

Spalding University lecture

20 min for Q & A

The Inspirational Fact

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Research and Memoir:

The Inspirational Fact

I grew up hearing endless stories from the whiskeymaking, hardscrabble culture of the Kentucky hills, stories that shaped me for life, a fact I learned as soon as I left for college. I would be sitting on the floor of the hallway of my freshman dorm at the high-toned California university where I'd come on scholarship, relating some childhood memory to my classmates. Their first response was disbelief, so impossible was it for them to imagine a world so far removed from the universally prosperous suburbia of their experience. But I knew how to tell a good story and I kept my audience engaged until invariably a listener piped up, "Would you *please* get to the point!" "The point?" I asked, genuinely puzzled. Even then I understood that the telling of the story *was* the point, that the facts of the story mattered less than sharing the communion of the word, the telling and the listening as entry point to a world outside of linear, chronological time. We sit down to hear or read the story, and when we finish it the clock tells us that an hour has passed, yet for the duration of that hour we have *transcended* time, have conquered time, which is to say death, in one of the few entirely adequate ways given to us. Only the long distance runner high on endorphins, the heroin addict, the besotted lover in the

presence of the beloved, the meditating hermit, or the traveler suspended between departure and destination may understand as fully as the dedicated listener or reader what it means to live outside time—to live, in fact, not in the past or for the future but in the mystic’s eternal now.

Memoir is by definition a vehicle for subjectivity. The label gives notice to readers that they are entering the funhouse of individual memory, in which a great deal of the pleasure derives from the entry the writing affords into the writer’s deepest and most honest self. And paradoxically it is through subjectivity that one best gains access to truth, by which I mean the timeless, enduring wisdom that enables us to have and keep faith in ourselves and in our capacity as a species to live in harmony with each other and with our planet.

Tell All the Truth, but Tell it Slant
Success in Circuit Lies . . .
The Truth must Dazzle gradually
Or Every Man be blind –

What distinguishes creative nonfiction from more conventional approaches to recording and analyzing experience – that is, history and science? A friend offers an old saw – “The victors write history, the losers write their stories,” a fact that contains a powerful truth: Stories have a way of outlasting victories. If when I was in my early thirties someone had told me that I would publish a memoir shortly after I turned forty I would have rejected the suggestion. Memoirs were something you wrote when you were old, after your hair turned gray, assuming you still had hair. And then HIV arrived in America and my partner died, and – motivated by the impulse to preserve his story and the lessons we learned for others – I wrote *Geography of the Heart*. A universally

familiar example makes the point more emphatically: Millions more readers worldwide know the poignant *truths* of Anne Frank's life in hiding than know the *facts* of Hitler's rise to power.

A successful memoir is a product not of the self-obsession of a me-first generation but evidence of literate people's recognition that the written word has replaced the story sung by the winter fire as our means of establishing and preserving cultural memory and engaging in a collective imaginative act.

I begin my undergraduate creative nonfiction classes by telling students that facts are malleable, truth is enduring. "No, no," they cry, "it's the other way around." The semester becomes a process of demonstrating that, like statistics, facts can be manipulated to any variety of interpretations but truth proves itself across time. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Energy is equivalent to mass times the speed of light squared.* These are overarching truths which prove themselves across generations of testing against the confusing and contradictory facts of history and science.

I pause here to make a distinction of paramount importance to writers, whose job it is to use words carefully. These days we use the words "fact" and "truth" interchangeably, as the recent presidential debates demonstrated. The candidates were forever accusing each other of "distorting the truth," when what they mean is "distorting the facts." In fact, the word "fact" is from the Latin verb *facere*, "to do," as in its descendant, the French verb *faire*, "to make." In its first English manifestation "fact" meant "an evil

deed,” but gradually it evolved to mean anything created by human agency, as in our verb “*manufacture*.”

Truth, on the other hand, originates from the same root as “troth,” as in “betrothed,” that is, a gesture born of a leap of faith. Thus at its heart our very word “truth” requires a leap into the unknown, an act of faith. Interesting, is it not, that today we think of “facts” as existing independent of human agency, though the roots of the word make clear that facts are defined by human minds and hands. Whereas we think of “truths” as changeable according to cultural whim, even as all our wisdom traditions tell us that truth endures across time and cultures.

Facts are malleable; truth endures. To quote John Keats, beauty is truth, truth is beauty, that is all we know and all we need to know

Most emphatically I am not saying that in writing creative nonfiction I make it up. In writing creative nonfiction – in writing memoir – only an amateur makes it up. In writing memoir the rule of the game is our contract with the reader that our writing is as true to the facts as we are capable of being and that we will let the reader know, directly or by implication, how reliable we feel ourselves to be. In *Angela's Ashes* Frank McCourt does not need to tell us that he is fictionalizing his description of the moment of his birth; he could hardly have been taking notes. In recalling his French governess in *Speak, Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov tells us up front that “I was not there to greet [Mademoiselle]” – but then he so vividly imagines her descent from the train amid the depths of the Russian winter that two sentences into his description we’ve forgotten that he’s making it up. A lesser writer might have been content to leave us dazzled by sleight

of hand but Nabokov, ever the literary trickster, ends this gorgeous passage by gently reminding us that we've been had:

Very lovely, very lonesome. But what am I doing in this stereoscopic dreamland? How did I get here? Somehow, the two sleighs have slipped away, leaving a passportless spy standing on the blue-white road in his New England snowboots and stormcoat. The vibration in my ears is no longer their receding bells, but only my old blood singing. . . . The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers.

When we universally agree that fact is stranger than fiction, why in writing nonfiction would you want to make up facts? When you find yourself tempted, consider whether you're just being lazy rather than doing the hard work of figuring out the real potential of the facts as research and memory present them to you.

The great memoirists do not conceal their uncertainties but use them as another tool for making art. They work both from empirically, historically verifiable fact and from the art of constructing the best of all possible stories. They work, in fact, in both linear and circular time.

[distinction between the time of the calendar and the time of the seasons]

[writers – storytellers -- work in both linear and circular time. Linear time is an illusion created so that time could be bought and sold – so that we could be turned into wage slaves. The storyteller's job is to shatter the illusion of linear time and return the listener or the reader to the circular time.]

Even now I write stories because to take up the pen is to remove myself from the linear time of calendar and clock and enter instead into circular time, the time of religion and philosophy and art, the eternal now, the time of God.

Think about it: Eternity is not a long, long time. Eternity is the enduring now – the ongoing, unending now-ness of life. Given that this is the case, why do I suggest to my students that they prefer past tense over the seductions of the present tense? Good question, which I hope someone will ask me in Q & A.

Today we seek to know ourselves through facts, when the only way I've come to a greater understanding of myself is through truths. I recall the words of Ghosananda, a Cambodian Buddhist monk who had survived years in a concentration camp under Pol Pot. He said, "To know suffering is to understand the dharma" – that is, to know, really to *know* suffering is to understand the foundational truths of what it means to be alive.

I suggest to you that in our entirely idiosyncratic ways, every serious writer is searching for the foundational truths of what it means to be alive and restating them to accord with the ever-changing facts of her or his moment in history. For writers, whether of fiction or nonfiction, facts are our means to that goal. In *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov praises Kafka's novella *Metamorphosis*, in which his protagonist Gregor Samsa wakes to find himself changed into a beetle. Nabokov, himself an expert on butterflies, admires *Metamorphosis* because Kafka so accurately assembles and uses the *facts* of the beetle's reality. *Metamorphosis* makes clear that Kafka spent a lot of time watching beetles (*not* cockroaches, as Nabokov takes pains to point out).

But *Metamorphosis* is not about those *facts*, however accurately Kafka rendered them. It is about the terrifying solitude of every human being, and the fragile barrier that stands between the myths we construct for ourselves and the hard truths of life and death, and what happens when circumstances destroy that barrier.

Writers in service to truth work hard to get our facts right, because otherwise we're undertaking our truth-seeking on a foundation of sand. But truth lies not in facts but in beauty. Truth lies neither in the head nor the heart alone but in the understanding that these are integrally intertwined and cannot be separated without doing violence to both.

Life is like water – it takes the shape of the vessel into which it's poured. Remove the vessel and it's lost. For those of us gathered here, stories are our means of shaping the vessels into which we pour the facts of our lives. Could any undertaking be more important?

We in the West, children of the Age of Reason, want the universe to make sense; we *need* the universe to make sense; and we use the word, spoken but especially written, as our tool to that end. The problem with this approach is that it assumes that somebody, or nobody, carefully constructed the universe to satisfy the demands of that small corner of the human brain that processes logic and language. For those who believe that with certain knowledge – that is to say, with enough facts -- reason can make sense of the universe, I recommend a passage to India, both the literal journey and the E.M. Forster novel. But in the absence of such a journey I offer the prose and poetry of our best writers and its rich and colorful relationship to reality – the only word, wrote Nabokov, that ought always to be enclosed in quotation marks.

And yet we writers work in this medium, with one foot in the reasonable world of facts and the logic of grammar and syntax and the other foot in the mysteries of the intuitive heart.

I visualize ways of being in the world as a Venn diagram. Empiricism – the philosophy that given sufficient facts, we can fully know the universe – is a rich and rewarding way of seeing and being in the world. But any significant act of creation constitutes a larger circle that embraces and celebrates the beauty and wonder of empiricism – of the facts -- while also incorporating ways of knowing that cannot be calibrated or weighed or measured. As sociologist and author Parker Palmer wrote, “Why assume that sensation and reason are the only points of correspondence between the human self and the world? Why assume so, when the human self is rich with other capacities – intuition, empathy, emotion, faith, to name only a few?”

In her memoir *One Writer's Beginnings* Eudora Welty writes that the shared imaginative act may be the only way that we can bridge the gulf that separates us one from another. At its best an MFA program is about helping you acquire what Flannery O'Connor called “the habit of art,” which I define as the daily practice, or discipline, of undertaking an imaginative act, using the busy mind to harness the dynamic and emotional power of the heart.

So let's talk about dynamism – about change -- about movement. In my workshops I talk a lot about the importance of dynamism – of *movement* in a piece of writing. Why should I require of writing, this most abstract and fixed of media, that it convey movement? Because at the end of reading one of your stories, I'm a half an hour closer to my death. Asked to define Zen Buddhism in ten words, Suzuki Roshi, being a good Zen Buddhist, took two words: “Everything changes.” In the time I've given to reading your work, everything else in the universe has changed. Why should a work of art – a

piece of writing -- be static? Working in the most abstract and static of media – squiggly black lines on the page -- the writer is trying to capture the urgency and dynamism of life itself.

How do the great writers accomplish this impossible task, this triple-backwards somersault leap off the high board? Stop for a second to consider our addiction to the English verb “to be,” in its multiplicity of awful, omnipresent forms – is, are, was, were. Some languages don’t even contain a verb “to be” – existence is assumed as a fact of life. Think about crisp, vivid verbs, and how you might use them instead of the old, tired, easy “There is,” “there are.” Consider the difference, to take a title from our childhoods, between “There Is a Tree in Brooklyn” and “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.” The former states a dull, lifeless fact; the latter presents us with a vivid enduring truth.

This is no minor point. It involves recalibrating the heart to be present to the ever-changing verb we call life. It involves hauling ourselves out of our La-Z-Boy recliners and jumping into the ever-flowing river of time. It involves becoming a writer.

Consider the miracle of writing and reading. That I can scribble “eggs, peaches, kibble” on a scrap of paper and hand it to you, and reasonably expect that an hour later you will return from your local farmer’s market with those three items, is nothing short of astounding. Consider, then, how fantastic the conjuring trick of using the same scribbling to incarnate truth: Here is Emily Dickinson, capturing in squiggly black lines what it means to grieve:

This is the Hour of Lead.
Remembered, if outlived --
As Freezing Persons recollect the Snow --
First chill – then Stupor – then the Letting Go

I believe writing to be the hardest discipline, because it embodies the greatest power in the most abstract medium. Our co-respondent -- our reader -- entrusts her or his very consciousness, offering her- or himself at their most vulnerable -- alone and in silence. The writer becomes, in fact, like God – some traditions suggest that we *become* God. Not for nothing is the beginning in the Word. This is why writers must always exercise humility in the face of our craft.

I know that, struggling to get a good sentence on the page, we don't feel like God. I often feel like a dufus, in fact, sucking my pen in the face of a blank page or screen when I could be weeding or planting bulbs or gathering random trash from the street or saving lives. But then I think of the miracle of writing and reading – I think of how it reached out into the Kentucky hills and literally saved the life of a boy who until then thought he was the world's only dreamer. I think of the miracle of the spoken word being set down in print, the miracle of the Word made flesh and dwelling among us – and I take up my pen again.

We are gathered here to share secrets as to how one achieves the deepest meaning in mastering, then pushing and stretching the boundaries of grammar and syntax in pursuit of beauty, in pursuit of truth.

A “professor” is by definition “one who professes a faith.” My faith, born of what experience has taught me, is in you, or more precisely, in the capacity of reading and writing, diligently and mindfully pursued, to open us to a greater understanding of

ourselves and of others, of the greater mystery in which we live – reading and writing as spiritual practice.

The poet Marianne Moore quoted the Jewish theologian Martin Buber writing, “The free man believes in destiny, and knows that it has need of him.” Miss Moore then added, “Not fate, *destiny*.”

What do you suppose is this distinction Moore takes such care to point up, between *fate* and *destiny*? I think the difference is free will. Fate is what we’re given – our gender, our sexual inclinations, our race, where we’re born, our social and economic class, our opportunities or lack of them, our inborn tendency to use each other for our own selfish ends and fuck the planet. *Destiny* is fate plus the element of choice – what we choose.

If there is progress – real progress, as opposed to more gee-whiz doodads – it arises from appreciating and enlarging this space between fate and destiny. It arises from hard choices freely made. You are choosing to give over some part of your time on the planet to reading and writing. You are choosing to be here, devoting your resources to making beauty. You are choosing destiny over fate.

And so: how are reading and writing spiritual disciplines? If you believe that the universe is pointless, to quote Nobel physicist Steven Weinberg, reading and writing are neither spiritual nor disciplines, and you may now excuse yourself to wine and cookies. But if you sense a greater order afoot in the blooming of an orchid or the implosion of a star, the practices of these disciplines – reading and writing -- are ways of incarnating that order on the page – our ways of creating God. Whether or not you believe in God, consider that writing is always and everywhere an *incarnational* art – that is, it takes the

airy fairy castles of the mind and subjects them to the cold, hard, challenging, difficult, glorious process of being incarnated in print. [etymological root of incarnate – to infuse with blood]

We talk a lot and obsess a lot more about publishing, and that's OK, I'm not dissing that, but consider that before and above all else writing is process, it is something we *do* in the here and now, voluntarily undertaking solitude and suffering so as to make ourselves the biggest persons we can be.

Consider the possibility that, however you define the word "God," God needs us as much as we need God, an idea that occurred to me spontaneously but that turns out to be the heart of Martin Buber's *I and Thou*. Think of God not as a noun but as a verb – a dynamic living evolving presence, whom we may encounter in an infinite number of ways but who comes to us most clearly and emphatically alone and in silence. There, with forbearance and perseverance and luck, alone and in silence, we may be visited by her at our desks. Think of the sentence and the story as the incarnation of that presence, the great flow of life that pervades the universe, given form in your mind and heart and flowing through your fingers and most especially your verbs onto the page. Go out and look, really look at the world, and then come back and write down what you see, hear, touch, taste, and feel.

This is a lecture on creative nonfiction, so let me end with a story about the writing of *Geography of the Heart*, my memoir of the death of my partner, the only son of Holocaust survivors, of AIDS. I had been dreading opening that particular box of memories for two or three years after his death, but all the great AIDS books had been

written by people who were HIV-positive and dying and writing, understandably and necessarily, from anger, when my experience of the epidemic had been one of love. People risking their lives to take care of the dying, people placing their bodies on the line in pushing the government to act. But then I started the book and all I wanted to do was preach – about Ronald Reagan’s irresponsible ignoring of the disease, about the prejudice against those who were working and dying to bring it to public attention. Until finally I typed out a note and taped it to my desk: *Just tell the damn story*. That was the best advice I’ve ever given myself, and I pass it on to you now as a gift not from me but from my partner, and all those dead artists and lovers. Trust the story. Trust *your* story. Just tell the damn story.

LIGHT IN AUGUST

Every summer, toward the end of July a day arrives when I’m walking along in mid-afternoon and I realize the light has slipped. Its angle is no longer that of high summer, high and hammering – light that for the past couple of months I’ve come to take for granted, in my too-human fashion, as the way things will always be. Summer will never end. No one I love will ever die.

Now the angling light signals that the endless summer is ending. In fact I and everyone I love will die. The question is only who will be first to reach the finish line.

And yet I see I have indulged a commonplace misperception, since properly understood there is no finish line. We are creatures of light, sentient bundles of energy moving through the universe, it is of us as we are of it, there is no death, there is only

process. Through some Cartesian sleight of hand the brain refuses to perceive this. Instead it cunningly divides the world into dualities. There's a little dab of brain, I'm told, given over to setting boundaries: This is where I end, this is where you begin – me/you, us/them, male/female, light/dark, beginning/end, life/death.

No doubt this illusion is or was necessary for our survival, no matter that it's the basis for murder and mayhem and our egocentric misunderstanding of death as now-you-see-us, now-you-don't. In fact death is only another milepost in the never-ending becoming of what is. Ask your dog – she'll agree; look to the wag in her tail. You don't see *her* moping about impending doom.

In this particular summer I noticed the slipping light on a walk rendered poignant by the tension of unrequited love. Denied an outlet for my passion, I offered my companion the observation that if I believed in death I'd kill myself. What do you mean? he asked, no doubt casting an uneasy glance at the penknife dangling from my knapsack. All that loss, I answered, all that grief. Who could stand it, if he really believed death to be the finish line? Not me. I take great affirmation and good cheer knowing we're light from light, true gods from true gods, one form of energy changing into another until billions of years hence when in the entropy of time all our colors will merge and melt into a uniformly still gray, the gray of the paintings that hang in the Rothko Chapel in Houston.

Some years back, under the auspices of *Harper's Magazine*, I moderated a debate held in that chapel. The subject at hand was faith and reason, as false a duality as light and dark or male and female or science and art or life and death, but one thing had led to another and here we were, with the Pulitzer-winning novelist Marilynne Robinson representing faith and the Nobel-winning physicist Steven Weinberg representing reason

and me wondering how I had gotten myself from the hollers of Kentucky into refereeing such (A)ugust company.

I chose the Rothko Chapel as our venue – a mistake. It features works by Mark Rothko, painted in the decade before he took his life in 1970 – vast lozenges of a smooth, even gray surrounded by haloes of an almost indiscernibly darker gray hung against the lighter gray of the walls. Their enveloping gray stillness prompts not debate but meditation. They demand that we sit down, shut up, still ourselves to the essence of being, the unbearable gray light-ness of being.

Robinson burned with quiet passion. Weinberg might be the most articulate man with whom I have had the honor of conversing, as was evidenced in that day's debate, in which he, the combative empiricist, set forth the case for faith, then argued with himself while the contemplative Robinson listened.

But we're not yet at the debate, we've just walked into the chapel and are spending a moment looking at Rothko's paintings. Weinberg shook his head. "I love abstract art," he said. "But I just don't get Rothko. What is it with these great blobs of gray." The most delicate of pauses ensued before Robinson said quietly, "It's the moment before creation."

I would have been happy to have ended the debate right there, since to my mind the exchange said all that needed to be said about the debaters' different understandings of the way things are. In *The First Three Minutes* Weinberg wrote, "Even when physicists have gone as far as they can go . . . there seems to be an irreducible mystery that science will not eliminate." Robinson, the contemplative, grasped what he, the empiricist, had

not perceived: Stories and art are our means of putting our hearts around the irreducible mystery. Rothko had painted that mystery, a few years before he plunged in.

And this is what I have to say to writers of fiction and nonfiction: Your job is to tell the story – “just tell the damn story,” I wrote to myself once when I wanted to use the page to preach, or to put down lots of pretty words, or to get back at an insult, real or imagined. “Just tell the damn story,” or, put another way, “trust the story.” That is at once fantastically simple and impossibly hard.

To reunify the parts of our broken selves is, it seems to me, to make the commitment to become a holy person, a vocation that each of us must discern and fulfill in her or his particular way. The good news is that, as Rabbi Menachem of Kotzk noted, there is nothing so whole as a broken heart. Reading and writing are or can be the glue, one means we use to patch ourselves together, as individuals and as communities.

Among the most brilliant of book titles is William Faulkner’s *Light in August* – a novel contained in a phrase. “Memory believes before knowing remembers,” Faulkner writes. “Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders . . .” Everything is always, as my friend Barry says, most especially us and most especially memory, and before you ask what he’d been smoking, take a walk at eventide in the light in August, the month of plenitude and of loss.

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To end with some practice tips:

1. Know that, just as you are what you eat, you write what you read. An empiricist’s approach to reading is to see the book as a storehouse of knowledge to which one brings a shopping bag, hoping to leave with some canned goods that may prove useful farther

down the line. The mystic approaches reading as a discipline, looking less for knowledge, though of course that's useful, than for the ongoing immersion in the sacred act of reaching across the illusion of separation, becoming one with another, with the other, through the medium of the word in print.

Accordingly, avoid reading as a drug to pass time, or at least avoid that approach except when you choose to do so, in the way that you might choose once a month to buy a box of Petit Ecolier cookies and eat them all in one sitting.

2. Write every day.

3. 5. Spend some portion of every day alone and in silence. Create a small ritual around this time – ideally, do it every day at the same time.

4. Incarnate your writing. Start with the senses, with the concrete and the particular and find the abstract within it, rather than as is so often our bent to go the other way around.

5. Consider that we write fiction and nonfiction not to offer the reader answers to questions but instead to pose and explore them. The writing itself is a journey. If you knew your destination before you set out, what would be the point in going? Try to create a space where the story can tell you what it wants to be rather than imposing a preconceived notion of what you think it ought to be.

6. Contemplate these words: birth, death, faith, hope, love, God – and develop a relationship with them. Let your heart define that relationship, and when your smart head raises objections, tell it to shut up. I don't want you to throw the brain away, not at all – we see too much of that going on right now. But consider how you might come to know the world in mystery – through truth in addition to fact, through intuition as well as reason.

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