On some level, I think I always knew what Sartre’s narrator discovers in *Nausea*. “Nothing happens while you live,” he says. “The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that’s all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition” (1959, p. 57). But then he says that “everything changes when you tell about life; it’s a change no one notices: the proof is that people talk about true stories.”

When you tell, as most of us know by now, you are making connections, creating patterns, making sense of what seems devoid of meaning. As a child, I was always reading. I was shamed by being called a “bookworm.” But reading was never enough; nor was recounting stories about what I read to my sister when the lights were out. It was essential for me to make my own sense of what I read, to incarnate it, to learn what it had to tell me.

Like Eudora Welty’s family, ours proudly owned a *Book of Knowledge* (1984, p. 6). Rather like Sartre’s autodidact or “Self-Taught Man” in *Nausea*, I was intent on reading right through its volumes, moving alphabetically through all there was to know. I am not sure how I happened on the “M” section so soon. It was certainly under the heading “Mexico” that I read what prompted me to begin a novel in a black and white notebook to give to my father as a birthday present. The account that started me off had to do with Mexican peasants being shanghaied and taken from their villages to work in the mines. The story had to do with seven-year-old Ramona going in search of her abducted father. (I was seven, and it made considerable sense.) I decided that Ramona lived near the city of Guadalajara at the start, and that meant I had to figure out the geography of that part of Mexico so I could decide my wanderer’s route. I not only learned a great deal about the topography and geography (because I needed to know it), I also developed quite some expertise on the Mexican mining industry early in the century. I am sure that Ramona’s search was inconclusive. After all, I did give the novel to my father as a present, although it took some years before I discovered how much I learned about our relationship through the choices of symbols and metaphors I made in the course of my writing (without any suspicion that there was a Sigmund Freud anywhere in the world). Lately, writing something else, responding
in part to Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “In the Waiting Room,” I learned still more about what it was to be seven and what it was to make meaning through writing. Bishop wrote (after that marvelous beginning about sitting in the dentist’s waiting room while her Aunt Consuelo was being treated):

I said to myself: three days
and you’ll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an I,
you are an Elizabeth . . . (1983, p. 160)

I have learned, presently and retrospectively, how much writing has to do with that recognition of an “I,” who is also (as the poet adds) “one of them.”

Perhaps oddly, much later on I decided to write an American historical novel immediately after I graduated from Barnard College with a major in American history. Seven hundred pages it was; it dealt with the turbulent years before the election of Jefferson to the Presidency. I did research on the Democratic Societies, the people who were imprisoned under the Alien and Sedition Acts, the sympathizers with the French Revolution, and the rest. The hero (naturally!) was modelled on the revolutionary poet Philip Freneau, but my character was a folk singer (premature, I grant) writing protest songs against the establishment of the time. I never sold the novel, but I learned about a period in American history as I never had in all my years of specialization at Barnard. Again, I was incarnating the material I read for my own symbolic and affective purposes. There was something very important for me in mediating great events through a single consciousness, viewing the personal in relation to the public, the public from a private point of view. I was beginning to recognize the importance of vantage point when it came to the dialogue that is history. As time went on, I came closer to discovering my own “voice,” meaning my woman’s voice. Through the writing I was doing, I learned much more about vantage point and more about history.

Virginia Woolf once wrote that she thought it was her “shock-receiving capacity” that made her a writer (1976, p. 72). She was referring to certain blows, surprises, revelations that tore through the “cotton wool of daily life” and escaped ordinary interpretation. She said, “I hazard the explanation that a shock is in my case followed by the desire to explain it.” Finding a reason, she said, made her feel less passive, less victimized. Few of us are likely to become artists like Virginia Woolf, but we can still attend to the smothering and silencing consequences of submergence in the “cotton wool” or the taken for granted. In my life, it has been extraordinarily important to identify myself in what I think of as a dialectic relation with the forces around me that determine and condition and (now and then) manipulate. Some of these forces have to do with my history, my gender; some of them inhere in the social and political environment. It is when I experience these forces as inhibiting, demeaning, interfering with my freedom, that I am moved very often to tell about them. The “shocks” I receive are very often those that come when I feel the spaces of my choosing (and my acting) narrowing. It is by writing that I often manage to name alternatives, to open myself to possibilities. This is what I think learning ought to be.

I … believe we need to make it possible for writers to name not only the shapes and byways of their lived worlds but the problems, the predicaments that have stopped and silenced them.

The philosopher Merleau-Ponty wrote: “The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible” (1967, p. xvi-xvii). The very notion of inexhaustibility suggests an ongoing search for ways of articulation or sense-making. Merleau-Ponty also reminded us that “Because we are in the world, we are condemned to meaning . . .” (p. xix)—condemned to making connections and seeking patterns and using our imaginations, so that we can reach beyond ourselves. Surely, that is what happens when we write, at whatever age. It is a search that anyone would undertake, as Walker Percy’s narrator says in The Moviegoer, “if he were not sunk in the everydynaminess of his own life.” And, later: “To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something: Not to be onto something is to be in despair” (1961, p. 13).

Yes, I believe the National Writing Project can work against despair. I also believe we need to make it possible for writers to name not only the shapes and byways of their lived worlds but the problems, the predicaments that have stopped and silenced them. Somehow, we have to enable them to transmute these
into "shocks" and to develop the "shock-receiving capacity" in each one. The alternative is submergence in the everyday or the "cotton wool"; the alternative may be despair. I recall Tillie Olsen writing about "the hidden silences; work aborted, deferred, denied—hidden by the work which does not come to fruition" (1978, p. 8). And then I think (and may be learning it by writing this paper) how inattentive so many teachers have been to those silences, and how they can be overcome by freeing persons to write.

It is not an accident, it seems to me, that the upsurge of interest in writing, in instituting a "raid on the inarticulate" (Eliot, 1952, p. 129), is accompanied by a philosophic concern with life as narrative. Alasdair MacIntyre connects the conception of identity with the idea of narrative when he writes of the way in which the narrative of any one life "is part of an interlocking set of narratives." He sees the unity of a human life as "the unity of a narrative quest" (1981, p. 203). More recently, Charles Taylor, in Sources of the Self, relates that quest to an orientation to the good. "One could put it this way," he writes:

Because we cannot but orient ourselves to the good, and thus determine our place relative to it and hence determine the direction of our lives, we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a 'quest'. But one could perhaps start from another point: because we have to determine our place in relation to the good, therefore we cannot be without an orientation to it, and hence must see our life in story. (1989, p. 52)

Taylor, like many of us, is interested in the problem of agency, human agency, when there is so much powerlessness and disengagement, when we are caught in technicisms of so many kinds. He and MacIntyre are not part of any writing projects, but their concerns (part of a swelling philosophical concern) for language, dialogue, conversation, narrative, story, and quest may well connect what they are saying to what the editors of this Quarterly are trying to achieve. It is a matter of self-creation among others in worlds of potentially shared experience. It is a matter of shattering the silences, of making meaning, of learning to learn.

References


