

## **Braiding a Naturalist's Journey of Embracing Courage**

Synthesis Presentation

Rhoda Maurer - 5 May 2015

*What do I want the audience to take away from my work/presentation?  
Don't honor the stressful feeling to say something profound...  
share the authenticity*

- 1) Winter in the Finger Lakes
- 2) As many of you know, I found myself accepting the position of Director of Horticulture for the botanic gardens and arboreta of Cornell University just 3 months ago, a landing and a beginning I've been seeking for years.
- 3) So I packed up the car
- 4) Ithaca location and geography
- 5) Soil Map
- 6) Topography
- 7) Cornell Plantations Visitor Map
- 8) 35 acres of Botanical Gardens
- 9) 100 acres of Arboretum  
40,000 plants and over 5,000 taxa
- 10) 75 years in 2019
- 11) 3500 acres of Natural Areas (Fall Creek Gorge 12,000 years ago)
- 12) But the journey to this new beginning has not been a linear nor prescribed path.
- 13) The path felt at times like a walk on a cool spring day with the sun shining gently through the young petals of the first flowering cherry trees,
- 14) or an exhilarating kayak paddle over a still lake. But, many other times the path felt more like a weedy footpath, my feet feeling heavy from pushing through the brush,

- 15) or like an uphill hand-over-hand boulder climb, not being able to see the summit and tiring from the lack of oxygen from exertion at high altitude, or like my feet were stuck in a swamp, and all I could do to free myself was leave my boots behind in the thick wet mud.
- 16) And then there were the times my feet fell out from underneath me completely.
- 17) The last time this happened to me was when I lost my job from the trickle down impacts of the 2008 recession. I was angry at how I was treated disrespectfully. I was angry I was suddenly financially and emotionally dependent upon others. I was left trembling in fear of my vulnerability and I lost confidence in myself once again, tainted by memories of adolescence and mixed messages of what I should do and who I should be.

Do you know what it feels like to lose confidence in yourself, to feel loss and pain? Of course you do. Yet we don't speak of these deep feelings in learning communities very often.

- 18) Some of us find comfort in close personal connections. Some of us build walls; I've been a wall builder. My Grandma Lucy lived life as a gift and process of discovery. She held an attitude of continual inquiry and tolerance. She found and honored the beauty in everything and everyone and loved unconditionally. She was the first person who helped me feel the natural cycles of living by mentoring me through life's challenges. My great-grandma Lucy died when I was 20 years old, and I felt very alone in a family that didn't talk about their feelings. I fled into nature to help heal my deep wounds.
- 19) I built a wall between any real belonging and me to other people. *Nature never lied to me. Nature never mislead me. Nature was just there as supportive arms to discover more about myself through being with her.*
- 20) My synthesis paper shares a loosely braided narrative of three strands that became revealed to me during the repetitive process of

revisiting, letting gestate, and revising. I hope you will extend strands of the braid, connected to your own life experiences.

21) I am braiding the importance particular people in my life, searching for my vocation, and building supportive community for my continued growth. The structure I've chosen to use helps to demonstrate the complexity of how important process is as the deeper underground, the structural roots, ever working to slowly reveal and shape new awareness. The paper digs into contextual stories that are parts of the braiding. And I'm experimenting with using seasonal metaphors to bridge further connections with you.

22) *Yet when we understand winter in the natural world, we realize that what we see out there is not death so much as dormancy... But much of it has gone underground, into hibernation, awaiting a season of renewal and rebirth... Spring is the season of surprise when we realize once again that despite our perennial doubts, winter's darkness yields to light and winter's deaths give rise to new life. As spring's wonders arise from winter's hardships, we must hold to live life fully and well – and to become more confident that as creatures embedded in nature, we know in our bones how to hold them... Summer is the season of abundance and first harvest. Having traced the seed of true self on its arduous journey from birth, through death and dormancy, into flowering, we can look at the abundance that has grown up within us and ask, "Whom is this meant to feed? Where am I called to give my gifts?"... The idealists among us tend to ask the "whose" question prematurely: we want to serve the world's needs, but we burn out trying to do more than we are able. I cannot give what I do not possess, so I need to know what gifts have grown up within me that are now ready to be harvested and shared. If the gifts I give are mine, grown from the seed of true self, I can give them without burning out. Like the fruit of a tree, they will replenish themselves in due season.*

~ Parker Palmer, founder and Senior Partner of the Center for  
Courage & Renewal<sup>1</sup>

- 23) I invite you to pay attention to what resonates or brings up tension for you, noticing the beginning of possible meta-awareness; to make conscious the story just beneath the surface of our talk and invite us to speak it.<sup>2</sup>
- 24) **Draw your tree**  
**How many of you drew roots? How many of you drew a tree without wounds?**  
**Placing yourself**  
**Where we are going... deeper into my roots**
- 25) **...Share one of the first Digital Stories I created - *Daddy Longlegs***
- 26) Four years ago I participated in two Center for Digital Storytelling Workshops. Only now do I understand why the workshops were such a profound experience for me.
- 27) When I was young, my father would always be telling stories. And I'm not talking about the stories typically shared with a five year old... he told those too. Rather he would tell stories that exaggerated reality – and the entire family knew it. And no matter how many times, and still to this day, he doesn't see his exaggeration; for him this is reality. So at a very young age I was aware of the power of perception. As an adult I attribute this trait of his as part of his artistic expression and sometimes a method he uses to get his way (even if he is not aware of his metacognitive process). Yet as a child I felt a double-edged message of right and wrong, of lies and truth.
- 28) The story circle space of the Digital Storytelling workshop honored my visual expression through my photography.
- 29) They honored a space of learning from our histories.

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<sup>1</sup> Palmer, P. J. (2004). *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. pp.82-84.

<sup>2</sup> Baldwin, C. (2005). *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*. Novato, CA: New World Library. p.30.

- 30) They honored a supportive environment for taking apart and putting back together again things held tightly to my identity.
- 31) And they created lasting community for me. Before this experience I didn't trust the power of story.
- 32) My grandmother's words still resonate with me today, "Money will never buy you happiness, but it can make life a lot more comfortable. This will be something you will struggle with in your adult life. Be careful to choose what is right for you." My family story was full of these double messages:

- *You are smart; make the most of your education so you can get a good job. When are you going to get married and have a family?*
- *Do what you love, follow your heart and the money will follow. You are a talented musician, but you won't be able to take care of yourself being a violinist.*
- *You are an artistic child with a creative imagination and gifted with lots of available choices. You need to choose one thing to do for your career and focus your entire life on that or you will fail to have security.*

33) Writing was never a strength of mine, or so I was told in grade school... my grades in English were always lower than my grades in science, math, music and art. I always struggled with vocabulary and I took this as part of my identity; later I learned this experience is coined asynchronous development not inability. More importantly, what I've come to understand during my graduate work is that just because this story defined me at one time in my life, it doesn't necessarily define me now. No, writing is central to building the clarity of my learning so that I can share my thoughts with others. Much like a child who speaks later than expected developmental models, I too am finding my voice, my way of finding clarity, through a combination of creative modalities developed asynchronously yet in concert with each other.

34) Only after... Spiral Dynamics of Human Development: the psychology of the mature human being is an unfolding, emergent, oscillating, spiraling process, marked by progressive subordination of older, lower-order behavior systems to newer, higher-order

systems.

- 35) Fiddleheads
- 36) Playing with visual metaphors
- 37)
- 38)
  
- 39) Romanesco and the intimate connection of flow
- 40) **Check-in on your tree**

41) **Pieces from my interview... an act of courage**

My graduate studies grew from a desire to scaffold my appreciation of how horticulture, art, and awareness of our environment add value to people's lives and it grew out of concern for what is happening to the places I have a personal connection to that hold the necessary diversity of life.

42) I've seen clear-cutting in the PNW rainforests first hand, I've seen my childhood stomping grounds transformed to pavement, and I've seen the results of out of rhythm wildfires in Yellowstone, deforestation in South America and New Zealand. I've seen seasonal cycles migrating through evidence of our flora and fauna, and I've heard countless stories of habitat and flora endangerment and loss through my professional affiliations. But what I quickly realized is that those of us who know, and those of us who act have trouble talking with people who don't see the same way we do. Yet the global problems we face will take more than the actions of a few individuals to solve.

43) Horticulture has been a part of the human experience for as long as we have cultivated plants; one story of how we relate to the natural world. But below the story are other stories, stories of why we see the natural world the way we do, about the connection/disconnect dichotomy framed by our cultural beliefs. And in a world of increasing complexity, we need to cultivate seeing anew and with empathy in order to solve how we want to be. Not honoring the diversity of our humanity has brought some of humanity's worst to fruition. And this is the real challenge of developing and nurturing any living collection... seeing them anew in the complexity of humanity and things larger than ourselves so that we become aware of the gaps in our seeing that ultimately might bring more conscious awareness of behaviors and how they relate to contemporary environmental issues. Horticulture as we currently see its role might

introduce people to a perspective toward nature to which they haven't been exposed. But we also need to examine the manifestation of *our beliefs and values* imposed on solving complex problems.

- 44) And this brings me to another kind of story. A story not grounded from the perspective of one human life, but the perspective of one tree. Imagine a story where the 500 years of the life of a Douglas Fir is intimately connected with the life going on around it and the history of human development, from birth through death and rebirth. Or imagine a story of creation where the sun, moon and stars were held in a bentwood box made of western red cedar and released to light the world. Or imagine a story of the emerald ash borer or human deforestation or any other story grounded in our natural world. They can all be connected to our living collections.

In order to best assist capacity for this kind of inquiry, for life-long learning, with building capacity for deep listening, people and communities need to open their hearts, first to self and then to others. We need to cultivate an intelligence of the heart. It's hard to look at ourselves in a culture that encourages individualism. It's difficult to see the gaps. But the beginning of knowledge is the recognition of how much we don't know.

- 45) This time of year helps me see the many transitions we all go through as a natural cycle of life. It helps remind me that there is beauty in decay, giving back to the earth, hope, promise and potential in transitions. Springboard stories are one way to engage the people just enough that they have questions; they have curiosity. They are vague enough that people can see themselves in it, thus encouraging engagement into related but implicitly implied ideas. Our challenge ahead is how to make those springboard stories alive in our living collections. And while I don't have a prescription for how to make this happen or for how Plantations should meet its mission and vision for the future, it's because I feel the real value is in building this together.

- 46) So maybe we can start by exploring our stories of "*What is your relationship with nature? Or what stories do you know of that might help us bridge the interpretation of our living collections with contemporary environmental issues?*"

47) Today I am concerned about the empowerment of people to shape their own lives and specifically through re-crafting their personal narratives and aligning behaviors with beliefs. I believe this is the deeper work we must all practice in order to be our best selves for others. Yet I also come to believe this work cannot be done alone. For us to become empowered, we must practice in a supportive community of non-judgment and respect, built from risk-taking and witnessing each other's stories. And re-crafting our stories is only one part of the process of empowerment.

48) Letting go and allowing people to self-direct the response to this support, and even help shape it mirrors leadership principles of helping our direct reports hold themselves accountable for their impact rather than being held accountable. For me this means going towards the fear of letting go and failing, knowing this is where the important work begins.

*And recent experiences I once saw as broken limbs on my tree are now gifts in my own personal development. In tree physiology, these wounds compartmentalize rather than heal; they are always part of the tree, but hidden from surface awareness as calluses grow to cover scars. Only later in the life of the tree may these wounds become apparent again when the tree is stressed by wind.*

49) As I've transitioned into my new place of employment, I've brought my practices with me. The interesting thing is that there is plenty of pull to focus on the day-to-day priorities of my job. The harder thing to do is take the time that it takes to do the deeper work of listening to myself in response to what I'm hearing and seeing around me in this new place.

Three years ago I might not have honored the time with such enthusiasm and deep understanding of its importance. I don't know if I would have been as comfortable with the discomfort of this kind of transition. I don't know if I would have been so confident in the slow process, giving myself permission to change my mind, adapt and model the kind of environment I want to create considering the tension with producing something tangible by Administration.

50) I'm coming to appreciate how deeply the SICW experience and support of you all have given as another essential part of the braid; a



time of gaining tools, processes, and clarity to support organizing my mind and the actions that lead from my heart. You've allowed me to be heard, and you've allowed me to practice, fumble around, and put things back together again. We have become a community of supportive learning for each other that I hope I can grow into my workplace with others. We have held a very special space for each other.

51) And today I find myself striving to create spaces for people to become their best selves in the context of a larger purpose where each person can find meaning to their contributions. I seek to inspire others to plant, nurture and grow the seeds of their wonder and their gifts, in the context of creating a better world.

52) *Last Week of January 2015, I witnessed clarity from all this practice ... There was little excitement in the room about our accomplishment as a team and the facilitators asked us why. It didn't take long for me to open up and share. "What happened here... this was a simpler version of exactly what happened for me in the morning session. Here we focused on the task accomplishment as the goal at the sacrifice of something else. And that something else was the foundation of the stepladder, the foundation of process, the foundation of people.*

*We accomplished our task at the expense of people. We accomplished a task I could care crap about and we overlooked the potential of building something lasting with greater impact to the system and group dynamic. We missed the opportunity to build empowerment, engagement, collaboration, and a supportive space for working together."*<sup>3</sup>

53) **So what is my synthesis?** A sharing of my journey, the accomplishments, struggles and practices essential to embracing

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<sup>3</sup> Maurer, R. (2015). From my daily writing journal.

courage from a different space of intention, from a space of supporting others while I continue to journey myself. But it's also a journey of tensions: self-acceptance and perfectionism, freed each time a work-in-progress is shared from a place of gratitude on my part.

54) The stories frame my experience of practicing what I've been learning, questioning, and seeking clarity around. They are not shared to elicit pity, but to build a bridge between us and invite us to start speaking what emerges from our talk. To do this I've had to unpack my feelings and thoughts around leadership, horticulture, and what I've been putting back together.

55) **Check-in on your tree – is your tree still alone? If yes, why?**

56) So my challenges ahead..

The synthesis process has supported me in realizing that we have value simply because we are, something I've easily given to others and not to myself. I continue to feel the tension between this and my ingrained perfectionism. And connecting with heart allows us (me) to speak the deeper truths and questions we (I) feel, know and seek, aligning intention to change the minds of others while authentically honoring differences of mind. With this kind of courage, I feel more able to find an opening into hearing others and myself as valuable contributors to the beauty of our complex humanity, finding solutions we might not have seen before. For me there is a growing connection of heart and courage to deconstruct the barrier walls built as part of my narrative and identity.

57) During the later synthesizing process of this research work, I started to understand the importance of building some guiding principles as both a qualitative measure of aligning my practice and my intentions for the envisioned foundational need for supportive space. These are adapted with the help of the Center for Digital Storytelling's Workshop Principles<sup>4</sup> and personal reflection of application to my own values and beliefs. As I return to these

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<sup>4</sup> Lambert, J. (2013). *Seven Stages: Story and the Human Experience*. Digital Diner Press.

experiences over and over again, I'm now in a place of being able to ground principles around a plan for practice so that important processes can be supported that help me evaluate whether we are [I am] supporting these principles or not.

On the slide:

- Supportive and Confidential Spaces to Allow for Building Trust, Taking Risks and Sharing without Judgment
- Grounding Experiences in Something Common to Being Human
- Discussing Polarized Topics from the Side (gently supporting the value of diversity while allowing for awareness)
- Allowing Enough Time to Dig Deep, Reflect and Put Things Back Together
- Living Ethics Through Process and Practice
- The Process as Important as the End Product
- Ownership and Informed Choices of Participation

## 58) Tension and Intention

Through my research, I've come to appreciate that my original inquiry is deeply rooted in my quest to understand my own connection with nature in the context of my life purpose and work. And I have been and continue to be on a journey framed in working to support exploration and change at the individual level of awareness rather than the bigger scale of the environmental movement. Yet I've also come to understand that the power of change is held within me. And that supporting myself in this environment will translate into supporting others. My capstone synthesis is focused, therefore, on my development as a leader/mentor of people I work with while also honoring my personal development as a reflective practitioner. And I've played with the structure of story to support that inquiry because I believe it's the connective tissue that builds empathy and support for risk-taking rather than a weakness lacking academic or scientific rigor.

## 59) **What insights have I started to form words for?**

1. That I must nurture my practice in order to be supportive to others
2. That I must continue to build my tolerance of self-acceptance
3. That I need co-creative spaces of supportive non-judgment that allow for risk-taking as a *serious practice* of learning and growth
4. That others need scaffolding to support their own growth and practice that might be similar or different than my own

5. That courage is grown through practice
  6. An awareness that transparency of my own intentions may help build community despite tensions of differences
  7. That I must continue to reflect and evaluate the effectiveness of my practice, paying attention to and seeking to explore gaps
  8. That I must let go of the outcome more often and enjoy the ride
- 60) **What do I want you to take away from my presentation?**
1. an awareness that story has power to shape our thinking, beliefs and behaviors
  2. an awareness that our beliefs can grow but are always connected with the deeper layers of our narratives
  3. an appreciation for the complexity of our journeys
  4. a connection with my journey and a bridge to your own
  5. an appreciation of the dreams and burdens as essential to the beauty of the journey
  6. a glimpse into the possibility of empowerment through the process of practice
  7. a hope that we can bridge socio-economic-biological awareness to solve complex problems
  8. a sense of place for yourselves
    - a. Where are you?
    - b. Where have you come from?
    - c. Where are you going?
  9. trust that I will work to hold these kinds of spaces for others because they are important to me
  10. a desire to learn more

*One part is about being grown-up enough, confident enough, fearless enough to face my deepest, most secret dreams and to bring them out into the world. And the other part is to embrace all those forces that seemingly work against those dreams, those burdens I have chosen by the act of living and surrendering myself to those that I love. Celebrate the dreams. Celebrate the burdens, too. For it is in that delicious tension point—where dreams pull forward*

*against the backward draw of one's burdens, where life becomes a beautiful work of art. ~ Shannon Hayes, author*

*Stories move in circles. They don't move in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in circles. There are stories inside stories and stories between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is the getting lost. And when you're lost, you start to look around and to listen.<sup>5</sup> ~ Deena Metzger, author*

61) **Lost**

*Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you  
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,  
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,  
Must ask permission to know it and be known.  
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,  
I have made this place around you.  
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.  
No two trees are the same to Raven.  
No two branches are the same to Wren.  
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,  
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows  
Where you are. You must let it find you.*

~ David Wagoner from *Collected Poems 1956-1976*

**Share our trees.... The beautiful and diverse forest**

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<sup>5</sup> Metzger, D. (1992). *Writing for Your Life: Discovering the Story of Your Life's Journey*. HarperOne.