

THE INTERNAL SOCIALITY OF CREATIVE WRITING

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Given that language is inherently social, writing is a powerful tool for connecting with the construction processes of others (sociality). But sociality is more than just thinking with social partners; it also involves feeling with them. Creative writing is one method that draws upon language to create sociality, but in a way that often involves feeling states just as much as verbal concepts. In the present paper, I describe the creative writing process as a form of emotional sociality, and share some stories and reflections to illustrate the point.

Keywords: Creative writing, sociality, constructivism

WHY BOTHER?

In teaching my graduate psychotherapy class, I usually ask each student to engage in the Adlerian exercise of delineating the various important life tasks that she/he can recognize, and then attempt to abstract from those tasks the overall lifestyle (Adler, 1935; or *fundamental project* as Sartre, 1943/1992, later called it). As the professor, I try to participate in as many of our class exercises as I can. But on one recent occasion of this pedagogical maneuver, I found myself confronted with some new realities. Having listed my life tasks year after year, and having abstracted my own fundamental project at least a dozen times before, the exercise seemed a battle between memory, honest self-reflection, and my desire to model something useful for my students. My own life tasks had evolved in the preceding year in some drastic (as well as in some not-so-dramatic) ways. I was still training doctoral students in psychological research, assessments, and therapies. I was still maintaining a modest private practice off-campus. I was still active as an actor/singer in a local community theatre. I was still engaged in my own research and writing in the areas of posttraumatic stress and forensic assessment. And I was still composing the occasional poem and short story. But I had recently married a woman with whom I had a kind of relationship that I had not thought possible in years before. Rather than being a relationship for which I had to sacrifice parts of myself, this

partnership somehow epitomized my identity, while simultaneously extending it and complementing it. Now, all the other life-tasks seemed like individual components of an integrated whole, all under the rubric of some superordinate psychological umbrella that was exemplified (but not defined) by this new-found relationship. It was as if I had comprehended Adler's exercise for the very first time. Sitting in the small seminar room, I wrote my fundamental project in simple terms: *To communicate emotionally with those I care about, using whatever verbal and non-verbal tools I possess.*

When asked to present a paper on the psychology of creative writing for the *Constructivist Psychology Network* conference in 2008, I immediately reconnected to my fundamental project as the guiding framework for describing my personal process of creative writing. Given that language is inherently social (i.e., if not for the psychological and/or actual *other*, language would not exist), the use of words is perhaps our most obvious—if not our most frequent—tool for connecting with the construction processes of another person (engaging in sociality à la Kelly, 1955, p. 96). Clearly there are many ways of construing the construction processes of another, and of exposing our own constructions to the other for construal. All of our physical senses are put into the service of sociality as we watch, touch, listen to, taste, and smell those with whom we socially engage. Just as we use these tools to *think* with our social partners, we like-

wise use them to *feel* with others (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Much of this *feeling with* process happens at a tacit level. I see a friend whose face is contorted in grief, and I feel sad with her. I sense fear in the subtle tremolo of an elder's voice on his deathbed, and a pallor of dread descends upon my own consciousness. But how do I intentionally enter into communication designed to *feel with* another, and invite that other to *feel with me*? For me, the answers are myriad: I sing; I supervise; I act; I embrace and allow my emotions in the presence of my partner; I conduct psychotherapy; I talk (sometimes *about* my feelings, but more often not). And, when the mood is right and the words visit themselves upon me, I write.

Before proceeding to describe the creative writing process as a form of emotional sociality, I must acknowledge that much written language is not in the service of emotional connection, but is intended for denotative purposes. *This is what happened*, or *This is how to do it*, or *This is what I think*, or even *This is what I feel* are all legitimate uses of written language. But they fall completely outside of how I use creative writing. For me, creative writing is always using language to enter into relationship and communicate emotion. If a story gets told (or not), or if a fact gets communicated (or not) is at most incidental, and usually immaterial to this purpose. But relationship is essential to such writing—the relationship to the actual or potential reader, and even the relationships to others in my emotional history.

On May 8 of 2008, I awoke with the memory of a vivid dream conversation with my late friend, Michael Mahoney. In my dream, everyone present was openly acknowledging something that is usually glossed over regarding Michael's death: that it was apparently suicide. I asked him what has been on the lips of many of his friends since his passing: "Michael...Why?" His dreamt response was so striking that I wrote it down as soon as I awoke: "The *me* I always liked, I wasn't seeing him or hearing him speak anymore. I just wanted to make him make noise. I

wanted to hear him scream one time." Finally allowing voice to some of my guilty anger, I responded, "In so doing, you made sure the rest of us would never hear anything after that scream."

Then the dream took an unexpected turn. Michael said he wanted to coauthor something with me. I immediately inflated with pride and satisfaction. You see, although Michael and I were, at times, very close friends, and we talked a lot about his writings and about mine, often sharing preliminary drafts of manuscripts, poems, and theoretical ideas, we never coauthored anything. So I was thrilled that he considered me a legitimate peer—enough to invite me to write something *with* him. I asked about the topic, anticipating that it would be about emotion in the therapy process, or therapist self-care, or the like. Instead, he responded with something so mundane and obscure that I could not even recall it when awake. Perhaps it was a chapter on the use of screwdrivers amongst electricians, or a treatise on why political parties lose favor in difficult economic times. It was likely neither of those topics, but no more relevant to us as psychologists, and not at all memorable.

For a day or so, I struggled to make sense of the strange twist in my dream. Why would my one chance to coauthor something with Michael have nothing to do with the content of our relationship? Finally, I settled on something that I knew all along. All of my authorship is coauthorship. Whether I am writing a chapter on posttraumatic stress therapy at my computer or a love note on the back of a napkin, the important relationships from throughout my life inhabit the words. Those relationships express themselves as connotations and invitations—connotations of the realities we co-constructed, and invitations for any new reader to *feel with* us.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP IN CREATIVE WRITING

The most effective way I have found to use writing in the service of emotional communication is to write in relationship. We do not really *have* relationships; they are not things that we carry around in our purses and briefcases. We cannot store them on the SD cards in our cell phones or PDAs. Rather, we *participate in* relationships. It is easiest to participate in a relationship in the physical presence of the social other; but such physical presence is by no means necessary. Sociality requires only that we are construing the construction processes of the other for a social relationship to exist. So, when I write a story, I intentionally loosen the mundane boundaries of my social circumstance and attempt to participate in many relationships simultaneously. Firstly, I intentionally engage and participate in relationships with my coauthors—those who supply identity to my voice. The loudest of these tend to be my mother and father, Rue Cromwell, my wife, and my son. Quieter, but still salient coauthoring relationships scatter throughout my history and life-space: Michael, the mentally retarded adult who lived next door to my childhood home, my clients, anyone with whom I ever sang harmony or jammed on musical instruments. These relationships offer the emotional content—the raw materials—that give substance to emotional communication.

Secondly, when writing I intentionally attempt to participate in relationship with the audience. After all, regardless of whatever images, plot-lines, or feelings I am attempting to capture and communicate, the audience will utterly and individually supply the eventual meaning to my words (Sullivan, 1953). This sort of engagement implies caring. Unless a reader cares (about me, about engaging with me, about being affected by me) at least to some extent, nothing emotional can take place. How can I expect a reader to care about me unless I care first? That caring is another part of the emotional communication. I have to survey my caring and cared-for coauthors and discover word-based and portable platforms on which to display and carry that caring from my emotions to the emotions of the reader.

TRICKS/TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Whether or not you have children, imagine that you have a 10 year-old son or daughter. Imagine that you are in a public place and visualize the following:

Your child is crying.

With that image in mind:

What parts of your body react?

What do you feel?

Where do you feel it?

What parts of you are gearing up for action?

What parts are inaccessible to you?

Now consider an alternative image:

Your child has just won a trophy at a sports event.

Again, the questions:

What parts of your body react?

What do you feel?

Where do you feel it?

What parts of you are gearing up for action?

What parts are inaccessible to you?

And finally, a third image:

Your child is misbehaving in embarrassing and socially-problematic ways.

And the questions:

What parts of your body react?

What do you feel?

Where do you feel it?

What parts of you are gearing up for action?

What parts are inaccessible to you?

Because our emotional construction processes are almost entirely non-verbal, when perceiving

emotion in another person we often begin by making a bodily copy of what we perceive in the other. That allows us to perceive the feelings by *feeling with* the other (which is very different than simply cognitively inferring what the other person might be feeling). Sometimes, but certainly not always, we take the time and effort to connect the emotional copy (derived by *feeling with* the other) to our verbal/verbalizable constructs (perhaps to talk to your child, or to boast about her trophy to a friend, or to tell your child's therapist that stronger interventions are needed). That is how emotional communication typically proceeds when the communication is the means to some other end.

But in creative writing, the emotional communication is the end in itself. So, in creative writing, I attempt to deconstruct the sequence described above and enact it in reverse. I attempt to use verbal tags and their paraverbal contexts, inflections, and aesthetics...NOT just to denote meaning (or deliver meaning directly)...but rather to create a non-verbal *getting-it* (or *feeling with*) in the personal space of the audience.

Perhaps the most powerful tool for communicating emotion is the intensive involvement of the body via sensorial language. Try the following exercise:

Think about the morning after a night with little sleep and the experience of the first desperately-desired cup of coffee. Allow yourself to experience your body with the imagination. Now say the word, *coffee*, aloud. Hear it fully. Feel it. If the way the word sounded did not match with your feeling, say it aloud again. Say just the word, but communicate as best you can, the context, implications, and bodily reality that the *word-in-feeling-state* carries.

Now change the scenario. Imagine the smell of coffee in your mother's kitchen signifying the family gathered for a holiday. Again allow yourself to experience your body with the imagination, and then say the word, *coffee*, aloud. As before,

align the sound of the word with the feeling.

One more scenario. You are a coffee plantation owner in South America. You stand on the hillside and overlook the vast fruits of your life's work. Now utter the word, *coffee*.

You could repeat the above process with any number of mantra-words. For example, say the word *fly* with scenarios of (1) soaring above life's problems; (2) rushing to get the children to school; and (3) going on yet another business trip away from the family. Or say the word *God* with scenarios of (1) transcendent connection with the ground of all being; (2) the self-appointed status of your ego-inflated boss; (3) a supernatural being that makes arbitrary decisions about the eternal status of individual human beings).

The creative writer takes a feeling state (as an example, you could use one evoked by the exercise above) with all its associations and embodied experience, and then considers what language, what metaphors, what relationships from the past or present, what descriptions of bodily experience, might bring a reader to share that *word-in-feeling-state* with the writer.

I will illustrate this process with two brief stories, each written for very different reasons. In each, notice the body references that invite the reader into the felt experience, and the metaphors that attempt to enhance the sociality of association.

The following essay was written on September 12, 2001, the day after the most impactful tragedy of my lifetime. The *word* (or feeling state) being grappled with still defies verbalization. Whether or not it was communicated nonetheless will be yours to judge.



Having awoken today in a new existence...a different society, I find it amazing that my memories of yesterday are more visceral than visual—more pathetic

than horrific. I spent all day yesterday NOT doing a variety of things. Most of all, I spent the day NOT crying. Somehow, the sense that my shock and grief—however profound it might have been—was too small...too removed...for me to be allowed the luxury of tears. Those tears waited patiently in line behind the half-paranoid glances around my own physical space, behind my look into the eyes of two teenage sons’ eyes as they struggled to understand their new existence, behind the stare onto my computer screen for work that would distract. The tears wait in line like passengers at terminals in airports waiting for planes that may never take off. They may curse their inconvenience, never knowing the blessing of their circumstance.

Others—my mother for example—allowed the tears to flow. Whether for better or for worse, those souls whose vessels of compassion have been emptied for their fellows must be awaking today with eyes that feel much different than mine... memories of yesterday that are less implosive, even if no less devastating.

Because I still cannot cry today, I write. Perhaps tomorrow, I will have something more useful to share.



The next story, from 2006, contains very different content. I had never noticed the common theme between this story and the one above until I selected it for inclusion in this paper. I suspect the two together may communicate more about masculine conflict in expressing emotions than either alone.



The day we cried in our cereal

Scooby was a beautiful dog. But his appearance was certainly not typical. His father was a German police dog and his mother was a collie. Although the siblings in his litter had the hair pattern and coloration of their German police dog patronage,

Scooby stood out as amusingly different. He had strawberry blonde hair, which seemed oddly out of place on a body type that otherwise resembled his father’s strong shepherd form. As he grew out of the puppy stage, the strawberry blonde hair grew long and became curly. In addition to being utterly unusual, this curly blonde hair gave Scooby a distinctly girlish look—even as his body type continued to mature toward the large guard-dog musculature. Somehow, the dichotomies in his physical characteristics were matched in his personality. Although capable of fierce aggression toward other dogs, Scooby was always gentle with people—especially children—and had a playful spirit that defied all correction and attempts at training.

Scooby had two great passions in his life: chasing the school bus; and lounging in my mother’s juniper bush on the east side of our house. There was just something about a large canister of screaming children that Scooby couldn’t resist. Scooby would come to the bus to greet my sister and me, then we would have to hold onto him tightly as the driver pulled away. In the mornings, my mother would lock him in the garage so we could board the bus without him following us around the rural section-line dirt-road square that we called “around the block”. Finally, Mom began locking Scooby in the garage even in the afternoons, to preempt the daily wrestling match. Regarding the juniper bush, it was a decadent pleasure for Scooby to lie on the puffy, round shrub, which must have seemed like a cool feather-bed after being shaded from the afternoon sun by the eave of the house. Mom had other plans for her bush than for it to be flattened like an old pillow on a daily basis, so she would shoo Scooby off each time she caught him there. She even resorted to the rolled-up newspaper now and again.

I suppose that every boy has a special connection to his dog. But I always felt as though Scooby and I were alike in some

important ways that I didn't understand. Looking back on it now, I see some of the same tense opposites in my boyhood existence that I recall in Scooby. I was a large and muscular boy, largely owing to my own German heritage. And I could be "all-boy", as the older folks would say, just as much as my male relatives and playmates. My attraction to sports and physical work with my father seemed to attest to my male identity. But somehow my size and shape stood at odds with my red hair (not inherited from my mother or from my father)...and with my emotional sensitivities that could have me writing a poem, reading the Bible, or playing house with the girls just as easily as organizing a tackle football game. People often seemed not to know what to make of this overgrown man-boy who might be emotionally hurt by an off-handed remark. I now think that my awareness of these competing extremes in my own identity gave me a special empathy for Scooby, and a certain kind of envy for how he enacted his personality with great gusto...certainly giving no thought to the expectations of others. They say that dogs mature seven times faster than humans...

One day Mom picked up my sister and me from school, and we ran some errands before returning home. When we opened the garage to let Scooby out, he did not emerge. It didn't take long for Mom to regretfully realize that she must have forgotten to lock him away that afternoon. The school bus had long come and gone, and Scooby was nowhere in sight. We drove "around the block" to scan for Scooby in all directions, hoping to find him chasing a rabbit in some nearby field. No Scooby. Although our negative imaginations were well-founded and thoroughly feared, we also knew how common it was in 1970s rural Oklahoma for an unleashed pet to wander off for unwitnessed adventures, only to return home either unscathed or with only a few battle-scars to show for

the trip. So we hoped for a safe return for Scooby.

At breakfast the next morning, I had already asked Mom if Scooby had come home. She said he had not. While my sister and I ate cereal and milk, Mom followed Dad out to his truck as he was leaving for work. I knew that something was wrong when they both returned. Mom was crying. They took my sister and me outside to see our beloved pet. Scooby had indeed returned. He had made it back home, apparently after an unsuccessful encounter with the school bus, and had laid himself to rest in my mother's juniper bush.

My sister and I came back to the kitchen; on a school day, we still had to finish breakfast and get ready for the day. My sister cried in full, free sobs...the tears mixing with the milk of her tasteless cereal. I struggled with my tears. They wanted to come out. But I was supposed to be the man, right? So, I strained and I mourned on the inside...and then eventually cried anyway, but not without a healthy dose of embarrassment.

It took me many more years to mature as much as Scooby... to learn to express all of my personality without doubting my legitimacy. I only wish Scooby could see me now (or rather, I wish I could see him).



I suppose this sort of creative writing comes easier to some persons than to others. And, of course, there are technical, grammatical, lexical, and empathic skills that can make some writers *better at it* than the average person. But I am convinced that most non-writers choose their silence not for lack of talent, but for fear of emotional risk. There is indeed emotional and social risk involved in telling a story and allowing an audience to respond. Likewise, however, there is much emotional and social satisfaction to be gained in the effort.

I will conclude this paper with the challenge I posed to the audience at the end of the Victoria symposium in 2008.

Answer me honestly:

Raise your hand if you can sing.

Raise your hand if you can draw.

Raise your hand if you can dance.

Raise your hand if you can play the drums.

Now place yourself back into your frame of mind as a five-year-old:

Raise your hand if you can sing.

Raise your hand if you can draw.

Raise your hand if you can dance.

Raise your hand if you can play the drums.

What has changed since you were five?

An earlier version of this paper was presented as the following: Sewell, K. W. (2008). Creative Writing. Presented at the biennial conference of the Constructivist Psychology Network, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, June.

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Sewell, K. W. (2009). The internal sociality of creative writing. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 6, 35-41, 2009

(Retrieved from <http://www.pcp-net.org/journal/pctp09/sewell09.pdf>)

Received: 31 Dec 2008 – Accepted: 14 Feb 2009 – Published: 20 March 2009.