

Chapter 16. Why I Write, Read, Teach, Edit Nonfiction

Laura Julier

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Of course I stole (the stem of) my title from Joan Didion, who stole it from George Orwell. I don't in any way aim to stand in that line of succession, but only, as it were, to borrow for myself a way to begin. Because for this purpose, at this time, I might just as well tell this story as if it began there, in 1976, in Los Angeles, when I was a relatively new recipient of a B.A. in English, newly divorced, working at a Kentucky Fried Chicken on Pico Blvd. just down the street from the 20th Century Fox studio lots, trying to figure out what the heck I would make of my life. I was working ten hours a day with a bunch of 15-year-old kids, leaving that job to drive five miles into the Hollywood Hills to care for an elderly woman with a deeply unsettling and otherworldly history, who was invalid and imperious and routinely told me I was too timid.

Somewhere, somehow, in some spare hours probably between the lunch hour rush at KFC from the studio and the time when all the teenagers arrived to work after school, I hid from the lecherous store owner, and in the corner where the squat round pots of acrid coffee burned down, I read. Somehow, somewhere, I'd picked up *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, the particular texture of the pages of which I can still recall to my fingers, the way the font was laid out on the page, spaciouly, with generous margins and gutters, but more importantly—much more importantly—the way the voice on the page seemed to resonate in my head, as if it were my own voice, as if it were something I recognized, shaped by my own life, although our lives held absolutely nothing in common except the English degree.

It wasn't as if I hadn't ever before immersed myself in the words of a writer: I had been reading and absorbing and chewing up words from pages and the worlds they created for as long as I could remember. Worlds that I can call up again wholecloth now decades later, words that challenged and absorbed me in figuring out how they worked. It was an English teacher in junior high school who, recognizing that I was hungry for more, had set me the task of explicating a passage from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Who'd thereby set an example to me of how a sentence might take hours and hours to pull apart, to understand how a sentence might craft a world. It was a different English teacher who threw a Gerard Manly Hopkins poem at me, requiring sense be made of it, and although I failed at his task, I still remember the poem, still remember how deeply I longed to be a writer myself who could make words do the things they do in "The Windhover."

In the late 1960s, universities were abandoning requirements and prerequisites, inventing courses that took untraditional, even radical, approaches to their subjects, so it was not unusual—but thoroughly in line with my hunger for the worlds that words might open up in a single poetic line—that I was able to spend not one but two entire semesters at the University of Buffalo swimming in the complete works of James Joyce and two semesters reading not only Yeats’ poetry but also his philosophy and drama. In another course, we were reading and re-reading *King Lear* with five different theoretical lenses, from Freud to Foucault to R.D. Laing, and I was completely engaged and mesmerized. But I can remember sitting day after day, as the spring semester days warmed and lengthened, counting down as one after another student spoke, keeping track of the dwindling number left who, like me, had not yet spoken. Then noticing that I alone remained, and imagining how if I did speak, everyone would turn to see who it was who had suddenly used her voice. And so, I didn’t. I spent the entire term silent, afraid and ashamed of what I might say, and took the lower grade as a result.

In Didion, however, I encountered not a fictional world, not words in service to inventing a world, but the (somewhat different) work of following a mind at work on the world, the work of nonfiction essays, one after another, which grabbed me in a way that seemed as if I’d already and always known it. And not a man’s voice but a woman’s, describing and following experience shaped by intense perception and self-doubt, in equal proportion.

And there, sitting in a corner in my little red-and-white striped KFC uniform, completely absorbed by her voice that felt like my own, I realized that although her voice seemed (as I would later learn so many critics made a point of saying) fragile, neurotic, and wounded, it was nonetheless *there* on the page, between covers of a book, taking up space. That while I heard Didion’s voice in my head, in the classrooms the voices had been all male.

I applied to graduate school to earn another degree, not for the sake of the degree but to reclaim some of that time lost as an undergraduate, because, well, I wanted more poets. And I started teaching because that’s how you support yourself in graduate school. As an M.A. degree student, I read my way through the surveys of centuries, preparing for exams. Although the reading lists directed me to D.H. Lawrence’s novels, I veered off course and discovered *Studies in Classic American Literature*. William Carlos Williams’ *In the American Grain* interested me even more than his poetry. What *was* this? Was there a way to talk about it with the same critical, analytical vocabulary and approaches used in courses on poetry, fiction, or drama? Apparently no one I knew or encountered at that time cared.

I thought I was a poet. I had written poetry, published poetry, consumed poetry. When I was prompted to write essays, however, I knew that speaking and exploring and making sense of experience in the forms offered by the essay was where and how I felt most naturally drawn. I hadn’t known it to begin with, when I’d had this vague desire to write and to study writing, but what I was being drawn to was (what was then called) literary nonfiction.

I found Annie Dillard and Alice Walker, James Baldwin and Richard Selzer, John McPhee and Lewis Thomas, but those writers weren't yet appearing on any syllabus or any exam reading list or any list of canonical writers in any Norton anthology. And while I was discovering the ways in which essays were not regarded as significant enough—Virginia Woolf's novels, but not *A Room of One's Own* or *The Common Reader*, for instance, and Adrienne Rich's poetry, but not *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*—I nonetheless read them hungrily.

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Does anyone really ever have a good reason for beginning Ph.D. study in English? I heard many stories, but none of them included a clear-headed notion of what the work would involve and why one would choose that work. When I went seeking a Ph.D. program, I still couldn't articulate what I was looking for, and I made at least one false start. By then I had acquired some research skills, and I used them. I made a pain in the ass of myself to every director of graduate studies of every doctoral program in the country that seemed remotely interesting, using push-pins on a AAA map of the US to keep track. I asked to meet and interview graduate students. I kept hearing that the University of Iowa's English department was a very "humane" place—that was the word used over and over, by people who did not know one another.

What convinced me to study at Iowa were the conversations I had when, on a blustery day in early March, I visited the university's English-Philosophy Building (more colloquially known as EPB). I arrived while the office was still closed for lunch break; I leaned against the brick walls in the dark hallways, waiting. A man in a wrinkly raincoat opened the door, switched on the lights, and disappeared around a corner—to a closet, I imagined, assuming he was the janitor. But he was, in fact, Richard Lloyd-Jones (known familiarly, I would later learn, as Jix), chair of the department at that time. He invited me to take a seat in his equally dim office and spoke to me (as did every other graduate student or faculty member I met that day) about the distinguishing feature of the department: that no matter their academic training or specialty, no matter which of the programs then under the very capacious umbrella of the English department—rhetoric, American studies, African-American studies, comparative literature, women's studies, writing studies, the Expository Writing Program (the first name for what became the Nonfiction Writing Program), the Writers Workshop—each and all cared deeply in some sense about the way language works.

In the halls and seminar rooms of EPB and at public readings, those many renowned writers and scholars shared scholarship and fertilized one another with questions, weaving together disciplines, creating new programs and curricula. Each understood and supported the notion that the work of an English department was language, in whatever form, towards whatever purpose, for any number of audiences. That trivium was self-evident throughout all those programs

under its umbrella, which also included a set of first-year writing courses in the Rhetoric Program.

When I studied theories of writing with Paul Diehl, we were talking about stylistics but also teaching writing to underprepared students, and he would veer off into expounding about how poetic metrics inflected and influenced the prose of any writer, of writers who were stylists, of writing you could find anywhere, even in advertisements. In Wayne Franklin's seminar on colonial American literature, we read *Of Plymouth Plantation*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Fanny Kemble's diary, attending to the prose cadences created by word choice and the rhetorical devices that contributed to particular representations of self. I was immersed, that is, in conversation about the craft of nonfiction. In a seminar on composition theory, the eminent British writing theorist James Britton had us looking at nonfiction prose to understand the rhetorical strategies, the language patterns, and the kind of self encoded by those choices, all designed to shape how one teaches writing, be it first-year writing or upper-level expository writing or graduate seminars in literary nonfiction.

For a year or two I also worked as an editorial assistant for *The Iowa Review*, edited by David Hamilton, who solicited and published (in addition to the poetry and fiction expected in a literary journal) nonfiction pieces that were also literary criticism, very different from the pieces of literary criticism that appeared in more "scholarly" journals. This was writing about literary matters that in itself explored form, employed a distinctive voice in developing the writer as persona, crafted in sentences that were lyrical or proceeded associatively, or wove the personal and the critical in ways that reminded me of Williams and Lawrence and Rich.

Even the American studies scholar Sherman Paul, in his seminar on the Contemporary Long and Serial Poem, required critical papers that engaged the subject in the ways that Charles Olson and William Carlos Williams did: in lines of prose that were lyrical and cadenced, explicating literary works not with literary theory but with infusions of the personal, with myth, with references to and echoes of other writers' work, with more questions than assertions. With the voice of a writer not a critic. And because Sherman Paul's own critical approach to 20th century poetry and the seminar reading list were entirely male-centric, I set off on a search that led to the nonfiction of HD and Denise Levertov and more Adrienne Rich.

As a graduate assistant, I also taught university-required general education literature classes (with titles that included American Lives, Narrative Literature, and Literary Presentation of Women) that I could build around women's voices, and so I filled them with nonfiction by women. Although most of the sample syllabi we were provided listed fiction, for these students (most of them women) who were struggling with and discovering things about their lives, it was Woolf's and Rich's and Walker's essays that spoke loudest. And what the students themselves wrote were nonfiction pieces, what's now called personal criticism. Not merely personal narratives, although you could find such elements in their essays,

they were personal responses to “In Search of My Mother’s Garden” and “Living with Weasels” and “Notes on Lying,” to name just a few, pieces which showed those students to be reading carefully and deeply while engaging the historical, cultural, and literary textures of the texts.

I also taught courses in the Expository Writing Program, which was, at that time, the name for courses in literary nonfiction. Students read, they imitated in exercises, and wrote essays that may or may not have been self-consciously influenced by the exercises. Those exercises were informed by the assignments I had myself written for Paul Diehl’s course on metrics and stylistics, on Francis Christenson’s article on cumulative sentences, on Raymond Queneau’s quirky *Exercises in Style*—all texts and assignments and conversations I’d encountered in my courses. Nonfiction infused everything I experienced at Iowa.

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In spite of the wide-ranging understanding of language that animated the scholarly and pedagogical commitments of the faculty, the requirements for the Ph.D. in English at Iowa were, like most at that time, entirely traditional and shaped by chronology and literature. The scholarly discipline of writing studies or composition studies was relatively new and had emerged by and large from scholars and practitioners of English education. If I wanted to study writing theory in a doctoral program, it would require additional courses beyond the required ones. It wasn’t that I started out wanting to study how to teach, although I was a good teacher and wanted to be better. I didn’t in any way yet understand the institutional history of these things, or the complicated ways that the cultural history of English education and the discipline of “English” in the US, issues of literacy, and the cultural forces of xenophobia and racism had all contributed to the ways we talked about and taught writing.

I was energized by those intersecting narratives, sought out the work of scholars who wrote to elucidate their essential untruths and oppressions. I wanted to learn about the differences between prescriptive and descriptive grammar. I cheered when Francis Christiansen wrote that those who complain about run-on sentences don’t know what they’re talking about, that real writers composed such sentences, illustrating this with example after example. I loved the work of picking apart sentences to drill down, trying to unearth the underlying structures of thought, of lyricism, of the music of language, of voice. That impulse went hand-in-hand for me with discovering the voices that previously had been suppressed in the literary canon, recognizing and hearing voiced the reasons for that suppression and the efforts to bring them to the forefront.

I doubled up my own course load so that I not only ticked off all the centuries of literature in the canons but also took all the available courses in writing, which is to say theories of writing, rhetorical theories, courses on the essay, and nonfiction writing workshops.

So, although the Ph.D. requirements looked the same as a traditional program in any other R1 university, Iowa made intellectual space, gave financial support, and provided teaching experiences that allowed me to range widely and take up nonfiction in various guises and contexts and for various purposes. I created syllabi around nonfiction writers, I included it in general education literature classes, in first-year writing courses, in upper-level nonfiction writing courses. I spent time dissecting the sentences of nonfiction writers in order to think about how to teach writing to undergraduates. I read nonfiction as a way to think deeply about the intellectual development of American letters, as a way of writing literary criticism. I was able to engage student writers at all levels in merging personal narrative and critical reflection, to question received cultural knowledge, and as a powerful means of fostering cross-cultural empathy—to bring as many alternative voices as possible into the classroom and into students' lives and awareness. This is to say that the courses I taught, the courses I took, the pieces I read and heard at public readings, and the pieces I wrote all intersected generatively, all led to a doctoral degree in nonfiction at a time when there was barely any such idea of it elsewhere as a field of study. At Iowa, under Jix, it was a natural and self-evident choice.

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Mine, I later learned, is not an uncommon story. I came from a family that did not know much about higher education and saw little point to it. Especially for daughters. I was a child who for a whole host of reasons—cultural, personal, familial—did not land in the sightlines of a mentor. I made choices that ricocheted me into social situations very different from what I'd been born into; I did not know how to understand them or navigate them very well. Given the time, given the possibilities for women beginning to be visible in the places teenage girls might see them, those like me rebelled against expectations. I didn't have a clue how to turn an undergraduate degree in English into any sort of relevant job (no less career), and so there I was, hanging out behind the counter of that KFC, reading. I followed a thread to graduate school, but did not know what a discipline was, did not care what a graduate degree in literature or English was good for. Did not understand that choices I made would inevitably lead to certain opportunities or worlds opening up further. All I really knew was there was oxygen there.

All through my education, I hung on to the thread of nonfiction, even when I did not know it was the name of what led me. I learned at my first tenure-track job interview that I was unprepared to articulate what connected first-year writing instruction to the discipline of women's studies. I didn't realize that outside of Iowa it was not self-evident how the growing canon of literary nonfiction or the history of the essay (Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, E.B. White, Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, Loren Eiseley, for instance) fit into or alongside the canon of American or British literature. I did not notice that no job ads, no position descriptions mentioned nonfiction in any form. I emerged from my graduate

degree program like everyone else coming out of a graduate degree program, shaped by that program and the stories its faculty told, with ideas about what was worth doing, shaped by the courses they taught, the books and articles they wrote, and what I heard at conferences. I emerged believing I'd find these kinds of assumptions similarly self-evident and supported in other universities and English departments.

I was wrong. I landed in a faculty position at a different Big 10 university—not in an English department but in a first-year writing department with a rigid curriculum, a constricted notion of what it meant to teach writing, and a patronizing model for mentoring junior colleagues. Needless to say, it did not leave room at all for nonfiction either in its curricula or its understanding of writing. And so I found myself continuing that struggle to make space for nonfiction—in creating new courses, sometimes in other departments and disciplines, in designing a new major, in advocating for faculty hiring, and in arguing for my own merit raises and tenure and promotion.

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There is another reason I stole my title from Didion. It is this passage from “Why I Write” I keep coming back to, have been returning to for over 35 years since I first read it:

The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind. The picture dictates the arrangement. The picture dictates whether this will be a sentence with or without clauses, a sentence that ends hard or a dying-fall sentence, long or short, active or passive. The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture.

Nota bene:

It tells you.

You don't tell it.

Following words on a page, picking them apart to find out how they work to create an idea, a world, a way of seeing and thinking and knowing, following another mind at work—this is how I learned to think. This is how I learned to have a voice. How I learned (again Didion) that “writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind.*” Didion goes on to call this “a hostile act,” “the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion,” which is, I grant, one way of thinking about it. Having grown up in a different time and place, in a different context, coming round to a feminist sensibility at the time that I did, I see it differently. Putting words on paper that say *listen to me, see it my way, consider this* is how I learned to speak up and speak

out, learned to figure out what to say, and that I even *had* something to say. It was a way of pushing other culturally loud, dominating, and domineering voices out of the way so that I had space to speak.

And so it followed that in whatever context I taught writing, I found my way around and back to what first pulled me in as a writer and reader of nonfiction, which I came to understand as operating on two deeply interrelated levels. On one level, literary nonfiction (as essay, as memoir, as literary journalism, in any of its forms) allowed me to hear voices and stories that are alternatives to the dominant cultural narratives I had instinctively rebelled against my entire life. Rejected not those narratives themselves, but their valorization, the fact that they insisted on taking up all the air, pushing anything but a replication of themselves out of the way. There were, I knew, other voices and other stories, a world of alternative ways of seeing and understanding experience, of giving (or claiming) space for the full range of those other voices and stories. The impulse to represent these voices and stories in other genres was certainly evident: *Orlando*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Diving into the Wreck*, *The Bell Jar*, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, *The Color Purple*, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and more all lined my bookshelves. Somehow, however, the stakes of telling a story of one's own, in one's own voice, seemed much higher. Those stories—in their own voices, about their own lives—resonated with a kind of authority and legitimacy that bore deeper into my soul.

On another level, what continued to feed me was what close attention to the choice and arrangement of words on a page can teach us: How shaping language shapes experience. How attention to the craft of an essay leads a writer and reader into a conversation about what difference it makes to say something one way rather than another. How stringing words together in a certain order creates a rhythm and a meaning that is nuanced and unique, and can open whole other worlds of knowing. How close attention to that act of shaping creates that which we call voice or persona.

You see this if you turn again to that opening of Didion's essay, where she explains why she stole Orwell's title, focusing on the sound of its "three short unambiguous words," all of which share the sound "I," a word and a letter she reproduces three times, in a column, that create and take up a swath of space on the page. Here begins an essay in which she tells us that a writer is aggressive, hostile, a "bully" bent on invading "the reader's most private space," and at the same time tells us that she cannot think, that she is "no legitimate resident in any world of ideas." So many readers have characterized Didion as fragile, and yet if you pay attention to the language, what you find is a writer very forcibly indeed imposing her "I" on readers, taking up space, saying "see it my way," literally. Which, then, is Didion? Which the creation, the persona? Which the assertion and which the evasion? How does Didion's arrangement of words create a sense of her self, her voice, and at the same time create a smokescreen behind which she hides?

It's that reflective and critical turn which seems to me crucial, whether writing a narrative of one's intellectual history, or a course syllabus, or a critical essay, or a

lyrical place-based memoir. Seems to me, in fact, the unique power and requirement of the essay, and indeed all creative nonfiction.

And so what I have tried to do in teaching is to open up for writers an awareness of these differences. No matter what course I've taught, it always begins with some version of this exercise, inspired by that little book by Raymond Queneau: Go somewhere and observe something. Describe it happening. Or find a sentence someone else has written about something happening. Write it out. Now using the same words (although you may change the form of the words) and changing punctuation as often as you like, rewrite the sentence in as many ways as you can imagine. Most everyone can come up with ten sentences, some as many as twenty different versions, and some, if they choose well, get to 35. What difference does it make if the words unfold one way rather than another, I ask. And from there, we move into conversation about writers' choices and intentions, how one's meaning may be crafted—and perhaps most important of all, why one might take the time, make the turn, and care about it all.

Although it can seem as if my focus here and in the teaching of writing I have described is on the page, on the subtleties of syntax and arrangement, it is also the case that that very close attention to what is on the page is designed to excavate the possibility of multiple meanings and multiple perspectives. To uncover and create an appreciation for the ways that diverse experiences create differing perspectives on social and cultural knowledge.

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In the final decade of my academic career, I was named editor of the literary journal *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*. At the time I took over, it was one of only three journals in the US that published solely nonfiction. The writers who submitted work ranged widely: not only those long practiced in the forms of the essay, but also people who were incarcerated, elderly retired folks who had been urged to write their life stories. Journalists and anthropologists whose work wasn't finding acceptance by the traditional publication venues of their colleagues. Former Peace Corps volunteers who all seem to have been told by someone that their stories would do the rest of the world some good. M.F.A. students who had been told to get their work out there. Writers whose previous writing had been in a different genre and were now trying something different. Writers I knew, writers who claimed a connection to me, writers who were cocky or arrogant or desperate or flippant or inexperienced or perfunctory—as well as writers who clearly had no idea what *Fourth Genre* published, who simply and doggedly wanted their words to be heard by someone. I read more pages of prose in that decade than in all my years of undergraduate and graduate study. How to choose?

Schooled by Jix in the teaching of writing with writers of varied degrees of experience and expertise, I developed a practice and philosophy for editing a literary journal of nonfiction. I began by shaping the production work of *Fourth*

Genre as a learning lab for students in the relevant undergraduate majors of professional writing, creative writing, and literature: students who were learning about editing and publishing and literary nonfiction, students who were writers aspiring to have their own work published somewhere at some point. I involved them in all the aspects of journal production: in conversations with the writers who submitted work (famous or beginning), with publishers and marketers and designers. Though most of the students were readers and lovers of words, some of them poets, some of them aspiring book editors, some of them graduate students exploring nonfiction as I had once done, almost none of them had extensive reading in or knowledge about the widely divergent range of nonfiction. They had discovered a couple of writers and books that had excited them, or they'd taken a course in which they'd generated personal essays. They were good readers. They were hungry. They were like I had been.

Editorial meetings, at which we considered submissions in order to winnow them down and make selections, were in essence workshops. As in the classes I taught, we workshoped by attending to the language very closely, attending to the ways words create meaning differently in each essay and for each of us as readers. I worked to move them to understand that the voice they heard coming off the page is not the same as the writer's. To find and follow a mind at work. To locate the persona of the writer through attention to the places where the mind turns back on itself. I directed their attention to the sentence level, to the rhetorical, syntactic, and lexical choices, to the structures of thought that mapped those habits of mind. To think about form serving the work of the essay. To understand the role of reflection, the way that an essay expects more than merely the rendering of experience, but rather that the writer make sense of it, in some way explicit or not. The ways in which tracing the machinations of a mind at work might reveal the thorniness and intractability of some of the most enduring of life's questions. To be or to find the best reader possible for each submitted piece, because as inexperienced readers of nonfiction, they tended to be drawn to the voices and stories that were most "relatable" (a favorite descriptor), most familiar. We worked at untangling a passage's (or even a sentence's) curves and twists, understanding the grammar, and what might lie beyond the grammar—a mystery that emerges as detail, structure of thought, and syntax weave and clear a path through questions and unexpected shifts to some new meaning. They also learned to accept that the meaning one makes of a sentence or essay is provisional, because the next reader brings something else to the conversation. Provisional because in hearing what another reader makes of the same words—in that difference—together we might find our way to yet another understanding.

In the many decisions about those submissions that fell to me alone—which in the end were almost all of them—I came to a principle of selection that harkened back to my first encounter with literary nonfiction, sitting with a 238-page book in hand, in a corner behind the counter of a KFC in LA, hearing a voice I

desperately needed to hear but had never before encountered: given the limited number of pages I get to publish, to whose voices do I want to give space?

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It's no coincidence that as academic or scholarly or intellectual work began (after the "rights" movements of the 1960s and 1970s) to interrogate the content, source, and bias of knowledge production, and started to develop ethnography as a methodology and standpoint theory as a critical lens and critique, the interest in and focus on story—as with narrative medicine and narrative theology, to cite just two examples—led to a surge in telling nonfiction stories.

Why else the explosion of interest, in the past 20 to 30 years, in memoir? Why else the explosion of M.F.A. programs over the past 20 years—from a handful in the early 2000s when I first researched them for a proposal at my institution, to over two dozen just three or four years later, to so many now that it's not worth counting. How else to explain the development of so many more nonfiction journals than existed when *Fourth Genre* was founded, not to mention the anthologies, the curricula, the venues for publication such as *Modern Love* in *The New York Times*. Not only *Harper's*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *The New Yorker* but dozens of online sites and platforms, and the surge in flash pieces.

We seek places to tell our stories, and we crave the ability to tell and read stories that have been historically silenced, unheard, unread, unvoiced. Despite the recent ascendancy of repressive political and cultural forces born of fear, there is a surge in desire to embrace wider and wider varieties of identity and personal expression. Well-crafted, there is nothing so powerful to engage and change us than a story from inside what it means to be me.

How do we understand ourselves? How, now that there's a request and need for hearing formerly silenced voices, do we tell our stories? We need to hear them and we need them to help ourselves know and hear ourselves. Shaping story to shape culture. And most urgently, most easily forgotten: where and how do we provide spaces for them to be heard?

Forty years ago, while studying rhetorical theory with Jix, I wrote an essay (not a very good one by any means) about the teaching of writing, weaving my way among the basketful of researchers and theorists then current for scholars of composition and writing studies. There were, among them, child development specialists, linguists, poets, psychologists, high school teachers, journalists, and writers such as Orwell and his essay, "Why I Write," which Didion acknowledges in her first line was the basis for her own essay. I was surprised to reread my essay, which I found while clearing out my office, and which ranged across the various political persuasions and linguistic styles of all these theorists, landing on Michael Polanyi's ideas about the search for personal truth through what he called "the active contemplation of what is known." This, I went on to say, is the work of the essay, no matter its subject, the occasion which gives rise to it, the

particularities of its form, voice, or syntax, or the conscious or unconscious motives of the writer.

For Jix, my attempts to work from rhetorical theory to a theory of the essay was fair game, and from what I could tell from his response, made sense. From Jix I learned how to be an essayist in the world. Or, to put it differently, I learned that the way I wanted to live in this world, everything involved in being the kind of human being I aspired to, might best be found by reading, teaching, writing, and editing nonfiction.