Forward
The Importance of Narrative

Telling Stories, Drawing Maps[1]

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James Cowan, in his novel *A Mapmaker's Dream: The Meditations of Fra Mauro, Cartographer to the Court of Venice*, writes about a sixteenth century monk who makes a map of the world without ever leaving his cell in the monastery, relying instead on the stories others tell him of their travels. He introduces the meditations in this way:

> To those reading Fra Mauro for the first time, let me say this: always treat his ruminations as a process of gradual guessing . . . . Little by little he tries to evoke a country, an entire world, in order to reveal a frame of mind. In doing so he often chooses a piece of information, a mere fact sometimes, with the object of causing a new state of mind to emerge. He is trying to encourage a process of unlimited deciphering, as if these facts are but the tip of an iceberg. He is asking us to dispense with the ice floe of appearances and plunge ever deeper below its surface. (xviii)

The sun lays a brilliant path of golden light on Lake Mendota. Gian Pagnucci and I sit at a table close to the water, under an old shady oak at the Wisconsin Student Union where we had visited many times when Gian was here as student and I as professor. We are drinking our first pitcher of Leinies, with a bag of popcorn to soak it up a little. We watch a woman dive off the dock, arcing high, suddenly jackknifing, slicing cleanly into the water. A slight breeze rippling the water takes the edge off the heat on this late

afternoon, July 1997. We are talking about the probability of the Packers sustaining their successful run; can Brett Favre lead them once again? Who is it who is going to win the NFC Central? Can it possibly be Gian's Bears? My Lions? And just what are the chances of our seeing a Badgers or Bears or Knicks or Brewer's game, together this year, as we now live pretty far away from each other, and far from Madison? Gian talks teaching comp and tech writing, I talk of English methods and doc sem, the shorthand of our new jobs; we laugh about the layers of gags in the dialogue of the latest Quentin Tarrantino narrative experiment, *Jackie Brown*, and admire together the latest brilliant Tim O'Brien novel, *In The Lake of the Woods*, and what it has to say about narrative as a form of research, and about making sense (and failing to make sense) of post-war life.

   We tell of each other's research projects, our perhaps inevitably *narrative* inquiries into literacy, learning, life. We make notes toward doing some writing together, maybe written collaboratively online, a study of the nature of fiction, composed in fiction, about teaching and learning in university and public school classrooms. He asks me, "How's Sam?" and I tell him about my 9-month-old son's first word: "You're not going to believe this, Gian. He's look- ing up at the light over my mother's table in Grand Rapids, and he says, 'light'. No one believed he said it, then he said it like seven times! We were screaming! It was amazing." We raise a glass to Edel, whose wedding to Gian I had attended at St. Joseph's Church in Killimor, Ireland. We talk of the simple, yet beautiful country Catholic church in Edel's home town, Gian's father's lovely poem that he read there in tribute to them, the wonderful speeches at the reception from the Italians and the Irish, the joyous Celtic dancing, the Guinness that flowed, and all the laughter. We tell and retell stories, spun out of our lives, weaving with them a deepening rela- tionship. We connect. Or maybe it's the beer?

   About August 1998, Gian is calling to tell me about this confer- ence he and his friend Nick Mauriello are hoping to put together in conjunction with an issue of *Works and Days*, with the help of editor David Downing. I am watching "Law and Order," but decide to keep talking, anyway. He tells me that the work they are planning will develop out of a series of colloquia in Pittsburgh around various intersections between literacy, narrative, and tech- nology. He invites me to get involved somehow. "It sounds great," I say, "But I'm not really into technology very much, as you know. I mean, I have done work with desktop publishing in summer writ- ing projects, and I taught—a dismal failure—a writing course

online in which almost no one participated because we couldn't figure out how to use the technology." But you do literacy projects," Gian counters, "and you teach narrative inquiry. Besides, it just might be a lot of fun. And the idea isn't that we are all experts in all of these things. That would sort of defeat the need for conversation, in a way."

As Gian sees it, the scholars involved in this conversation, this learning experience, the people developing the articles, will come from a variety of disciplines and perspectives. To be in on the project, what they will eventually call Project UNLOC (Understanding Narratives, Literacy, and Ourselves in Cyberspace), everyone has to be willing to commit the time to come to a couple of weekends in Pittsburgh, and participate in a year-long Web site/email exchange. The idea is a kind of Bakhtinian one; we would develop projects—some of them hopefully interdisciplinary ones—exploring some of the intersections and issues that interest us, coming from a range of discourses and perspectives. In such projects the seeds of heteroglossia would be planted with clashing voices and viewpoints—and a unique hybrid of texts, various in form and content and perspective, would bloom, resulting in a rich and interesting cultural bouquet exploring some of the relations between literacy, narrative, and technology. I turn off "Law and Order," hooked by another story, Gian's fantasy of a possible future, 'academic heteroglossia' as he and Nick refer to it in their introduction to this volume.

Gian tosses out the names of a few interesting people, scholars with generative experiences and ideas they might share with each other across the same room, or at least online: people from linguistics, literature, rhetoric, composition, teacher education; like others he talked to, I throw out a few names, too. Gian and Nick would see to it that graduate students and junior scholars would also be invited to join the conversation, since they knew many of these folks were reading deeply and creatively into these issues, taking us in new directions.

Then came the struggle to make it work, trying to bring these people together for real. But some of the people they invited couldn't come, some of them were unwilling or unable to commit the time for talking through these issues together, in this collaborative, 'process' approach to scholarship. Still, Gian and Nick were adamant about people collaborating: "You can't develop projects across different academic cultures unless people are committed to telling stories to each other from their various experiences," Gian said to me on email, sometime before many of us began to commit to meeting in October in Pittsburgh. "That would seem to me to

negate the whole social nature of storytelling. In a project on narrative, you'd want to test out the nature of story in the process of getting a bunch of scholars together, and see if they could learn from each other, see if something like dialogic work would exist as Bakhtin would claim for story."

That made sense to me. But I wondered whether and how it would work, really. "Most academics," I replied, "are generally more analytical, more task-and goal-oriented and just too damned busy to do what we all know can be useful. This exploratory storytelling is a messy, time-consuming business."

Gian agreed, "But it's a good way to do something interesting, to just get together and explore. In a way, that's how most of the recent developments in literacy, narrative, and technology have taken place, without a map."

That sounded good to me, too, yet I wondered about how to achieve 'cross talk,' talk across disciplines. "Some of these people are coming from such different areas. Do you think they can really talk with each other?"

Gian was convinced it was the only way something really new could get developed. I agreed, knowing that the best work I have been able to do with others has occurred when stories were shared, and relationships formed, and we talked across differences. "Sounds good," I said. "Let's do it." And we all did.

Gian thanked me, too, for some pictures I had sent him all these many months after his wedding. "I loved the one of Sam in the pub in Doolin, banging his cup on the table to the music. We have him on videotape from the reception, you know, dancing with you around the floor. He's amazing. Just so bright and alive in every picture."

Proud parent, I told him of a recent compliment from a stranger: "She had observed him near a public pool and she came over and said to me, 'There's something remarkable about that child. He's going to be something special, you can just tell. An artist, or something like that. You can see it in his face, such intelligence and spark.' Isn't it nauseating, parents bragging about their kids all the time?"

Gian tells me of the death of Edel's father in Ireland. I express my sorrow and promise prayers on their behalf, and recall: "I remember him taking her so proudly down the aisle of the church, and the thunderous applause for him after his short welcome speech at the wedding, so obviously respected by the whole community he was." I told him of the death of my own father, and how I was coping, years later, with the loss.

The Value of Narrative

Over email or on the phone and in bars or wherever we can meet Gian and I talk as we have done for several years about the nature of narrative, weaving our reading of various scholarly books on narrative with our related interests in novels, films, and sports. Narrative, as we came to view it—because how can we separate out, after all the talk, whose view is whose?—is inevitably complex, a form perhaps intrinsically personal, exploratory, subjective, multi-perspectival, context-centered. When we first began writing about narrative, both of us, informed by our reading of Bruner and Coles, tended to emphasize its possibilities, its potential to *reveal* the world and ourselves. We discover our 'voice' through writing narratives, we thought, we discover or reveal ourselves in our stories, we might have said.

But the more we read into postmodern theorists such as Foucault and Lacan, the more we became interested as well—without losing that sense of the possibilities in storytelling—in how much might be *concealed* in story, how the various perspectives that story might represent could evade a clear, singular point of view. Stories, we knew, might be sites of rich descriptive detail, grounded as they are in particular contexts, vehicles to help us think about the real from a constructed exchange of perspectives, and yet some stories seemed to possess a kind of poetic indeterminacy as well, skimming close to the limits of language, skirting away from any sure sense of what we might have experienced in some other stories to be 'real.' Some stories we saw achieved some kind of limited generalizability, reaching across contexts, yet some stories seemed to work against any kind of universalizing tendencies. We knew of stories that functioned like certain kinds of arguments, and others that worked against argumentation. In short, stories have seemed to us increasingly hard to essentialize, much like other, postmodern conceptions of literacy and technology.

In early September I was talking to Gian on email about the Lions and Tigers and Bears (oh my!) and the possibility of our writing an online story together and about the first meeting in Pittsburgh, and it occurred to me that the intersection of literacy, narrative, and technology would be a fair description of Gian's dissertation—which I was lucky enough to direct—focusing as it did on the story of Gian's tutoring a middle school boy in writing, the boy initially resistant to Gian's literacy teaching strategy that invited him to write personal narratives, he eventually leading Gian to join him in collaboratively writing a cyberpunk story.

I had warned Gian early on in the process of his gathering data for the dissertation: "The real crux of the problem is this, that the academy does not truly value narrative as a way of knowing. I mean, things are changing in some places, and everyone is writing about it, but there's getting a job, and there's still tenure. It will mark you, in a way, put you on the outside, possibly." Gian was determined to write a narrative dissertation, however, and I was determined to support him in his efforts.

In this September phone call we reminisced for some time about our struggle to get a committee together that would support his approach, a process which in some sense mirrored my own struggle for legitimacy as a storyteller within a decidedly more analytical, social science scholarly tradition. Both Gian and I live lives beside our academic ones in the world of 'creative writing,' publishing fiction and poetry from time to time. And we generally don't parade such works on our c.v.'s, knowing that they don't count for as much as other forms and styles. And what about academic stories? It might depend on the institution, but things still seemed to be perilous.

"The politics of narrative for students and teachers and academics are still such that they are still so often marginalized for doing this kind of work," I said. "Even in English departments, where the analysis of narrative is privileged over doing narrative. But it's a similar kind of border work for lots of folks laboring in literacy and technology, seems like, in most places."

"Right," Gian said. "It's a question of what counts as knowledge, basically."

In spite of the variety of interesting work in narrative inquiry and analysis being done in a variety of fields, and my own teaching of it as research methodology to teachers and doctoral students in a variety of disciplines, I had for years felt marginalized in certain ways within the ed schools where I had worked. "Stop telling stories," one senior professor advised me, in my first post-doc job. "And start writing about narrative." "Navel-gazing," another 'mentor' labeled dimensions of my classroom stories. At my next stop my chair told me, "Stop writing stories, and stop writing with your students. Establish a strong individual scholarly niche." In my next stop, my present roost, they finally gave me tenure, appreciating the kind of narrative work I had done.

And so you can understand why I am proud to situate this volume as one more important attempt to value narrative in the academy, to share and tell stories and illustrate how crucial the process of storytelling still is and will continue to be for our various con-

ceptions of knowledge and research. This volume has been created through a story-honoring, community research effort, bringing people together, online and at two colloquia, to talk about the future of narrative discourse. The blending is what is important, the professional and the personal, stories and analysis, friendship and sports, textual and visual, the fluid and the concrete. As we look to the provocative range of stories in the collection you are about to read, we see some of narrative's possibilities recreating the map of our understanding: tales of the digital self on the Internet, tales of new media narratives, hyper-text stories, stories of what it means to teach with technology, stories of political issues, of the limits and resistance around technological narratives. Stories that might lead us to resistance, hope, caution. A diverse group of stories, written sometimes across disciplines and sometimes from multiple perspectives.

As Bakhtin wrote about the novel itself, what is achieved here might be read as a kind of cultural forum. There's even a story or two (including this one, I suppose) about the colloquia itself, versions of its proceedings. What is the story of the intersection of narrative, literacy, and technology that this collection begins to tell? It's a tale sifted from fragments, bytes and bits, a pastiche of limits and possibilities, of caution and concern, of fascination and social change. Gian was right; I did have fun, and learned much from the exchange, as I am sure we all did. We trust you will, too. If you look hard, you will see there's a kind of map being drawn here, not of fixed names and places and elevations, but of an ever shifting terrain of stories told for our possible futures. As James Cowan says of Fra Mauro, "He is trying to encourage a process of unlimited deciphering, as if these facts are but the tip of an iceberg" (xviii). We invite you to join us in this process of unlimited deciphering, plunging ever deeper below the surface, and place your story on the map, too, of course.

Sam's Story, Or Getting Certain Stories On Our Map

"What's up?" Gian asked in January when he was calling to invite me to write this preface. We hadn't talked for a long time. "How's that Sam of yours?" He hadn't actually seen Sam since we had attended his and Edel's wedding in Ireland, though he had pictures and had heard some happy stories. "Gian," I say. "This is really hard to say. I know how much you love Sam. I don't even know how to say it, really. Sam was fine when he was two and a half, as you know, but over the past several months, things really

sort of fell apart. We didn't notice it at all at first, but looking back we can see the beginnings of the regression. He's lost language, he's lost social skills, he's lost narrative! This kid, who was so active and social, his pre-school class leader, sits and spins trucks in a circle, and pushes other kids away when they come near him. He mostly stopped talking altogether. It's really devastating, most days. I can't make any sense of it. Yet somehow, he's still Sam, of course. We love him all the same and are doing all we can for him."

"My God! What happened? What caused it? Do you have any idea?"

"Not really," I said. "He was diagnosed with a kind of developmental disorder, but he's only a little over three, no one knows what it is for sure. We sure don't. I mean, we're looking into various kinds of causes and solutions. We have him already in a special ed pre-school program and in speech-language therapy. We're looking into special diets, and so many things, as you'd assume anyone in our position would be doing."

Gian and I have shared some joyful stories over the years that seemed to make sense, like ones we could tell about his and Edel's wedding, and others, like this one, like the ones about the death of Edel's father, that seemed to make less sense. He thanked me for telling him the story and said he'd pray for us. "It would seem that things are sometimes too much for anyone to make sense of," Gian e-mailed me later, "Yet in the end we have to keep telling ourselves even these stories because of what they preserve and help us comprehend/understand. Dave, you once told me, 'Narrative is important because it helps us preserve/understand complexity.' You need to keep telling stories of Sam to try and make sense of it all even when it so obviously does not."

A couple weeks later, Gian told me, "You know, when I told Edel about it, all she could really do is respond by telling a story of Sam at the wedding, dancing, spinning in your arms across the room, grinning from ear to ear."

It seems to me that in the end, Sam's story can serve as a small example of what it may be crucially important for us to tell and hear, in our homes and as we meet in bars and restaurants to share our lives, but also in academia, stories with consequences, stories where facts are but the tip of an iceberg, stories that nudge us to go deeper. Stories of various contexts, our relationships, our loves and losses, are woven into the fabric of our work, in one way or another. It was and is certainly important for me to tell about Sam and for Gian to hear as part of our evolving relationship and understanding of the world, for our continuing work together. Let me

submit that stories such as mine about Sam become part of the argument for why we have to help the academy learn to value narrative more, and put this kind of work more and more on our discursive maps, because it is such a critical way of understanding the world.

Notes

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PROJECT

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Narratives,
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Works
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and
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Cyberspace

UNLOC