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Art Therapy's Bastard Child

Martin Perdoux

Intercourse of Image and Prose

The language of most educational researchers uses the tone of the academy and the implicit intent of science. It is distanced, authoritative, oriented toward wider meanings and generalizations, and often implies that there are right or wrong ways of teaching. It does not speak the voice of uncertainty, does not acknowledge the changeable, instinctive, and intuitive character of teaching. (Gallas, 1994,p.2)

This paper examines the long-term process of art-based research I pursued across art forms, from sculpture to prose, resulting in the writing of a memoir about the story of my conception. The writing of Junkie Bastard emerged from ceramic sculptures I created as a graduate art therapy student in 1994, and earlier, and continued for ten intensely therapeutic years. Only this amount of time could yield sufficient artistic and psychological distance. Junkie Bastard is about growing up in France 23 years ago as a 17-year-old punk rocker with a bad heroin habit, and discovering I was the love child of a Hungarian opera composer.

When I found out in 1982 that I was not the son of my mother's pharmacist husband, I was forbidden to tell him. I was already a troubled seventeen-year-old, but I now had a troubling story to boot. Even though it was still a family secret, I had to tell my story to everyone else, because it was about who I was, and because I couldn't get out of trouble until I could tell people who I was. In other words, I couldn't save myself until I owned the story. Not an easy task since I was the product of the story I had to tell. It predated me, and for seventeen years, my participation in the story was passive, unaware. My first problem was that the story was bigger than I was.

The solution that manifested itself was twofold. First, I went into the story. In practical terms, it meant exploring every detail available in the amazing archives my mother had created by religiously keeping photo albums, original manuscripts, musical scores, every scrap of paper relating to her love story, and a large suitcase filled with love letters. This creative archive was a lifeline, especially during the four years until my first visit with my biological father in Hungary. Long after I left France at the age of nineteen, these archives focused my search. They simplified the arduous work of recalling memories complicated by the presence of a secret. They mapped events I had lived but not truly experienced.

Getting all the facts was only part of what I needed to do before I could tell mon histoire. The second part of the solution manifested itself once I moved to the United States. I realized that I had a difficult time articulating the story because it had been told to me in French, and because French was the language used to hide the secret from me for seventeen years. French was not only the language my mother taught for a living. For me, it was the artful tongue of lies, understatement, and cover-ups. My mother used French to romanticize the plain truth, not the language I needed to debunk the myth of the affair. French was too loaded with emotion to allow me the distance I needed. It also held the stigma of academic failure during the last years of French high school I spent in a narcotic stupor, while the success I experienced in American universities introduced English as a hopeful language. I was the embodiment of the Unspeakable in the French language, but English welcomed me as its Love Child. It is no wonder I chose an English speaking audience to tell my story, since English gave me the first term that described me in a way that felt comfortable. I think 23 years is rather slow to catch up on seventeen years of incomplete self-knowledge, but maybe it is just my impatience, my obsession with finding out everything that I may have missed during these first seventeen years of ignorance. At any rate, this obsession probably had a lot to do with my going into the profession of art therapy. Altruism was not my only motive. Understanding, and maybe even controlling the process of self-discovery also attracted me to the field, because I had been thrust into the process since I had left France. The act of running away from the drugs and the drama in France charged everything around me with the energy and the symbolism of what I had escaped. I began deliberate art-based research about my story only after my graduate art therapy studies, but the sculptural attempts I made as an undergraduate student were already an exploration of my birthright.

Life and Death, 1991. 40cm (diameter). Earthenware.

With titles like Let's get to the Bottom of Things, these early studies were displayed along with abstract statements like "Have you ever wondered what someone really meant in all honesty? Do you look for the hidden meaning, the deep significance of words and behaviors?" Although I could not see it then, the juxtaposition of the sexual imagery and the statements created a dissonance that betrayed the need for more work.

Fortunately, I did not stop exploring the story of my birthright, especially since I did not fully comprehend what was driving me. I kept my addictions at bay as long as I ceaselessly explored the story of my identity. If I had stopped, it would have caught up with me and I probably would have self-destructed.

Art therapy cultivated the curiosity I already possessed—or maybe it was the curiosity that possessed me—but it also helped to define my audience as a writer.

Once I settled on English, memoir writing still entailed finding the right choice and combination of words in a second language. This process often consisted of eliminating the language of therapy. This became painfully obvious as I told my story to art therapy colleagues, who responded with remarks like, "It's a lot of loss," or "There is an absence of father." Clearly I didn't need to feel sorry for myself or to reconnect with the shame I had inherited for being the Unmentionable, but it also seemed unwise for artistic reasons. As much as I knew the value of good psychotherapy, memoir writing privileged artistic merit over psychotherapeutic insight. As Lopate admonishes would-be memoir writers, "unproblematically self-assured, self-contained, self-satisfied types will not make good essayists" (1994, p. xxvi). It was much more interesting for the reader to watch me bumble through the story and make repeated mistakes, than it would be for me to claim to have great revelations and infinite wisdom. When I shared these writing tips with my graduate thesis students as an art therapy educator, I was confronted with the limits our programs placed on students in the name of academia.

During graduate art therapy thesis, students wrote about the world they encountered during their art therapy fieldwork, a maelstrom of psychiatry wards, group homes, jails, and reform schools, that often seemed as ill as the people there. The daunting task of writing about messy and overwhelming experiences in the neatly structured style of the American Psychological Association took on an absurd quality. Encouraged by the program overview my department handed out to students, in which it advertised the possibility of producing non-traditional thesis formats, I offered my students the help needed to write a thesis in the creative writing style of the personal essay. I had found the personal essays I had written about my own art therapy practice to be much more representative of the experience, and I had published one in a widely read local weekly (Perdoux, 2001). Creative nonfiction was native to the artistry it described. I was confident the department would support me in my effort to innovate, since the rest of the school had validated the connection between my creative writing and my thesis course by awarding me a faculty enrichment grant and a residency to finish my memoir. A chapter of *Junkie Bastard* won an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship Award in prose. See:

http://www.state.il.us/agency/iac/IAC_Fellowship_Web_Pages/Prose_Recipients/Perdoux/Home.htm.

Increasingly, students and I talked about the therapeutic quality inherent to the process of writing a creative thesis. I was not surprised, since I had already experienced this in my own creative writing about art therapy. I had likened it to a form of self-supervision, a way to gain true objectivity on fundamentally subjective situations. I often remarked to students that "just because something is not billed as art therapy does not mean it's not therapeutic." The inclusion of creative writing in

thesis constituted a much-needed form of self-care for students, but it also seemed to embolden them to speak out on previously self-censored issues.

My effort was cut short when my application for a promotion was voted down by my department, and my contract was not renewed. I was told that my application would be great if I were applying for promotion in the Writing Department, but not for Art Therapy. Since I had gotten good course evaluations and excellent recognition outside the school—the two criteria for promotion—the thumbs down surprised me, particularly since I taught a writing course. The vote frustrated me at first, but my disappointment was quickly replaced by my concern for the welfare of students and the provincial thinking it suggested.

One of my essential premises was that in art therapy, we don't choose our medium, our medium chooses us. My medium was prose, not because I had chosen it, but because I had to write the story of my conception as a condition of my existence. Consequently, my view of therapeutic art forms was inclusive, and certainly not limited to visual art forms. I also understood that just because something was billed as art therapy didn't mean that it was therapeutic. Some therapeutic creative processes fared better in the context of their native discipline rather than in their pseudo recreation within art therapy. Art therapists would do better, I thought, to take the idea of art therapy and run with it. I had tried it, returned with a memoir (a chapter of it is appearing in an anthology <http://www.middlefingerpress.com>) and a second nonfiction book (Jason & Perdoux, 2004), but I was rebuffed.

I knew from McNiff (1998, p. 65), that the field was “now ready to explore voices that emanate from artistic expression”, but while Allen's warning (1992) about the “clinification syndrome” led many art therapists to practice her advice, it remained only a didactic exercise in much of art therapy education.

While some colleagues perceived my successful transition from sculpture to prose as evidence of my departure from the field of art therapy, I felt it had brought me closer to its heart. In my experience teaching and practicing art therapy, I found overwhelming evidence of what I already knew from writing *Junkie Bastard*. Privileging artistic considerations and aesthetic concerns rather than psychoanalytic insight produce better art, and in the end, this process is more therapeutic. If I reached the heart of art therapy by crossing its academic boundary, it suggests that art therapy education is off center and that art-based research is a way back. I continued to share these findings in the field by leading creative writing workshops for art therapists on a state and national level.

Meanwhile, my writer and artist friends reacted with a salutary envy. “You're so lucky to have a story like this!” They said. “What a great story!” Naturally, I started spending

more time with writers and distanced myself from people whose company did not enrich my work. Memoir writing was neither a solitary search for language, nor a sudden success, but a slow process within a community of fellow artists. One person in this group stood out by the quality of guidance I received from her: My wife Eileen Favorite, who is herself a writer.

Shortly after she wed me in 1994, she retraced my awkward attempts at telling her family my story. With her help, I recalled how miserably I stumbled to explain I had been married once before, why I had two fathers, and why I had not been raised with my six siblings. This was the beginning of my ability to talk about my story to a broader audience. Until then, I could only tell my story to people I knew very intimately, or people I wanted to know very intimately. Fellow writers and the vast horizons of literature taught me how to tell it well to strangers. Although the material was exactly the same, spinning a good yarn to write a true story turned out to be a lot more laborious than the art of seduction. Beyond that, both rewarded me with intense pleasure and pain, but the foreplay of writing lasted years longer.

I needed these years to take artistic distance, before I could rewrite the most painful material, the stuff that I had to revisit, to re-experience from the safety of twenty-three years away. I needed the compassion I discovered as an art therapist who worked with troubled teens for nine years before I brought to life my own teenage junkie ghost, and kept him at bay with enough self-deprecating humor to crystallize him in a twenty-three-year-old present tense.

Before I knew it as art-based research, I already knew that the synergy of image and prose setting in motion this inquiry about my life was the source of the deepest and most beneficial influences coming to me. My research started intuitively with a series of sculptures and drifted into prose without having to choose one or the other, because I sensed that it would have been an artificial choice. I did not choose my medium; it chose me, and I went where it led me with a deliberate abandon. I exercised control instead on artistic considerations, not psychotherapeutic ones. Looking back on this decade with the eyes of an art therapist, I see that only an unfettered artistic journey across art forms could guarantee an experience as rich as the human existence I yearned to recapture. My experience has shown that is the duty of art therapy educators to learn to recognize the diversity inherent to art-based research, to welcome it in their programs, and to share it with their students in a teaching mode that is native to its nature.

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