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A road less traveled: Vocation, sex, and religion

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ABSTRACT

This chronicle of embodied experience charts the pilgrim's progress of a qualitative researcher during a research trip to New Mexico. The story traces a path from his spiritual awakening as a teenager, through his painful coming out in his thirties as a gay man, to an eventual collision of conflicting issues in his fifties while traveling on the road to a healing shrine with a group of Hispanic Roman Catholics. His participation as a researcher forces him to come to grips with the events of his life as he realizes the vital connection between body and soul in the long journey home.

1. Act I: a performance

Larry, a trim man with short, salt and pepper hair, listens as he waits to speak on a panel at a conference at the University of Illinois. There is a visual contrast between the muted tweed of his sport coat and the cherry red of his leather sneakers. During a quiet space between speakers, the audience sorts through painful images of the story told by the previous speaker. In the quiet, they consider the violation of a boy's trust, and cruelty in the guise of religion. They exhale with a sigh, not in relief but in sorrow. Larry looks up and speaks into the stillness.

I am an ethnographer. My research is based upon participant observation, and I want to tell a story of pilgrimage. The telling, though incomplete, may be true. You and I will test an interpretation that unfolds within this classroom as a performance does in a rehearsal hall. Your listening response, quiet but not passive, will fashion many interpretations. We construct them together as we note what I say, who and what is privileged, and the offstage influences in the wings that have shaped my choices to tell it in this way. This personal story is more than biography—it is a cartography of the intellectual, psychological and spiritual terrain nurturing the ideas in this paper. The composition of the story is relevant to my description of religious experience, and the rhetorical use of repetition, metaphors, emphasis, and rhythm is not incidental. It began at a tall desk where I stand at my computer with a stack of books, looking up at a monitor attached to the wall. There is a sequence of events in this story, but I have arranged them to tell a truth as I see it. I am not invisible in the narrative argument nor in the telling. There are gaps, which leave room for your version of the story.

Carolyn Ellis is seated in the sixth row. She has promoted the use of narrative in research since the publication of her book about the death of her partner (Final Negotiations, 1995). *The audience for this panel would not be as large if it were not for her. In* 2009, *she wrote,* "*Stories are what we have, the barometers by which we fashion our identities, organize and live our lives, connect and compare our lives to others, and make decisions how to live*" (Revision: 16). *Larry is startled to see her because she was his imagined audience for this paper.*

You note the gray of my hair, my gender, race, and class, and you see an "old, white man," a middle class white man of a certain age. But your careful listening and informed reading deserve a more nuanced characterization of me than this. I weave anecdotes and disclosures into my account that, though personal, are meant more as context than confession. It is with relief that we ethnographers now admit our involvement in the subject we study. Since we no longer claim the implied distance of an objective observer, "the dominant metaphors for ethnography shift away from the observing eye and toward expressive speech (and gesture)" (Clifford and Marcus, 1986: 12). We have become storytellers. The shift in methodology has blurred academic boundaries and encouraged interdisciplinary work among scholars in theatre, communication, and anthropology, creating performance studies.

Performance has been a metaphor and paradigm for the work of ethnographers since the 1980s when anthropologist Victor Turner

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(1982, 1987) and experimental theatre director Richard Schechner (1985) realized that their research interests combined ethnography and performance. My story of an encounter with religion is an ethnography of religious performance. It is set in New Mexico. Like many other people, I was fascinated by an old, adobe shrine where pilgrims traveled for healing. At first, I tried to keep my research at a distance. It was the beginning of my work. I was green, naïve, teetering on the edge of a dissertation. Pilgrims were reticent to speak of their experience, and I slowly realized I could only understand it if I joined in the performance, choosing an etic rather than an emic viewpoint (Turner, 1982: 65–66), participating wholeheartedly.

Academic training had not and perhaps could not prepare me for this level of involvement. It was difficult to grasp what Ruth Behar meant by "anthropology that breaks your heart" (1997). Though I had spent time at a university recreation center, I was not ready to walk a hundred miles. Though I had read about the importance of prayer for pilgrims, I had not dreamed I would have to pray. The physical and spiritual shock gave me little opportunity to theorize about the behavior of other people while I was immersed in the vigorous religious life of Hispanic, Roman Catholic culture. So I learned to engage in metacommentary, using stories to tell myself about myself, reenacting them all the while (Geertz, 1973: 448–449). Late in each afternoon, I told my account of the day to other pilgrims as I struggled with what I was learning. Those daily recapitulations taught me to speak and write about the experience we were sharing. Today, the only way I know to bring listeners close to lived experience; that is, close to understanding the bloody, sweaty, heartrending and heart making reality of pilgrimage, is through narrative in what Paul Stoller calls sensuous scholarship (1997).

The journey had begun years before that pilgrimage when I was an adjunct at a community college in southern California. At fifty-five, I was hard pressed to account for what I had done with my life. One night I went to a lecture by a Lebanese-American academic, who was talking about her research on Palestinian women in the camps along the Gaza strip. It was unsettling. We were used to the distance of a research account but not to the immanence of a research narrative. As Laila Farah performed the stories of the women's lives, their voices challenged us with the intensity of their suffering. The rhetorical power in the embodied texts gave the audience a jolt. I remember the way she etched the personalities of the women through the modulation of her pitch, rhythm, timbre, and cadence. We came to know the women in the way they spoke, walked and gestured. The strength of that performance was the strength of the narratives as they lived in her. We sat within the circle of their lives as we heard them transmit their courage to the children. We were implicated in the stories as we realized how our inaction condoned the hardship they endured.

> And do you know, Laila, these children have nothing: they have no land, they have no home, they have no garden. They need to know why we are living like this. They need to know their circumstances, love their country, identify with their country. Look, they have taken this in with their breast milk. Why else would you see a three-year-old duck when a plane flies over? They know this in the camp (Farah, 2002, 293).

Their lives mattered. She was demonstrating performance in ethnography. That act of performance pushed aside a curtain, and I could see the next fifteen years of my life. I had found performance studies—not the aesthetic performance I knew from my years in theatre but a reflective and reflexive performance that invited action.

Many academics in the audience know performance studies, and some are familiar with Laila's contribution. As they listen, they are aware of Larry's performance—what the words do as well as what they say. They know the capacity of language to be performative, showing "the power of discourse to reproduce the phenomenon that it regulates and constraints" (Butler, 1993: 2)*. They are sensitive to the argument in his style of writing.*

Laila's text went beyond words in the amplification of her body and psyche. She taught us about the Palestinian women's culture in her face and tone and gesture. There were concepts in her research that could not be said but had to be performed. Sometimes her body or her voice focused our attention on a nuance that would have escaped us in reading. We trusted her presentation of the culture in the details and sureness of her performance.

When anthropologist Michael Jackson put three sticks together to build a fire in Sierra Leone because he had seen Kuranko women do it that way, he was studying a culture through performance. The simplicity and economy of their movement taught him their values through "experiential truths" (1989: 133)*. At first, Larry was eager to embrace performance in theory, but he would later need to learn a "performative sensitive way of knowing"* (1998: 26) *from Dwight Conquergood's example as he moved toward "an ethnography of the ears and heart that reimagines participant observation as coperformative witnessing"* (2002: 149).

2. Act II: a collision

At the time I took up graduate studies, I wanted to apply performative methodology and self-reflexive analysis to religious experience. But an academic life sometimes collapses in upon the personal realm with unexpected consequences. There is no microscope, no objective cushion between the experience of an ethnographer and the lives of the people he studies. A lack of distance in participant participation thrust me into the cultural practices I wanted to examine. This intimacy claimed my body, psyche, and life history as instruments of exploration.

When I visited New Mexico in order to collect stories of pilgrimage, I found myself on the road to a sacred, healing site with forty men. They said I had to join them if I wanted to understand, and I was a graduate student, who would agree to almost anything for the sake of a dissertation. But my striding, singing, praying, even prostrating body precipitated a spiritual crisis. I was an agnostic in our shattered, ironic, postmodern age. The physical rigor of the journey peeled away layers of theory until I came face-to-face with a pilgrim's ardor. They were learning compassion while they prayed for the suffering of people as the world hurtled past them on the highway. I had chosen to return to the painful place of religion in my life that I might know it for the first time. But I was also a student, not yet settled into an academic world with its unending questions when I was dumped out on a highway with a bunch of strangers in the New Mexican high desert. The collision of passionate, Hispanic Roman Catholicism and fierce, academic skepticism wounded me in a wonderful way. I was on the road to a new life beyond any destination I might have imagined.

Larry looked out at the ethnographers in the room. He paused because they were smiling. Was it recognition? Had they been to a similar place in their lives? Della Pollock had written of how this work "folds back on the researcher-subject, catching her in surprising, even disarming processes of transformation" (2006: 327–28).

I did not expect that it would begin with a collision. Graduate work was a journey of return, but was I ready to face the pain? Thomas Wolfe argued that you couldn't go home again (2001/1942). And he was right. You probably shouldn't go at twenty-eight. But I was fifty-seven. The difference in our ages and viewpoints suggested different remedies. Both of us were right. It isn't wise to go home when you don't yet know who you are. You desperately need to change those circumstances that wounded you,