

Narration, Knowing, and Female Empowerment: Telling Stories, Authorizing Experience

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Abstract

Throughout history, women have told their stories, sometimes at great peril to themselves. The social codes that have defined women's lives forced many women writers to adopt male pseudonyms. Poems of the Greek poet, Sappho, all but disappeared completely when Pope Gregory VII ordered her poems burned. The story of the banishment and destruction of her work, and (more importantly) the story of the survival of fragments from her poetry tells a larger narrative that underscores the power inherent in women's narrations. Early in the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf (refused admission to the Bodleian because of her gender) advised women in *Three Guineas* to become a community of outsiders and to tell their own stories.

The paper argues for the role of narration as knowledge in education and in public policy. Advocating "radical storytelling," the author outlines strategies for setting up opportunities for ordinary women to speak. By naming the event, by telling the story, women empower themselves. The paper draws from case study research in which teachers study their own classrooms, including their own participatory roles. The paper also examines the practices of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker nongovernmental organization that brings together delegations of ordinary women to meet face-to-face with policymakers on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. in order to tell their stories of the impact of policy on their daily lives.

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Vera Brittain dreamed of the day when women's rights would be openly discussed and taken seriously. She would be proud to see this Oxford Round Table on Women's Rights. As I sit here, I feel her peering over my shoulder, urging me—and all of us—forward as we engage in these conversations. When she first came to Somerville College to take her exams in 1914, Brittain had to beg her father and mother to allow her to travel to Oxford from her Macclesfield home in Staffordshire. Once admitted to the University, she pleaded with her father to be allowed to continue her education. A woman's place *was* at Oxford, she argued. And as she argued, the Great War broke out and the world focused on things other than the education and empowerment of women.

Brittain abandoned her studies at Oxford to join the Voluntary Aid Detachment (V.A.D.) as a nurse when the war broke out. It was the only war-related position considered suitable for young women of her age and class. After the war—and after losing her brother, her fiancé, and more friends than she cared to count—she returned to Somerville to pursue her education. Profoundly changed, and sobered beyond her years, she went on to become one of England's most beloved writers. She told her story, determined to use her own experience as a means of explaining to younger generations what it meant to have been robbed of her youth because of the war. In the forward to *Testament of Youth*, Brittain writes:

Only, I felt, by some such attempt to write history in terms of personal life could I rescue something that might be of value, some element of truth and hope and usefulness, from the smashing up of my own youth by War....[I wanted] to tell my own fairly typical story as truthfully as I could against the larger background, and take the risk of offending all those who believe that a personal story should be kept private, however great its public significance and however wide its general application.¹

Here I must pause because I hear a great echo in my ears, and I think it may be echoing in your ears as well. Listen again to Brittain's words: "...take the risk of offending all those who believe that a personal story should be kept private...."

As I pause and listen, I hear behind those words another echo, and what emerges is a single word question: Why? Why are personal stories offensive? Why should a personal story be kept private? Especially if, by telling that personal story, it could have an impact on educational policy; on public policy; and (perhaps most importantly) on the teller of that personal tale? Should we not all continually "take the risk of offending"² and tell our stories?

Throughout history, women have told their stories, sometimes at great peril to themselves. They have often trembled while doing so. The social codes that have defined women's lives forced many women writers to adopt male pseudonyms. The names George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) and Currer Bell (Charlotte Brontë) come to mind. Poems of the Greek poet, Sappho (whom Plato dubbed "the Tenth Muse"), all but disappeared completely when in the eleventh century, Pope Gregory VII ordered her poems burned. The story of the banishment and destruction of her work, and (more importantly) the story of the survival of fragments from her poetry tells a larger narrative that underscores the power inherent in women's narrations. Early in the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf (refused admission to Oxbridge libraries because of her gender) advised women in *Three Guineas* to become a community of outsiders and to tell their stories using their own language. We can best do that, Woolf argues in her response for a donation of one guinea for the society to prevent war, "not by repeating your words and following your methods but by finding new words and creating new methods....not by joining your society, but by remaining outside your society."³

¹ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (Penguin, New York and London: 2004), 11-12.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

³ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1966). 143.

This is precisely what Vera Brittain did: she told her story in her own way using her own language. Brittain and Woolf both took the risk of offending. And in taking the risk of offending, they began to break down some of the barriers that had kept women, and their stories, isolated and imprisoned. In moving out of silence into speech, Brittain and Woolf empowered themselves, and in so doing, empower all women who encounter their stories and in them recognize something of themselves.

Brittain and Woolf offer us a way of understanding women's narratives and how to tell them. Both women understood experientially what it means to remain outside male society, and to dare to tell their own stories. Far ahead of their time, both women could see, as Woolf asserts in *Three Guineas*, "the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected."⁴ The concept that the public and the private are intricately related continues to inform feminist theory and public policy debates. And so it should: what we as educators do in our classrooms, has lasting impact on the lives of countless students. Likewise, what our policy makers do when enacting public law has enormous impact on the lives of countless individuals.

In the tradition of Woolf and Brittain, therefore, women's stories must be told not only in the places where we feel safe, but in the places that frighten us the most, the places hostile to women's issues: in the academy; in the courts; in the Congress. But to personalize that, how do I do it, when I have trouble trusting my own authority?

When I first thought about submitting a paper proposal to this Round Table, I resisted the impulse. After all, (I thought), my invitation had probably been an accident. Who was I to address the Oxford Round Table? But the more I thought about it, the more I had to ask myself, why I was choosing not to engage? Why was I resisting the move from silence to speech when I insisted that my students speak, and in so doing, find their own voices?

I realized that what I wrestled with was my own culturally inscribed lack of confidence in speaking publicly. How do I learn and re-learn to trust my own authority in a cultural milieu that continues to simply not hear me? How do I pass on to women who are young, perhaps impoverished, and uneducated—that is, to those whose voices and stories are most vulnerable to disappearing acts—a sense that they are important? How do I help them discover the importance of their stories I struggle with my own sense of worth? And where do I start both my own empowerment and the larger project of advocating for others?

⁴ Ibid, 143.

I know of two key places: first, in the classroom, with case study research and second, in the halls of Congress with nongovernmental organizations such as the American Friends Service Committee. Let me tell you stories about each of these.

In his book, *Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life*, Joseph F. Trimmer advocates teacher-research that goes directly to the story, that trusts the storyteller and the story. Trimmer writes:

We became English teachers because we loved stories...But as we worked our way into our professional lives, we slowly, almost imperceptibly, changed our attitude toward stories. We lived in a world that did not trust them. Stories were not true. Stories were not reliable. If we wanted to keep stories in our lives, we had to convert them into something else. Something more serious. More scientific.⁵

Trimmer goes on to assert,

Rather than abstract our teaching into empirical research or bury it in ethnographic studies, we need to face ‘the real moments’ we encounter each day. And we need to trust our stories of these moments. To narrate is to know. We need to tell our teaching stories if we are to understand our teaching lives.⁶

Trimmer was not the first to advocate case study research outside the scientific rubric. Glenda Bissex, writing a case study of her two-year-old son as he learned how to speak, placed herself and her career in jeopardy when she presented her case study, *GNYS AT WRK: A Child Learns to Write and Read* to her dissertation committee at Harvard. Written from her own observations, intuitions, and reflections—without the apparatus of control groups. Bissex writes in her book, *Partial Truths: A Memoir and Essays on Reading, Writing, and Researching*

“I had set out not to do a case study as such but simply to understand more about [my son’s] learning in the only way I could see to do it.”⁷

It was, in Trimmer’s words, a “real moment.” Bissex trusted her own ability to observe directly, without elaborate apparatus. The text was so original, the voice so strong, her professors recognized it as groundbreaking research, and recommended it for publication at Harvard University Press. The book has influenced many subsequent case study researchers. When I took a course with Bissex, she made the comment that “once you start observing, everything becomes interesting.”⁸

⁵ Joseph F. Trimmer, *Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life*, (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1997), X.

⁶ *Ibid.*, XV.

⁷ Glenda Bissex. *Partial Truths: A Memoir and Essays on Reading, Writing and Research*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), 164.

⁸ Glenda Bissex, a comment in class at The Martha’s Vineyard Summer Institutes on Writing and Teaching, 1988.

I started observing and I found she was right.

When Laura, a freshman English student of mine, began to write an essay on a topic of her choice, she chose to write about Christmas. Her first draft explored a number of possible focuses for her paper, but Laura had a hard time deciding what to write about. We discussed her paper in a conference, and I asked about her family experiences going out to dinner, something she had mentioned in her paper only in passing. She had written, “Going out to eat around Christmas is always kind of difficult without having children swarm around my father.”⁹

It turned out that her father was jolly, liked cookies, and had a “long white beard and white hair to match.”¹⁰ As we talked, Laura began to recall more details and remembered one specific time when a little girl, not “more than 4 or 5” with “long blonde, curly hair and big green eyes”¹¹ came up to talk to her dad.

The more Laura talked, the more animated she became. I asked questions for clarity, and she recalled more and more detail. The big moment came, however, when Laura suddenly asked, “You mean, I could put *dialogue* in this paper? I can treat it like a *story*?”

For Laura, this was a “real moment.” And her writing changed as a result of it. She wrote with more detail, more confidence, more purpose. The point is not that Laura wrote a nice little Christmas story. The point is that Laura felt experientially the power of storytelling. Once she owned her story, she could speak (in this case, write) more fluently. She had become empowered through storytelling. She was taking control of her own education by actively engaging in it. And her own voice authorized her to do this.

Through the act of narrating we come into identity; we authorize ourselves. As Sidonie Smith and others have noted, however, the telling of women’s lives is complicated by our “cultural marginality.”¹² The very fact of our womanhood makes us outsiders, as Woolf notes. Our very marginality, however, can become our best asset precisely because of our outsider position for one simple reason: from the margins, *we can see what insiders cannot see*.

The importance of this unique position became abundantly clear to me during the time I worked at the Washington Office/Davis House for the American Friends Service Committee (A.F.S.C.), in Washington, D.C. in the late 1990s and early 2000s. A Quaker organization

⁹ Laura Gibbons. Unpublished student paper.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Narratives*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2001), 141.

devoted to alleviating the root causes of suffering, violence, and injustice, A.F.S.C. offices are located throughout the world. First-hand information is channeled from remote areas to the Washington Office, which in turn provides education to activists and policy makers as well as advocacy on public policy issues. At the heart of this project is bringing to Washington various delegations and witnesses—ordinary, everyday people—to meet with policy makers. Sitting face-to-face with some of the most powerful figures in Washington, they tell their personal stories of crisis and struggle.¹³

While delegations of both men and women are brought to Washington to tell their stories, however, as James Matlack, retired Director of the Washington Office observes,

In nearly every case women are more seriously affected and victimized than men by the crisis or conditions that give rise to the Washington visitation. Thus it is essential that women be in the forefront of the delegations and witnesses who get to ‘tell their story’ to the seats of power and the shapers of policy. The Quaker affirmation of the worth of each and every person impels a regard for the special experiences and circumstances of women in situations of duress since social norms too often discount or neglect their added suffering and dehumanization as well as their deeper disempowerment.¹⁴

Among the many delegations that came to Davis House while I was there, was a delegation from Comite Fronterizo de Obreras, maquiladora workers from the factories along the U.S.-Mexico border. I listened as they sat around the large mahogany dining table telling their stories of going home each day to tin shacks and cardboard boxes after working all day for pennies in dangerous factory conditions. As women, they were sexually harassed, and expected to go out with supervisors, who could jeopardize their already shaky position at the factory if they did not comply.¹⁵ The factories were polluted, poorly maintained, and violated many health and safety standards.¹⁶ These details, and others, were documented in a report written by the U.S. Department of Labor’s National Administrative Office (U.S. NAO).

Reading official reports of such findings, however, is one thing; listening to a woman talk about her life in the border factories is quite another. Although I could listen to their stories only through Spanish interpreters, what I saw in their eyes as they spoke was evidence of deep pain,

¹³ James Matlack. Personal email to Lolly Ockerstrom. Feb. 7, 2006.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kamel. *The Maquiladora Reader*. 38.

¹⁶ Ibid. 38.

horrific struggle, and an incredible strength of spirit. In their voices I heard their hope and determination as they told the stories of the “real moments”¹⁷ of their lives.

Listening to them, I realized that they were not so different from me: they worked hard; they loved their families; and they believed fervently that if they worked hard, things would improve. They valued sisterhood; they channeled their understandable anger into organizing. With the help of such organizations as A.F.S.C., they brought the plight of all women working in the maquiladora factories to the attention of those at highest levels of power in the U.S. government.

James Matlack asks, “How could these women risk and bear so much and still remain faithful to each other and to their shared goals in solidarity with all the women in the maquiladoras?”¹⁸ There is, of course, no adequate response to this query. I only know that their stories made a great and personal imprint on me. I know that in telling their stories, they put a human (and female) face on the impact of public policy. The tellers of these factory tales are not women who had read books by Vera Brittain and Virginia Woolf; nonetheless, they followed in their footsteps. They took “the risk of offending”¹⁹ in order to be heard. And in giving voice to their struggles, they told their stories in the places that scared them the most: offices of top level staff at the Labor Department ; Members of Congress; policy analysts. They spoke to many journalists; to human rights activists; to Congressional staffers. These sites were a far cry from the flimsy shacks and unsafe factories where they spent their days.

As Matlack notes,

When women speak from the heart and from the fabric of their daily lives, they are persuasive advocates who often connect at a profound level with all who listen to their personal accounts. Even hardened bureaucrats and prideful politicians can be moved and made more aware. Whether positive policy changes result is always uncertain but the impact of such encounters and narratives must have some effect upon those who formulate and implement policy.²⁰

I conclude with a plea: tell your stories, and make it possible for other women to tell theirs. If we are to fight oppression; if we are to push back against gender discrimination in

¹⁷ Trimmer. *Narration*. X.

¹⁸ Matlack email.

¹⁹ Brittain. *Testament*. 12.

²⁰ Matlack.

education and in public policy, we all must “take the risk of offending.”²¹ We must draw attention to ourselves and to the conditions of women’s lives everywhere. Only then can we even hope that our lawmakers might begin to see the connection between public policy and private lives. Then we might reach Woolf’s dream (and ours) “...to assert the rights of all—all men and women—to the respect in their persons of the great principles of Justice and Equality and Liberty.”²² Perhaps then we can transform these lofty concepts into realities.

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²¹ Brittain. *Testament*. 12.

²² Woolf. *Three Guineas*. 143-44.