I got a question to axe you. If I write like you, what that gonna make me?” The other Orient State Prison students in my composition class laughed. They’d often challenged me, demanding to know why they had to use apostrophes (“Don’t you know what don’t means?”), why capitalize “proper” nouns, why revise drafts. But this young student in the back row was serious. I didn’t have an answer. I’d never even thought about it.

After that, I began to think more carefully about resistance in my classroom, and to entertain the idea that learning could be as affected by self-identity as by intelligence, hard work, and perseverance. I had come to the prison classroom with the fuzzy notion that most underachieving students had negative self-images and that improved self-images would naturally improve academic performance. But my experience both in the prison system and teaching at Ohio State University seemed to suggest that academic achievement didn’t correlate so directly with self-esteem. A student with a positive self-image could still be a poor learner—a happy slacker, or an arrogant know-it-all. Conversely, a student with a poor self-image could still be thoughtful, creative, motivated and diligent. Was there any relationship between self-image and achievement?

After graduating from Ohio State, I accepted a position at Sinte Gleska University on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. The Rosebud is astonishingly isolated; its people are some of the most economically disadvantaged in the country. In 1992, over 35 percent of the families were single parent households, and the annual per capita income averaged $4,005 (Palmer, 1992:2). Resistance in my classroom was palpable. Students resist on the reservation much as they do elsewhere: walking in late, creating commotion, forgetting books, ignoring paper assignments, skipping class altogether. Some were more creative: they asked questions in English they might answer in Lakota. A few young men were even menacingly playful, suggesting I ride out with them to Ghost Hawk Lake for a game of Cowboys and Indians.

The more I tried to make English relevant to my students, the more they seemed to resist. I had come to the reservation hoping I could
make a difference in people’s lives, wanting only to teach a skill I was sure everyone wanted—the ability to use English well—a skill that could magically open doors of employment and sometimes even conquer hearts. Who could resist? Why were these students resisting?

As a last, desperate measure, I stopped trying to change my students and began to listen to them. Slowly, I began to hear. I heard about the historical mistrust of bilingual Indians, who had been the first to advise signing disastrous treaties with the whites. I heard about the contempt for those who assimilate, when, in the face of a declining culture, rejection of the dominant culture seems like a moral imperative. More specifically, I heard about how each step in the process of learning English adds another layer to the inevitable wall raised between these students and their families and friends, isolating them in a space in-between traditional and dominant cultures. I came to see how rejecting uniform grammatical rules was, for some, a way of rejecting the growing uniformity of social life, of rejecting the heavy stamp of the dominant cultural pattern, of rejecting well-heeled material success as the only valid measure of self-worth. I came to see how, for some, resistance was political—a struggle for identity, for control over how whites saw Native Americans, and how they saw themselves.

It was also in South Dakota that I first heard the ancient Coyote tales, which helped me to see a new connection between language and identity. To the Lakota, Coyote is not only a demigod and “chief” of the human beings, but also a trickster and clown. He is by turns foolish and clever, helpful and destructive, “a foolish butt of jokes and a self-injuring buffoon who nonetheless releases the profoundest potencies of the community even while making people laugh at his misadventures” (Kroeber, 1997:20-21). Stories of Coyote and his role in creation continue to be told because, as one informant told folklorist Barre Toelken, “Through the stories everything is possible.” Why does Coyote do all those things, foolish on one occasion, good on another, terrible on still another? The informant replied, “If he did not do all those things, then those things would not be possible in the world.” Many Lakota share the informant’s view of Coyote as “an enabler, whose actions, good or bad, bring certain ideas and actions into the field of possibility,” who makes abstractions concrete, as Toelken and Scott write in “Poetic Retranslation and the ‘Pretty Languages’ of Yellowman.” (Kroeber, 1997:102). In the tales, Coyote
is creator of the world; in telling the stories, the raconteur causes the world to be created again. This is a mystery, a way of seeing stories as a kind of magic, words that create a world.

This was very different from the way I had thought about stories, as narratives created after events they recount. Yet recognizing the way words constitute reality helped me to see that events don’t happen, rather life happens, and we shape life into events with the stories we tell about it—the form we give it. It’s the structure of narrative that makes an event an event, that makes it seem coherent and whole, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. In other words, a narrative is a structured version of life, which has no inherent meaning because it has no inherent form. This is the work of the human, perhaps: to give life form, to give it meaning.

This is just as true for the meaning we give ourselves as for the meaning we give things that happen to us. At the University of New Mexico in Gallup, on the edge of the Great Navajo reservation, a traditional Navajo student named Hazel Begaye took my remedial English course one semester. She tried hard but accomplished little, barely squeaking by with a “D” grade. Yet less than a year later, in my Freshman Composition class, she was writing beautifully. In fact, after getting back her second essay she stopped by my desk to tell me how happy she was—she’d gotten her first “A” on an English essay. I asked her what had turned things around for her. She said she had no idea. Then she launched into an apparently unrelated story, about how she really wanted to be a nurse and how last year this had created a problem for her. She would have to take biology, which meant she’d have to dissect a frog, which meant breaking a serious Navajo taboo. She agonized. When she finally decided that she wanted to be a nurse more than anything, she took the course, broke the taboo, and dissected the frog. “After that,” she said, “for some reason English began to come easier for me than it had in the past.” Her decision to dissect the frog helped break a barrier, a certain concept of who she was, that had also kept her speaking and writing broken, ungrammatical English. She’d changed because the stories she told about herself had changed.

Sometimes I wonder about that change, whether it was good or bad. The world lost a traditional, but gained a nurse. And I think what is important, ultimately, is that by learning English, Hazel Begaye gave herself another option, and found the courage to exercise it.
This seems too easy to some of my students here at Western Oregon University. They challenge me: are you saying I can change who I am just by changing my language and stories? Are you implying stories are some kind of magic? They believe they’re educated enough to know that stories aren’t magical. These students know how to read and dissect a story. Others, though, know instinctively that when I ask them simply to read a story I’m asking them to risk who they are, that when I ask them to change how they use clauses and commas, it is they, themselves, I am seeking to change. I have learned some of the limits of teaching: I cannot, for example, give my students the courage to dissect their particular frog. But I can help them acquire some of the knowledge, skills, and confidence they will need once they have stepped up to the table.

Yet my biggest challenge as a teacher is to demand of myself what I ask of my students: to be willing to change, to be vulnerable, to put my own identity on the line. When I feel most insulted (“Are we doing anything important in class today? It’s kinda sunny out...”), most tempted to lay down a thick wall of professionalism to hide behind—that’s when I need most to take the challenge, to compete joyfully with a sunny day. When a student hands in a poorly written, ill-conceived mishmash for an essay, and I’m tempted to write snippy little barbs in the margins, that’s when I need most to recognize an opportunity to teach rather than to wound. When I’ve worked late nights and early mornings to prepare “The Death of Ivan Ilych” but half the students come to class without having read it, and the rest lounge around in headphones, working crosswords; when I’m tempted to complain vociferously to my colleagues, to slander the public schools, to throw a tantrum or simply to shut down, this is when I most need to stay receptive to encounters that bring pain but may also bring growth. As Parker Palmer writes, we know we are alive when we “feel the painful tuggings that teaching can bring and struggle to stay open to them. We know we are dead when we shut down so far that we can no longer feel either the pain or the joy” (1994:2). We must try to stay open, because to become unavailable diminishes both our teaching and ourselves. But when we succeed, reaching beyond what we had thought were our limits, we can accomplish the miraculous for both our students and ourselves.

WILLAMETTE JOURNAL 53
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