

Sharon Who Tells Stories

SANDY DELUCA

University of Western Ontario

As a mature woman who chose to return to graduate studies in the early 1990's, I forged ahead toward my goal armed with fortitude and a resolve that I was doing this one for me. I had been, at that time, a professor of nursing education for over 20 years and had been engulfed in a system known for its firmly imbedded notions of what it meant to do "good" scientific research in the ways of the forefathers—literally speaking. I did not want more of the same, knowing always that there were many ways to see and understand health care, education, the world, and the people who inhabit it.

I met Sharon Rich in a narrative inquiry course where she spoke a language of inquiry familiar to my understanding of what it means to ask relevant questions. Sharon supported my pursuit of the questions for which I held a passion, questions that ultimately took the shape of a master's research study lit with wonder toward and a respect for the messiness and complexity of the human condition. My initial work with critical narrative inquiry subsequently extended into doctoral research and continues to live within my work with nursing students and graduate health professionals.

Why do I share that story? Imbedded in the text is a wealth of insight into Sharon's work as teacher...mentor...storylady. I was asked to write a piece for this special issue about Sharon's teaching. After asking what form this piece must take, I became quite aware that, no matter what directions I was given, the form would grow in a way that was indicative of the par-

ticularity of Sharon's personal / professional self as teacher as well as of the particularity of our own personal / professional relationship.

The particularity to which I refer is perhaps captured by her response to a question asked of her by the facilitator of a collaborative nursing faculty development conference. I invited Sharon to give a keynote address on transformative learning. The facilitator asked Sharon the manner in which she would like to be introduced. Her response was, "Just introduce me as Sharon who tells stories." I was not surprised as she is a master (mistress?) of understatement. In fact *understatement* describes well Sharon's teaching ways. Sometimes when the self of the teacher is alive in one's teaching ways, it may appear to others that the person is perhaps simply a *natural* teacher. Yet there is nothing more complex and understated than simplicity. What appears natural is intentional and deliberate.

Sharon celebrates voice. Her mentorship does not trample on the self of her students. She has a way with mentoring / teaching that provides scholarly support for one's work, unwavering interest in one's thoughts and frustrations surrounding the process of writing or learning, and a strong respect for voice. In fact in celebrating the voice of her students, she also urges her students to do the same within their work, and within the words and spaces of their writing. In turn, Sharon takes it as *her* work to ensure that one's voice will make sense to the academic world.

Sharon celebrates community. Her teaching ways are inclusive, not only of differences of opinion, but of differences of food and drink preference. I say this not with tongue in cheek (well, perhaps just a bit), but with great sincerity. Her community is one that not only shares scholarly ideas, but in addition shares place and food. Her community of learners share gatherings where ideas, as well as the self of the learner, are nurtured (and fed). Gatherings are fertile grounds. As Madeleine Grumet (1988) notes, "theory grows where it is planted, soaking up the nutrients in the local soil, turning to the local light" (p. 14). So does learning. Personal and academic peer support are powerful educational fertilizers. Sharon is a substantial spreader. When it is time for graduate students to fly, they do so with double vision...one eye toward their goal and one eye holding fast to the community from which they emerge.

Sharon celebrates the wild things...innovative ideas living on the margins of mainstream educational thought, the view from below, and as well, the view she may not entirely share. In fact it was this celebration of the wild things that drew me to her advisement for my master's work. At the time, uncovering the passion in nursing education (my master's thesis topic) was not a mainstream idea within the nursing research community; and yet, the likes of Maxine Greene, Bill Pinar and Madeleine Grumet wandered about educational thought at that time. I was drawn to their ideas surround-

ing passion and possibility. I heard these names in Sharon's narrative research course. I felt I was home.

Sharon celebrates story . . . the story that each individual enacts within their own teaching and personal life, the connections of all these things that make a student a teacher, a scholar, a researcher, a person. This storylady offers to her students a respect for their own context and history that lives within the text of their work. At times she assists her students to pry and prod and haul their story from the liminal spaces of their text in order to make visible that which gives one's writing energy, passion, and wide-awakeness, and as well, heart.

Sharon celebrates dialogue and discourse, most importantly un-sanitized. In an academic setting described by Johnson (1995) as being enamoured of deodorized and disinfected language, Sharon supports the messiness of mundane as well as academic conversation, or of what Johnson refers to as "an unholy union of academic and vernacular language" (p. 129). Tarule (1996) describes *discourse* or *interpretive communities* as "sites in which knowledge is produced, reproduced, and contested" (p. 286) where "knowledge production, like dialogue, becomes a shifting and unstable process" (p. 286). In a place where thoughts and ideas may grow *where they are planted*, weeds and wildflowers are honoured. In this academic / personal space, conversation wanders where it may as academic ideas lolly for a while. *For a while* is a key point. There are boundaries. Sharon sees it as her work and wisdom to apply these at critical points in the student-scholar's academic life, usually with the intent of assisting her students to navigate the political realities of obtaining the degree. Accompanying the work of pacing students' writing lives is a reminder that this particular thesis is not necessarily a student's life's work; and yes, there is life beyond academia.

There are drawbacks to Sharon's teaching ways, yet the drawback of a mentoring style such as Sharon's is actually a strength in disguise. When one's academic life centers around the sparking and "flame-maintenance" of another (her students), one risks being unrecognized by the academic world at large, where glory tends to drift toward the vocal known. This is unfortunate and begs the question *why?* I have been pondering this continually during the writing of this piece. Other than considering the usual answers that circumnavigate the mundane realities of academia, I am challenged to understand this from a more personal / cultural perspective. I had just finished reading a piece written by Mary Canales (2000), a professor of nursing, when I realized that her words might offer me a way of thinking about Sharon's (and others') teaching ways.

Canales (2000) "proposes a theoretical framework for analyzing how we engage with [others], those perceived as different from self" (p. 16). Canales developed her framework as a result of her doctoral research which

explored teaching practices of a select group of doctorally-prepared Latina nursing faculty. What is of particular interest to me is the way in which Canales began to see the process of othering as a central dimension of her participants' lives and as influencing their teaching practice. Her interest stemmed from her own experiences of "exclusionary othering" (p. 19) during her nursing education and in particular her doctoral program. As a result of her research, Canales conceptualized othering as two categories: exclusionary and inclusionary. Whereas Canales recognizes that "both processes exist within the context of power and power relationships" (p. 19) what she describes as exclusionary othering "often uses power within relationships for domination and subordination" (p. 19). The consequences of this form of othering are obvious—alienation, marginalization, decreased opportunities—all of which may have untoward consequences in relation to human development and maintenance of self-esteem (p. 19).

Canales (2000) contrasts inclusionary othering as a "process that attempts to utilize power within relationships for transformation and coalition building" (p. 19). Canales suggests that inclusionary othering practices result in "consciousness raising, sense of community, shared power, and inclusion" (p. 25). Sharon's teaching celebrates the difference of each individual with whom she works. Sharon is a "world"-traveler in the way that Lugones (1990) describes, traveling to the "worlds" of others through their stories, engaging with the texts of her students, creating meaning places where she and her students may be "fully subjects to each other" (p. 401).

Canales' research draws on Collin's (cited in Canales, 2000) analysis of Black women's experiences and how their relationships exemplify different ways of being with others. Canales finds that the Black women in Collin's study have established "connected communities" (p. 26) that "challenge the mythic heterosexual, married couple, nuclear family norm that continues to pervade US society" (p. 26). The community of Black women Collin studies take on roles as "bloodmothers, othermothers, and community othermothers" (p. 26). Through Canales' reading of Collins, I realized a cultural way of life that is evident within certain cultural groups, perhaps a more familial way of relating, not necessarily as common in mainstream academia. Academia represents a particular culture that exists within a larger culture of local community. Often that culture of academe is perceived by graduate students as chilly and other-oriented—or to which Canales would perhaps refer as an *exclusionary* orientation. What is noteworthy in the Collin's study is a reminder of a more relational way of being with another, perhaps not as dominant within the larger culture. This insight helps me to better understand Sharon's teaching ways; they are familial ways that may challenge mythic notions of scholarly support and respect for difference idealized in mainstream academe. Perhaps this is a reason why Sharon's teaching is not nec-

essarily visible to the academic universe at large. The values that underlie her teaching do not live *out there*. Sharon is a participant, a co-learner (as she herself would describe), one aspect of a whole. Sharon's teaching lives within the community of dialogue and story of those with whom she works.

Sharon celebrates the "personal." I enclose in quotes as I use the word in the way of Grumet (1995). Grumet asserts that the "personal is a performance, an appearance contrived for the public" (p. 37), a mask that enables one to perform the "play of pedagogy" (p. 37). As I listened to Sharon during the aforementioned faculty development conference, I was aware that I was not solely listening. I was watching. Now that may not seem a profound insight, yet the question of why one is drawn to simply listening to certain speakers/teachers versus listening/watching others in order to gather their wisdoms for further usage continued to bother me. I recalled Grumet's dislike of the word *personal*, and her "enactment" of a paper (Grumet, 1995) presented at a conference with her green robe (that which she thinks about when she hears the word *personal*) hung for all to see. The point she was making was that her *scholae personae* (her pedagogical wardrobe) simultaneously "conceals and reveals [her] leaks" (p. 44). Sharon wore a red hat at our conference. I would venture to say that the red hat conceals and reveals *her* leaks. She *wears* and *is* that hat. It covers and it tells. There is mystery. Frank (1995) suggests that the "desire of the students is for the speech of the animator's self—not the spoken text the animator presents...but the *speech of what animates* that text" (p. 32). Perhaps that is why a student *looks*. When one watches a teacher passionately perform the text(s), inevitably one catches glimpses of the self of the performer and wants more . . . perhaps to emulate, perhaps to consult, perhaps to find common ground or place to share ideas. Sharon's performance of her pedagogy is indeed personal/professional as is her mentoring relationship. Her students *watch*.

However one describes teaching ways of the Storylady with the Red Hat, the fact is that what is revealed is that Sharon thinks and lives in *story*. Sharon's community of discourse is as a circle of storytellers, leaning inward, listening, questioning, embracing the messiness of ideas and the self of each person sitting on the floor with legs crossed, mouth agape . . . hearts engaged.

Thank you, Storylady.

References

- Canales, M. K. (2000). Othering: Toward an understanding of difference. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 22(4), 16–31.
- Frank, A. (1995). Lecturing and transference: The undercover work of pedagogy. In J. Gallop (Ed.), *Pedagogy: The question of impersonation* (pp. 28–35). Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Grumet, M. (1988). *Bitter milk: Women and teaching*. Amherst, MA: The University of

Massachusetts Press.

- Grumet, M. (1995). Scholae personae: Masks for meaning. In J. Gallop (Ed.), *Pedagogy: The question of impersonation* (pp. 36–45). Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Johnson, C. (1995). Disinfecting dialogues. In J. Gallop (Ed.), *Pedagogy: The question of impersonation* (pp. 129–137). Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Lugones, M. (1990). Playfulness, “world”-travelling, and loving perception. In G. Anzaldúa (Ed.), *Making face, making soul: Haciendo Caras: Creative and critical perspectives by feminists of color* (pp. 390–402). San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Foundation Books.
- Tarule, J. M. (1996). Voices in dialogue: Collaborative ways of knowing. In N. Goldberger, J. M. Tarule, B. M. Clinchy & M. F. Belenky (Eds.), *Knowledge, difference, and power: Essays inspired by women’s ways of knowing* (pp. 274–304). New York: HarperCollins.