

My Kanawha

Anne DiPardo

‘Out of many, one’ does not refer to conformity and standardization and cultural chauvinism, which caricature this ideal. The founding fathers drew this saying from ancient mystical traditions . . . where it referred to the unity in spirit behind the plurality of material manifestations. According to this teaching, the reason that it is possible to make many out of one is that the many came from the one in the first place.

(Moffett, *Storm*, 214)

Regarding *Agnosis*

For over a decade, my students and I began each new academic year with *Storm in the Mountains*, studying maps of “West—By God—Virginia” as we pondered Moffett’s intuition of “a rawness, a danger, a suffering” lurking in its forgotten backwoods (8). These words inevitably excited a vague sense of dread—and gratitude that we were here, now, and not there, then, back in that place where Moffett’s visionary *Interaction* book series sparked violent protests.¹

Each year, a new group admired the distance between our well-educated selves and these wild-eyed book-banners, these half-crazed people who displayed in such abundance what Moffett termed *agnosis*, “the will not to know” (184). How, after all, can one *not* be a touch judgmental about people who think it’s a fine idea to torch school buses by way of protest? How backwards they seemed, with their fear of differing perspectives, their off-handed racism, their belief that kids will emulate in monkey-see-monkey-do fashion whatever they happen to encounter on the printed page.

But Moffett seemed to anticipate such wrong turns into self-congratulation, nudging us toward self-interrogation in *Storm*’s second half. As we read on, he invited us to ponder the universality of *agnosis*—our own implication, and, especially, our responsibility as educators to make whatever inroads we can in expanding our own as well as our students’ consciousness. My classes and I had many rich and soul-searching conversations about so many of the issues that Moffett raised—the limits of local control, the sometimes fuzzy line between church and state, and, particularly, the promise of the language arts to open up new ways of seeing, to foster habits of heart, hand, and mind that might lead us toward city-upon-a-hill social futures. But truth be told, I always sensed that none of us—certainly not I—were fully taking in the possibility that there may indeed be things *we* didn’t want to know.

When I tried to articulate my own *agnosis*, my words always came out sounding measly and comfortable: good soul that I was, I didn’t want to know about the inner workings of sociopaths, hated violence so much that I steadfastly avoided action movies, would just as soon cover my ears at the first sign of meanspiritedness. I sensed that I was swimming in the shallows, but how, after all, can one know what one doesn’t know

¹ Editors’ note: *The Interaction* series, based on James Moffett’s student-centered approach to teaching language and reading, was to date the “largest program of school materials ever done” (*Storm* 4). Covering K-12, its 30 co-authors produced 175 volumes, accompanied by 800 activities, games, and 80 recordings (244). The series’ pluralist, multicultural expression reflected America’s “diversity of situations, values, tastes, dialects” (6).

when one has chosen *not to know it*? If such choices are symptomatic of insufficient consciousness, how do we bring them up for conscious review?

I was of course constructing rather than simply receiving this notion of *agnosis*, and my architectural moves—grounded in historical and cultural circumstances, as such moves inevitably are—were informed by my accustomed first-person-singular way of looking at things. A California baby boomer, I'd come of age fully believing in my existential freedom and responsibility, my ability to reinvent myself at will, my essential mastery of the road ahead. When I entered academia later on, I found myself in an arena where solo authorship was considered not only possible, but decidedly preferable. Even as I peppered my conference papers with references to Vygotsky and Bakhtin, I stood visibly alone at countless podiums, hoping anxiously that audiences would find what I had to say quite new and quite wholly my own. I often referenced the importance of historical context—and while I'd learned a version of our country's history over my long years in school, it seldom occurred to me that I knew next to nothing my own forbearers' roles in shaping our national legacy.

I'd grown up far away from grandparents, in a household where ancestors remained unknown and unacknowledged, where no one seemed to know quite where our people were from ("They were all English, Irish, Scottish, *boring*," my mom would say). We were living that downside of the American character that Alexis de Toqueville observed so early on—a certain tendency to forget history and, in the process, overlook those standing before and beside us. Noting the determined energy of the then-new country's citizens, de Toqueville aptly worried that as "they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone . . . they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands" (*Democracy in America* 194). Two centuries later, Joan Didion would describe growing up in a California where "we did not believe that history could bloody the land, or even touch it" (71). I had grown up in this country and this California, bringing to my thinking, teaching, and living a historical *agnosis* of which I was quite entirely unaware.

And so it was that I understood the subtitle of Moffett's *Storm—A Case Study of Censorship, Conflict, and Consciousness* along the lines of: (1) *censorship* brought on by close-minded reactionaries; (2) *conflict* arising from progressives' righteous indignation; and (3) our educators' responsibility to expand students' *consciousness* to more closely match our spacious own. My essentially us-them perspective notwithstanding, I tried to invite a more intellectually generous approach, encouraging students to consider Moffett's acknowledgement that the book banners were not just individually but generationally bitter, their families and communities poorly served by governmental powers for decades, even centuries. What if your own students' parents were feeling similarly disenfranchised, I'd ask—how would you help them feel heard, and how would you go about explaining your instructional choices to them? ("Them," always "*them*".) While kindness and tact are important, we inevitably agreed it's our job to insist on opening up the world, to communicate that we're emissaries of knowledge who will enlarge and enrich their children's horizons.

Alongside *Storm* each fall, my students also read Dewey's *Experience and Education*, with its classic (yet ever-so-relevant) argument against the dualities that continue to inform educational discourse in our own time. Dewey warned us wisely of the reduc-

tive effect of polarities, of assuming righteousness on the one hand and blame on the other, thereby obscuring the inevitable complexities and ambiguities of teachers' work and worlds (MacDonald, *Teaching*). Oh, I tried—but the *Storm* book-banners seemed themselves such striking practitioners of us-them thinking, and they seemed so different from those of us gathered in our fluorescent-lit classroom. As our soaring, often highly charged discussions lifted away my late-afternoon weariness, I gave little thought to the idea that perhaps—just perhaps—my own thinking was shot-through with either-ors, too.

Mixed Up

I'd known just enough about my mother's family to understand that there were lots of details that she'd rather not bring up for review. Although I didn't really know any of my grandparents, I must have mentioned some curiosity about our background in a rare conversation with my mother's mother because I remember opening a letter in which she warned me that if I began poking around, I might just find things better left unknown. She mentioned an ancestor who had died in a Union prison, perhaps to underscore her concern that our genealogical details were not quite the stuff of greatness. When my mom developed Alzheimer's many years later, she began to share long-silenced family stories now and then, pulling details up from long-term memory as her inner censor waned. Many were just snippets—her own mother's tenacity and courage during the depression years, her astonishing purchase of the graduation gown that allowed my mom to march in her high school ceremony ("I wish I could have done more to thank her," she said again and again.) But once in awhile, she began stories that stopped at tearful mid-sentence that ended abruptly as I murmured something about not needing to know if she wasn't ready to tell me.

After my mother died amidst visions of angels and ancestors last year, I flew out west to visit my 94-year-old aunt. She'd always lived far away from us, and while I'd talked with her from time to time during my mother's final weeks, the frail, white-haired woman before me seemed at first a near stranger. Earthy, candid, and mentally spot-on, she struck me in many ways as the polar opposite of the mom I'd just lost. I was struck by my aunt's keen understanding of the woman she continued to call "my little sister," with her hidden vulnerability, stoic courage, and, particularly, deep aversion to discussing family history. In our short time together, my aunt set about filling in a few of the gaps, surveying the possibilities, and pulling up key moments for review. Some of this I'd known in broad outline but not in detail—the deaths of a brother and father, the family's desperate struggles in Great Depression, long periods spent with distant grandparents. My aunt tirelessly recounted story after story, often in heart-stopping detail, always with an unspoken acknowledgement that we could now speak of these things in a spirit of respect and love. I needed to know all that had been so long kept in the shadows.

Venturing still further back, she spoke of the family's long-ago immigrations from Virginia to West Virginia to Missouri and, finally, to the west coast. Our family had been on the continent for a long time, my aunt noted with a meaningful gaze—long before the Civil War, long before West Virginia's state boundaries were drawn. Then she spoke of her belief—grounded, it seemed, in long family lore—that we had ances-

tors who were slaves as well as ancestors who were slave owners. Our white ancestors, she added with grim authority, were hardly a moral set.

That a multitude of interracial children were born in colonial and new-nation times is well established (Nash), and it seems safe to surmise that countless Americans remain unaware of their mixed-race lineage (see, for instance, Daniel Sharfstein's *The Invisible Line* and Bliss Broyard's *One Drop*). This would seem so common a phenomenon as to be entirely unremarkable—were it not, that is, for a widespread decision not to acknowledge it, and, as generations have come and gone, not to *know* it. As I grappled with the possibility, I realized three things: (1) that the prospect had an unmistakable ring of truth; (2) there was deep meaning here that I wouldn't fathom anytime soon; and (3) my hunger to know bordered on obsessive.

But since we were talking about my maternal *grandfather's* people, my lack of a Y chromosome ruled out genetic testing. Instead, I gave up sleep to troll Ancestry.com, contacted archivists, family historians, professional genealogists, and complete strangers who might just be relatives. Finding my grandfather was easy, and I managed to obtain a photograph of *his* father—a lanky mountain man standing beside a woodpile in soiled workclothes, enormous shotgun in hand, big black dog and pet bobcat by his side. He had high, prominent cheekbones, a nut-brown complexion, and intense, distantly fixed dark eyes. I kept looking, finding family trees, portraits, and letters, discovering my bobcat-owning great-grandfather's parents, aunts, and uncles, all of whom were caught up in one way or another in the horrors of the Civil War. My great-great uncle, a Confederate soldier, had died at 19 in the Battle of Glendale. Another—described in military documents as “dark complexioned, with blue eyes”—served for three years before taking the Union amnesty oath, by then shell-shocked, starving, and desperate to be home. These were not slave holders, but poor mountain people who struggled to compose plaintive letters to loved ones. “I Preye,” wrote one of my Confederate ancestors,

thate this war will close, Prey to God for him to close it if it is his will oh thate we cood have Peace thate ward Peace is the sweetest ward thate cood be utered may God savers all in his everlasting kingdom is my Prears. (Bailey)

I'm not sure what my mom's “boring” English-Scots-Irish were supposed to look like, but somehow the available images of these people didn't seem to quite fit that particular ethnic bill. There were plenty of tantalizing teasers, lots of “could-be's”—a portrait of a white ancestor holding a Black baby, stories of similarly named families adopting Shawnee and Cherokee orphans, old portraits and early photographs of dark-haired, dark-eyed people of uncertain race. But as far as our certain ancestors were concerned, the trail stopped with a man named James, a Methodist minister and hardscrabble West Virginia farmer, his tombstone reading “pious father, gone to a better place.” (One can't visit it now, a newly discovered relative told me with a West Virginian's twang, “cause the lady who owns the property will come out with a shotgun and her two *real mean* dogs.”) James was my great-great-great grandfather, and while traditional lore abounds, no one knows for certain who his parents were. He was born in Virginia in 1796 or 1797, showing up mysteriously in the home of a white couple who had remained childless for the previous 10 years of their marriage. We know that the source of James' sur-

name moved nearly 200 miles away soon after the child's appearance, and that later legal papers indicate that this presumed "father" was in fact childless. An enduring bit of family lore casts James as an orphaned Native American adopted by this later-estranged couple. There is no "bastardy bond" for James—a legal requirement at the time where children were born out of wedlock. James and his ancestors remain as mysterious as a local artifact known as the "Kanawha Madonna," its human face worn to a smooth, featureless slab (Jefferds, Jr.)

Do I have Black ancestors? Native American ancestors? Likely, I'd say, though my exhaustive search has turned up little by way of convincing evidence, let alone proof. What I *do* know is that those little lower-Kanawha valley towns where Moffett sensed "a rawness, a danger, a suffering" are places where my ancestors lived, places filled even today with people bearing their now-familiar surnames. In this "skipped-over part of Kahawha Valley," writes Moffett,

Most human life—mines, little stores, cottages, highway, railroad—crowd between the Kanawha River and the mountains, which are really wild except for settlements along the occasional ravine road. Several hundred yards up the precipitous woods is another world (8).

These people, it seems, are *my* people—but then again, in this unfolding scenario, who isn't? My people are the "them" of the book-banners, but also, quite plausibly, the multicultural "others" of the banned books. Am I really so devoid of any of these histories, identities, from any of this raw suffering? In this gallery of carnival mirrors, the once-sturdy distinction between "us" and "them" becomes elusive. I'm realizing that this only seems exotic, that this story of secretly mixed-up genes, of a commonality that quietly binds us even amidst our most rancorous strife, is as common as Kanawha clay.

What If?

In re-reading *Storm* over the years, I've been struck by Moffett's prescience, the Kanawha episode foretelling the rise of the religious right, anti-government sentiment, and calls for an emphasis on values-neutral "basic-skills" in our nation's classrooms. It often seems these days that the nation has gone the way of the Hatfields and McCoys, our opposing political, ethnic, and socioeconomic resentments filling the 24-hour airwaves. As I've coasted about on these waves of history, all this is striking me as less inevitable, less natural, a touch ridiculous, even.

Narrative theorists across disciplines have long argued that we make sense of experience through storytelling (e.g., Bruner, *Actual Minds*; Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing*; and Sarbin, *Narrative Psychology*). Recently, psychologist Mark Freeman has taken up the related business of what he calls "moral lateness"—that is, the power of historical hindsight to foster consciousness-expanding reflection (*Hindsight*, 67). Drawing on the work of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and sociologist Edward Shils, Freeman maintains that the "self"—so often seen in our own times in ahistorical, wholly self-determinable terms—can be understood only with reference to the "fabric of history" into which we are all enmeshed; "the modern autobiographical subject," Freeman writes, "whose past appears limited to his or her own life, is something of a *mistake*" (121). For

Freeman, our historic baggage—what he terms “narrative reserve”—doesn’t have to be fully conscious to inform our lives in important ways. We all carry a “narrative unconscious,” he maintains,

untold and unwritten stories, cultural as well as personal, that are in important respects constitutive of experience and identity. Narratives are with us in ways we don’t quite know; they are part of our deep memory, as I have called it, which is itself comprised, in part, of sedimented layers of history. By recognizing this via the reflective work of hindsight, we open ourselves to the possibility of exploring new and different forms of making sense of personal life. (123)

Freeman, it seems, would take one step further Faulkner’s famous observation that “[t]he past isn’t dead. It’s not even past” (*Requiem*, Act I / Scene III). Our pasts, Freeman argues, connect us to our ancestors and to one another—a reality that we may choose to ignore in the spirit of *agnosis*, or meet as avenues of wonderment, mystery, and expansion.

When Moffett left us in December of 1996, I was in the midst of planning a small conference at which he was to be a keynote speaker. At the gathering a few weeks later, Betty Jane Wagner, his close collaborator on the *Interaction* series, stood before us delivering a remembrance. We all laughed at the prospect of Betty Jane being identified as a purveyor of “dirty books,” and we gazed in astonishment at the full set of *Interaction* texts that she’d placed on display. All of us had heard of the books, of course, but none of us had ever actually seen them, all copies save those in private collections having been long since expunged from schools and libraries. It seemed no one wanted to know about them anymore, least of all anyone with personal turf to protect, these pages filled with mind-corrupting works by the likes of Rudyard Kipling, Jack London, Frederick Douglass, and Langston Hughes. Betty Jane spoke of how calm and forgiving Moffett had been in the face of all the Kanawha ugliness, how he could hear hateful things but never give way to hate.

While I never had that chance to meet Moffett in person, his words on the page have left me with much to think about. I meet many young teachers who’ve never heard of the Kanawha controversy, for whom this whole explosive affair has become one of those unconscious narratives of deep memory. I find that while I don’t really care whether or not they know the concrete facts of it all, I do long to provoke the counter-cultural questions the book raises for those of us who’ve found it good company along our winding paths. What if Moffett was right: What if it turns out that we’ve more in common than we know? Why wouldn’t we want to know this? Why shouldn’t we let the very possibility rock our worlds?



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