Imaging Experience

by

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One day last semester, my student Jocelyn James began her mini-lesson for our Advanced Writing class with a short writing exercise. She asked us to call to mind a childhood memory and to write for a few minutes trying to get that memory down in words. With no more direction than that, we all began immediately to move pencils across blank, white notebook pages. Out of nowhere (or out of everywhere) the Wayne City farm house came to my mind, and I immediately started trying to describe its lawn, the giant shrub mazes of the front yard, and the expanse of cornfields that surround the house on three of its sides. Here’s what I wrote:

Images so American and clean. The huge white farmhouse looms before me. The maze-like shrubs on the front lawn. Clear, blue summer sky over acre upon acre of corn bursting under the August sun. I remember walking into that corn with Dad to find the patch of sweet corn, hidden there from drive-by thieves. The stalks loomed over my head, and as I walked behind him the large, coarse leaves of the corn plants slapped against my cheeks.

I have no idea why that particular memory came to me. To my knowledge, I had not been preoccupied with thoughts about home or about my father. What I wrote was sketchy and incomplete; I didn’t fix on a specific “story” from my childhood, as Jocelyn had asked, but rather on a feeling that seemed to persist around those details of time and place. And yet, in that few minutes of writing and discussion about the writing exercise, I became attached to the image of a man walking smoothly across a green, Midwestern lawn and gliding gently into the cornfield that edged that lawn, followed closely by a little girl who at once wanted to follow and who simultaneously feared the darkness and disorientation she sensed she would find in that field.

I remember making reference to my image later in the class, and in talking about it I added a detail that occurred neither in the real, personal experience, nor in the writing about the memory of the experience. I described the little girl holding on to the belt loop of the back of the father’s pants as they walked through the corn. Was the belt loop her link to security and direction? Should it break, what might happen to her? I was momentarily pleased with that metaphor, but the class ended, I put my notes away, and that was that. Jocelyn had taught a very effective lesson, elicited good conversation among the class members, and I was through thinking about that little detail of my life, real or imagined.

The image, though, was not through with me, for it returned to me again the next day as I flew to a conference in Oxford, Ohio. On the plane I took out my note pad and, not yet knowing what to do with the memory, made a listing of the details of the scene that was insisting itself upon me:

- green grass
- bright blue summer sky
- hot august day
- white-hot brightness of the day
- waving cornfields surrounding the house
- Dad
- baggy khaki pants
- patch of sweet corn embedded in the larger field
-reaching up to hold on to his belt for guidance
- buckling ankles
- big clods of dirt
- coolness once I entered the field
- stalks dusty and towering over my head
- leaves slap my face/cheeks
- red welts
- tears to my eyes
- Dad rushing ahead

As I constructed this list, it occurred to me that these details might be the makings of a poem — if I were a poet. This memory was not leading me to the familiar terrain of narrative, but it was leading me to something that wanted to be said. The questions that I posed about the girl’s fierce attachment to the belt loop were nudging this image into the realm of idea. This wedding of image to idea was the basis, I had repeated to my student, of all good writing. My task now was to provide a form through which this idea could emerge. In the privacy of my seat on the airplane, I mustered the nerve to put the details from my list into crude poetic form:

Walking into the corn field behind her father
Holding on to the belt loop on the back of his pants
The coarse, green leaves of the stalks slapped against her face,
Raising soft, red welts.
Her ankles buckled and her feet struggled with the clods of dirt which threatened to topple her.
And so she hung on for dear life to that single, loosening loop.

Poetry aside, what had become intriguing to me at this point in the process was how the image had developed into a kind of representation of my relationship with my father and the several psychological states that his presence can stir in me: frantic desire to keep up with him; the fear that he will rush on without me; the dependence I have on him; the tenuousness of that security. The image (my memory) was becoming fixed to an idea. But as the idea embedded in my memory/image began to emerge, I saw the need to reshape the memory so that this idea might become clarified through the text. I was no longer satisfied with a mere report of the memory as it first occurred to me (when Jocelyn called it up in class), for now, twenty-four hours later, the idea under-girding that memory had become just as important as the fond memory which had forced it into existence. In order to express this idea, I realized, I was going to have to reshape my memory of the experience. Essayist Pat Hoy describes this very process:

... first the writer recalls the moment and reconstructs it, then the reconstructed moment yields an idea, then the account must be reshaped and put to the service of the discovered idea. (p. 89)

The next day, I found myself eager to return to my image, to modify it again in the hope that I could more closely represent the idea that was taking hold. At a conference session on Saturday afternoon I sat in the back of the room and half attended to the paper being read while I rearranged and extended lines from my first draft created on the plane. An essayist by calling, I was annoyed at myself for continuing to see this image as a poem, but a poem I thought it should be. And so I struggled to impose form onto this idea born of image. Still feeling intimidated about writing poetry, I nevertheless came up with these lines:

The farmhouse sits in the middle of a square patch of perfectly manicured lawn which sits in the middle of three square acres of the finest Midwestern corn.

A girl lengthens her stride to keep up with the father who races across the green and (without even pausing) glides into the golden stalks. Leaving white-hot brightness he slips into cool-confusion seeking the hidden patch of sweet corn.

Following him in, she struggles over clods of dirt the size of shovel blades which threaten to topple her until she reaches up and hooks a single skinny finger through the belt loop of the father’s pants. So connected, he pulls her with him through the stalks which tower far over her head.

Coarse, green, dust-laden leaves slap against her face raising soft, red welts on her cheek.

How far ‘til we get there Dad?
Almost there, baby. Almost to the prize.

As if he knew the place exactly, he stops at the patch of gold hidden from greedy eyes. And as she watches, he picks and stacks the silky ears into her outstretched arms which gladly bear the bounty of his labor.
I will resist my urge to apologize for the poetry of this version of my memory. The point here is that as the idea embedded in that memory began to emerge for me, I was compelled to refashion the details of the actual memory, and its images began to shift and merge and even to evolve into new yet related images born of recollection. My students and I have spoken often about how blurred is the line between memory and imagination for most writers. We are simultaneously awed and baffled by the way unexpected details push themselves into our written versions of experience. It's not that these intruders are not accurate (truth-full) in how they represent the feeling of the experience; it's just that they're not factual. This is an issue which intrigues my students. Many feel an obligation to accurate recording of their experiences in their writing and sedulously resist those flights of imagination that sometimes intrude themselves into their own texts. Don't we have a responsibility to facts in our writing, they ask?

Donald Murray says all writing is autobiography, that a writer cannot not write the truth, even if she is fictionalizing an account. He says the writer's very style and perspective make her writing autobiographical. And further, the fact that she is motivated to create the scene means that she has felt the scene and it is therefore a part of her life. I did not hear my finger onto my father's belt loop; I did not hold the ears of corn as he stacked them into my arms; but I am the girl of this poem. The next week in class, at one point in a class discussion about my revisions on the poem, my student Dillon went to the board and wrote:

All writing is truth; all writing is lies.

And we were all resigned to, even pleased with, that paradox. And there, in the shape-shifting of my own memories, was the evidence of this paradox that kept insisting itself into my own writing.

I do not present this writing experience of mine to boast the product; the poem is unsophisticated, to be sure. If I'm lucky, the trek of recollection and rediscovery that Jocelyn began with her mini-lesson will continue as I keep imaging (imagining) this childhood scene into being. It may yet take on other forms. Whatever the form, though, it will hover delicately in the place where image and imagination mingle, a place with which I want my students to become very familiar.

Note
This essay is essentially an analysis of the stages that I went through in calling up a memory and then moving that memory into a particular discourse form which gives the memory purpose and intent. It occurs to me that in identifying those stages we have the framework for a useful classroom exercise for students who want practice in shaping their own memories for an audience. These stages push the student beyond mere "recording" of the memory and encourage them to think about how the memory is significant or meaningful to them now.

Imaging
This is the process of just recalling the memory in as many details as possible. This first step should probably be a free writing or maybe even a brainstorming session with a partner.

Condensing
Many times we ask the student to expand and elaborate before they are really ready to. In my own process described in this article, I found it helpful to try to condense my original free writing to the bare facts of the memory by just making a list of all the details that came to my mind as I thought about the scene I was focusing on. As you can see from the list on p. 2 of the article, I came up with new facts, more details, than I had in the original, brief free writing. Because I wasn't pressuring myself to put those details into some kind of coherent form (an essay or a poem), I think I was freer to just focus on what details and images I could recall about the farm scene.

Shaping
After I had my list, I was prepared to begin shaping the details into some form. I chose a poem, but you should of course give students options that would be appropriate for their own memories: a story, a scene, a sketch, a portrait, etc.

Explaining
At this point, the students should be pushed to try to articulate an idea residing in or growing out of the memory that they have presented. Why did you remember this? What does it mean to you? How is it important to your understanding of yourself or of someone else? This might be done in small group conversations. The important thing is for them to

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begin talking to themselves about why the memory is meaningful to them. And then, they must get that meaning down on paper.

Reshaping Experience
Now they should return to the first shaping (the text they created) and see how it can be changed or transmuted to carry more fully the weight of the idea that has emerged from Step 4. As I did, they may want to extend, to develop, or even to create anew the image that they generated in the first free writing.

References


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