the lumberyard and then he started thinking that maybe he would stop at the next hardware store. He decided so, and turned in, finding a parking place 25 feet from the front door. David thought about how much he hated this store, from the products, to their prices, to the ignorant personalities of the people who worked there. He never liked the place.

He entered the store shopping for tools or odds and ends. He didn't need anything. In his pocket he had a cell phone and over \$1145 in cash. Just the thought of taking something from this store, a wheelbarrow full of anything without paying for it gave him a rush. Yes! To do this would make him feel alive and better again, a feeling that would transcend the loneliness, the missing pieces and the loss he felt, if only for a moment. Especially taking something from THIS store, with their gung ho attitudes, and low life construction salespeople who attempt to put on airs. He definitely got some sort of sick satisfaction at messing with these people, and strangely enough the entire scene was something his mind had come up with to justify and talk himself into senseless behavior. He continued on, acting suspiciously in the store and that is how it appeared to the people monitoring the store security camera. He walked a big loop through the store, watching, carrying things, putting things down—a counter surveillance mission. Then he felt it—it made him feel so alive. An instinctual warning of danger hit him like a cold bucket of water in the face and he quickly, in an instant, right there abandoned any and all thought of doing anything illegal and as if

² ARCO is a gasoline company and an ARCO station is a gas station.

awakened from a trance he set his shopping basket down and exited the store with nothing of the store in his possession.

After he exited the store a posse of vigilantes circled and surrounded him. They stated they were placing him under arrest for shoplifting. David politely submitted by showing them there was nothing hidden on his person. The employees reiterated that they were placing him under arrest. At this point David's mind was in the redline, his heart pounding like the banging gears of a formula one race car, engine revving, higher, louder and he was literally backed against a fucking wall. He had no weapon. No out. There was nothing to do. In nanoseconds every possible scenario played out behind his eyes. His adrenaline fueled mind computed this unwinnable contest a thousand times in every possible way.

This was not an option and totally unacceptable. So, he transformed—his metamorphosis to a frightened and wounded, cornered animal was complete with glazed over, wild, bloodshot eyes. A dry, white, frothing mouth and limitless spring and tension coursing through his muscles and nerves. He said, 'I didn't take anything from the store and I am going to leave now.' The posse staring at him like they had captured a Martian said, 'The police are on their way—we'll let the authorities sort this out.'

At the end of the last statement, as if hit by an electric cattle prod, David shot to the left in an attempt to flee the posse, the cops, and the face of every terrible earthling who wished to do him harm. At all costs he could not afford contact with the police, being on the run from parole.

The posse mobbed him, gang tackled him hard against the wall and slammed him to the pavement while he thrashed and howled like a banshee, trying to get away. His attempts were futile." [20]

Whispers is documenting and describing his experience. He refrains from explanation or causality. He is in control of the telling of his story as he crafts his narrative in the third person, but does not take responsibility for anything that happened in the story. This first draft is the *externalization* of the story. He is putting narrative form to his lived experience. [21]

One way to understand some of Whispers' behavior in the first draft is through the idea of adaptive unconscious. WILSON (2002) challenges us by asking whether introspection is the best path to self knowledge. He introduces the idea of the adaptive unconscious. Our adaptive unconscious, he argues, is a set of pervasive sophisticated mental processes that size up our world, set goals, and initiate action, all while we are consciously thinking about something else. If we do not know ourselves, WILSON tells us, it is because we have developed plausible stories about ourselves that are out of touch with our adaptive unconscious. He argues if you want to know who you are or what you feel or what you are like, pay attention to what you actually do and what other people think of you. Whispers brings WILSON's theory to life. Whispers' adaptive unconscious was acting as he entered the hardware store and in the first draft his inability to face what he created through his actions is evident. [22]

4.2 Second draft

I encouraged Whispers to return to *Storm on the Horizon* and "re-author" (e.g., WHITE, 2007) his story. After he had completed the second draft, I was interested that six parts of the story remain the same: 1. He put the metal roof on Dino's house; 2. he drove down the highway in the Honda playing AC/DC's *Highway to Hell*; 3. he returned some materials for \$33; 4. he pulls into the hardware store parking lot; 5. he thinks about petty theft; and 6. he is arrested. The second draft changes were inserted after the episode inside the store. In the second draft, Whispers focused on his anger and rage. In this draft he began the process of *re-storying*. "Restorying ... is the literary process of re-composing the stories we have 'made up' about who we are, where we have come from, and where we are headed" (KENYON & RANDALL, 1997, p.1). In this draft Whispers was externalizing his anger and pain. At this point in the process he thought the world was against him. Here is what he inserted:

"David's bitterness seethed and simmered into everything he was doing in his life. His relationship with Darci was suffering. He still did not hesitate at any chance of high risk behavior, fraud, boasting, traveling at will without permission from parole. His whole being was driven by one out of control fit of anger to the next. He felt this whole disruption in his life should have been overlooked and forgiven by the authorities just on his good deeds of cleaning up, quitting crime and starting his little family in Montana. He thought how fucked up the system is. Apparently, no one else understood who he was and it ate at him from the inside like a million worms of hate gathering momentum and building tension, this life I was not engineered to take this kind of pressure. Carrying on day to day, slipping closer and closer to the edge. He knew it was there for the choosing and to ignore it. He drove forth, attempting to steer the shooting star he was riding on—to live life like it was his last day. The more excitement and danger the better—all care to the wind. These were the predominant underlying currents beneath while he was trying to portray the norm—clean cut parolee. But, the worm shit oozed from his pores. He felt all these perceived wrongs, injustices and pain. Somehow, some way the system was going to pay."

By focusing on one story and, in particular, one aspect in this story, Whispers was able to begin reflecting on his experiences in a new way, an angry way. [23]

4.3 Third draft

In the third draft once again the first parts of the story remained the same: 1. He put the metal roof on Dino's house; 2. he drove down the highway in the Honda playing AC/DC's *Highway to Hell*; 3. he returned some materials for \$33; 4. he pulls into the hardware store parking lot; 5. he thinks about petty theft; and 6. he is arrested. In the third draft he removed the second draft insertion and he, instead, inserted the story of his trial. In the third draft Whispers made a significant shift and he was able to reflect more deeply on his life story. In his trial story he took responsibility for his actions. Here is an excerpt:

"Finally, the judge spoke and he said, 'I don't know what you were doing in that store or what you were thinking. We may never know. But I don't believe you or any part of your story. I can assume you are a decent person when you want to be by the testimony of your friends in the courtroom today. I don't believe you have a drug problem and you have a trade. You are a lot better off than most people who come before me in this situation, so you know better. I am not going to sentence you to a drug program. You don't need any program. So you will not get probation, but what I have decided to do is sentence you to the aggravated maximum term possible of three years, credit for time served, of course. The sentence will be doubled under the three strikes law and you will receive one year for a prison prior. Your total sentence is seven years. You are now committed to State of California Department of Corrections.' " [24]

This is not what the judge actually said, but it is Whispers' narrative representation of what the judge had said to him. Later in the story he concludes:

"David's family, his dad, mom and little sister and his dad's friend and their kids all moved in together on the ranch. The hippie families now finally away from the rat race, away from corporate America to fulfill their dreams of living off this land and it was heaven. Building a log cabin, living in a real Indian teepee in the summers, weeding a garden as big as a baseball field and the potted plants grew over twelve feet tall. The smells were as rich as a slaughtered hog, the pitch of squaw wood, whispering pines, shoveling hot manure or freshly cut hay. Everything was alive, except the hog and they lived it. He loved it and there were no rules. Oh, some basic easy ones maybe—respect your elders and such.

The structure in his life was the sheer workload it took to keep a ranch going. He was always busy, yet free to do whatever he wished. The daredevil built bicycle ramps and jumped his bike 25 feet through the air. He rode the calves and steer until he was bucked off and he drove his dad's pick-up like a man down to Killarney Lake where he fished and swam. David missed 80 days of sixth grade due to bad weather, but his dad assured him that he was good in sports so the teacher would pass him anyway and she did. David passed with incompletes through the sixth and seventh grade. Life was golden, good, simple and easy. His whole nature and upbringing was based on a lifestyle of hippies, Native American Indians and pioneers. This is the root of his soul—who he is—so now to go forward and where he has landed can seem the extreme opposite and the struggle his personality faces. This new prison world tears him like a chainsaw, but he put himself there." [25]

Whispers' effort to re-author his story is represented in the table below:

Story Draft	Story elements	Major themes	Narrative process
1 st draft	Finishes putting metal roof on Dino's house Drives Honda down highway playing AC/DC <i>Highway to Hell</i> Returns construction material and gets \$33 Pulls into parking lot and thinks Thinks about petty theft Arrest	No sense of responsibility	Externalizing his story
2 nd draft	First six elements remain the same. He adds: Anger/victim insertion	Victim story about lack of fairness	Begins re-authoring/re-storying his experience
3 rd draft	First six elements remain the same. He adds: Trial story	Responsibility	Re-authors his story

Table 1: *Storm on the Horizon*—Three drafts [26]

Instead of being a victim, in his third draft Whispers portrayed himself as responsible. Whispers spent nearly eight months (August 2008-March 2009) working on these stories. In the end we are not entirely sure what the "storm" on the horizon was. The language he uses in the beginning of the story gives a sense of the storm to come: "The day had a strange feeling to it, a little off ... eerie feeling, slowly lapping and rising ... the sadness of packing his stuff in boxes ... a dark force." Was the storm Whispers' impending conviction? Was it his internal struggle? Or was it a storm that would give rise to a desire to shift and regrade a life story, his life story? [27]

Whispers' narratives can be considered personal accounts of his lived experience (SHAW, 1966 [1930]). The authenticity embedded in his stories allows them to convey sentiments and circumstances. This way of viewing narrative casts these personal accounts as genuine reflections of lived experience remembered and recounted. [28]

The practice of narrating a life is enmeshed in a social world. If Whispers' narratives are personal, they were also produced under social circumstances. Narratives are not merely collections of facts held within a subject. Instead all stories are generated, put together and communicated in some fashion (e.g., OCHS & CAPPS, 2001). [29]

This view of the active and socially situated narrative has implications for how stories and storytellers should be approached. Narratives emerge in context. Whispers became the architect of his own story, but he accomplished that task through interaction with me and the other students in our class. The narrative process is emergent and should be regarded as highly dynamic rather than a text. In practice, narratives are social to the core (GUBRIUM & HOLSTEIN, 2009). [30]

5. Conclusion

How can we make sense of or orient to the goodness of Whispers' story? Often those who have direct access to the experience being narrated are considered good storytellers. An authentic storyteller is one who is in touch with his/her emotional experience and who will reveal his or her own true experiences, feelings, and self. Ethnographers promote the credibility of those who narrate their stories touting the extent to which they are present (GEERTZ, 1988). *Being there* provides a figurative anchor for description and also supplies a basis for treating such accounts as factual because the authors are in the know from firsthand experience. DOUGLAS (1985) indicates that the best storytellers are *emotional wellsprings* from whom *deep experience* can be extracted. [31]

We approach the question of who is a good storyteller by looking at how a storyteller identifies with everyday life. Often the focus is on the storytellers and how reliable, truthful or suspect they are. In our *Write Your Life* class there have been many good storytellers. Whispers was just one of them. He examined his emotional and lived experience through the stress and pain that prison created in his life. [32]

We might think of Whispers as a brave storyteller in relation to circumstantial criteria which were formed in our class. Do we know if Whispers' stories are true? SMITH (1978, p.33) argues that "for any set of actual events, there is always more than one version that can be treated as what has happened." She notes that the credibility of the storyteller plays a role in how social meaning is constructed from a story. Whispers had credibility in the *Write Your Life* class. Other students look to him seriously. His authenticity and courage in his narrative exploration drew others in our class into his stories. [33]

The narrative metaphor is the idea that our sense of reality is organized and maintained by the stories we have about ourselves and the world we live in. Our stories shape our experience. They are not stories *about* our lives, but instead the stories *are* our lives. Whispers produced metaphors of his life to reorganize and interpret his experience—that is what we all do. The creation of life story metaphors underlies the mystery of what it means to be a human being. [34]

This project, which falls in the tradition of social science life writing, gave an inmate voice and a chance to tell his story. By learning about and listening to his story we have the opportunity to gain understanding of his life through his eyes. Whispers demonstrates that no one can escape being interesting, and we convey

how interesting we really are through the stories we tell. Life story writing as a form of research can connect us to ourselves and the lived experiences of others, and evoke in us fundamental human emotions. For this reason, I encourage continued exploration of life writing in the social sciences. [35]

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