

Warren Herendeen

OF TRICKSTERS AND DILEMMAS IN ESL WRITING CLASSES: AN EPISTOLARY ACCOUNT

Dear Lynn,

This epistolary account about tricksters and dilemmas in ESL writing classes is prompted by your tale of a need for new sources of vitality in general in writing classes. If we listen close to home, I think we may hear vital signs in tales that come down to us in oral traditions such as that of the Cherokee.

Once upon a scholarly time, in search of a means to illuminate Vygotsky's theory of concept-formation as a gloss on Marx, I retold a sly tale of Sequoia and his fabled linguistic trick (I recently witnessed another retelling in a brief television film). In *Correspondence Two* I wrote, "...Sequoia, chief of the Cherokee, was fascinated by the spectacle of American soldiers being talked to by their mail and by their talking back to blank white leaves which were then folded, sealed, and dispatched. Sequoia noticed many other conversations the soldiers had, with books and newspapers: all was so different from Cherokee ways of communication. Suddenly, an idea was born: Sequoia would discover how to make the leaves speak Cherokee. He listened carefully, counted the syllables in his language, devised a syllabary, laboriously figured out how to symbolize the sounds, and then on heaps of bark chips wrote every Cherokee word he knew or heard. Unfortunately, his wife, in the indignation of her ignorance, burned his heaps. He left, on a quest for a better system and for a new wife more sympathetic to Cherokee linguistics.

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“Finally, Sequoia succeeded in inventing an alphabetic system that could perfectly analyze the Cherokee language. Placing his trained young daughter in a Cherokee meeting, he left while discussion ensued, returning to read back to the amazed Cherokee his daughter’s verbatim record of the meeting. Thus was the transforming concept of writing brought to the Cherokee. It was not a heap of broken bark chips, nor a complex of words organized by similarities of sounds or spellings, nor a pseudo-concept such as an assessment of the skill demonstrated by his daughter in taking the minutes of the meeting. Rather, it was a concept, an abstract method that permitted the exchange of one mode of expression for another, of orality for literacy. It expressed its own value no matter what literary form it took and embodied a reflective dimension. This is writing, essential tool of thought in civilized societies.”

Having told this tale, I was diverted subsequently into speculations on the value of such catalysts in writing. As a concept, a tale seemed to generate another concept in an intellectual and imaginative dialectic. I continued this line of reasoning briefly in the essay on Sequoia and Vygotsky, asking: where does this leave the basic writer who allegedly cannot think in concepts?

My experience with nontraditional students and non-students—inmates of the New York State prison system, a South Bronx gang I helped organize into a block improvement council, and ESL speakers with little or no formal training in their first language—revealed no instance in which these persons demonstrated an inability to think conceptually. In one instance, one of the South Bronx group, a high school dropout after his freshman year, had composed a dozen notebooks containing chapters organized by various techniques (dreams, TV skits, adventures on and off the block, et al.).

I have wandered on many wayward paths in my search for vital catalytic sources, but it was in a summer class at Columbia on orality, literacy, and technology (offered by the talented linguist Professor Clifford Hill) that I first came to see the immense catalytic power of the trickster and dilemma tales, whether African or American, in writing classes. Later, I tried them out in my ESL classes, where I have continued my habit of writing responses along with my students and then reading my responses to the class just as they do.

What works? Not every trickster or dilemma tale works perfectly or absolutely as a catalyst, but all are at least initially provocative. Luckily, there are countless tales to draw on and they are frequently brief, so one need not bank on an all-or-nothing roll of one trickster and his tale. The teacher needs to beware primarily of the seeming simplicity of trickster and dilemma tales. And, they should be introduced very carefully, with thoughtful explanations and explications of unusual terms. On the whole, I have found it best to start with a tale I devise myself.

For example, I once told my students that terrorists had taken over a tourist ship at sea and blown it up. Passengers ran for their lives to the lifeboats only to discover that all the lifeboats but one had been destroyed. Fifteen panic-stricken passengers managed to clamber into the one lifeboat and escape from both the sinking ship and the desperate arms of the passengers left behind. One of the fifteen aboard the lifeboat turned out to be an officer of the destroyed ship. It soon became evident to those aboard that the lifeboat was able to accommodate no more than eight people safely. Fifteen brought the boat to water level and slightly below. The saved began to cup their hands to capture the water in the boat and toss it out. As night came on, a storm broke. Rain poured down on the boat and the waves rose and fell on the sinking craft. The officer suddenly reached to his side and gently eased a very elderly man into the water. The old man's young grandson and granddaughter watched with horror. No one moved. The officer said nothing, but looked grim. The remaining passengers looked death at the officer. The storm continued, and about each half-hour, as the boat sank yet further beneath the waves, the officer gently eased another passenger into the water, always the oldest among the group. By midnight, the storm was dying and the boat floated just above the water line. The first lights from heaven showed the passengers sitting mutely, stonefaced, looking accusingly at the officer. With the dawn came a military craft which sighted the lifeboat, soon taking the survivors aboard. They promptly accused the officer of murdering seven old men and women on the lifeboat. At the trial, the jury listened to prosecution and defense arguments and then made its determination. The judge imposed a sentence.

I asked my class what the arguments were, what the jury decided, and what the judge's sentence was.

By listening critically to the story, the students were able to propound a number of possible answers to the questions posed. As argument after argument was presented for the defense or the prosecution ("at least he saved seven lives"; "but he also saved himself"; "he murdered seven people"; "he set himself up as God"; "he should have sacrificed himself as an example to the others on board and then let those who wished to follow suit, do so"; "he had to act coolly and professionally and no one else had his qualifications"; etc.), I thought the students would benefit from writing out their thoughts in expository form. Once written, the drafts were read to the class and further critical listening and critical thinking were evident.

Those who had thought it a relatively simple issue to decide, found out differently. Those who were impatient to get rid of a tedious, atypical event found that dilemmas can sometimes be partly resolved by thought and that impatience is hardly an appropriate form of expression when matters of life and death are involved. (I divulged at a strategic point that my account was based on a true story that occurred in Philadelphia in the nineteenth century.) The social compromise outlined in the lifeboat story led easily to new fields of speculation and to new assignments.

As I thought about these matters, I decided to introduce one or two short dilemma-tales of African origin, but without the terminological trappings (such as the African names of the characters) that might have been a distraction. Thus, I told the tale of a pregnant panther who killed the husband of a pregnant human wife. The human mother later died in childbirth, but her baby lived. The panther baby undertook to care for the human child secretly until both were about twelve. At that time, they set upon the panther mother and killed her. They had many wonderful adventures during the next year. But, suddenly, the young panther sensed danger and warned his human brother to go back to his own kind. The human boy agreed reluctantly after securing the young panther's promise to visit him in the village every night at midnight, bringing fresh meat each time. This went on for years, even after the human boy had grown up and married. But one night, the panther lay down by accident next to his human brother's wife, who, reaching for her husband, found a beast's body in his place. Her husband was tongue-tied in shock as alarmed neighbors rushed in and killed his panther brother.

Now, Lynn, all is not reading for pleasure! I expect an epistolary return in which you surmise what the human brother did the next day when he thought about how he had treated his panther brother. My students offered many answers after our critical discussion of the possible ways of interpreting the story. They seemed somewhat more sophisticated by this point than they had been when first analyzing the story about the lifeboat (and how the fourteen remaining passengers should have tossed the officer into the water or how the government should have awarded him a Congressional Medal of Honor for heroism at sea). Now they thought that perhaps the panther brother had not been quite properly treated; perhaps his human brother had been cowardly and ashamed of his panther brother; perhaps the story was an allegory about gratitude, or an allegory that could be adapted to another society and thus show its universality. Perhaps, they surmised, the human brother became a monk and repented for what he had done; perhaps he had a better relationship with his wife as he outgrew his animal sympathies; perhaps he committed suicide in despair over his inhuman ingratitude to the panther brother who had raised him—and who had killed his own mother in punishment for what she had done to his human brother's family. Perhaps the human brother never ate meat again.

In taking the idea of this allegory as the basis of another assignment, I found the results encouraging for its release of imagination. As I recall, one story concerned a drug-abuse problem experienced by a Black family living close to the Spanish Harlem section of New York City. The Black family—a mother with fatherless children—was ruled by a woman who had succumbed to drug addiction. In her mad desire for a fix, she had, while pregnant, assaulted a married Puerto Rican man, robbed him, and accidentally killed him. His death caused his Puerto Rican wife to give birth prematurely; she died in childbirth, but her child lived. The boys born to the two women grew up near each other and became very close

friends. But, over the years the Black woman, still a drug addict, became more and more violent, abusing her son physically and verbally. The neighbors noticed this violence and also noticed that the two boys—José and Joe—were inseparable companions. There was quite a lot of talk about this but the situation endured for years. When they were twelve, the boys decided to form a gang of just themselves called the Two Panthers. One night José visited Joe just as a fight was beginning. In the ensuing fracas, José, trying to protect his brother, accidentally pushed his friend's mother into a broken chair. She fell backwards, hit her head sharply on the iron clubfoot of an old gas range and died immediately of an injury to the brain. The boys were happy for a year, wandering around their mixed neighborhood at 116th and 117th Street in New York City. But soon the neighbors began to talk more openly. The Two Panthers spoke about it. Joe felt that he had better go back to his own people. José almost cried, but Joe said he would visit him often, when nobody was around, and he would bring José gifts from time to time as tokens of their endless friendship. This went on for years. Eventually José found a job in a meat market and got married. Joe found jobs hard to get and began dealing in drugs. Joe would visit José from time to time, always at night, and bring him money sometimes, a few joints, or other small tokens. One night, the police chased Joe up and down 157th Street, down Prospect Avenue, until, breathless, he reached the fire escape at José's place. He climbed up and went in the window as José rose to meet him. Joe fell down on the bed exhausted, forgetful of his agreement made years earlier that he would never enter José's apartment, but wait for José on the fire escape. José's wife awakened and began screaming when she saw a strange man next to her. The neighbors were aroused and ran to the door and banged loudly. The police following Joe heard the suspicious sounds, broke in the door, and shot Joe as he sprang to escape through the window. José did not say anything to the police about who Joe was or how Joe came to be there. But, after that, José went about with a sad face and in a little while he went inside himself and would no longer talk to anyone. You can still see him of a Sunday at the Bronx Zoo. He sits in front of the panther cage, watching as the great and beautiful beasts restlessly walk behind the bars, sometimes stopping to look curiously at their perennial visitor, sometimes stretching and showing their claws and teeth as they incline their stomachs to the ground. Sometimes a light snarl seems to escape from their well-fed jaws.

In trickster tales we often see tricksters pulling tricks for the sake of the trick itself, but sometimes it is for the sake of establishing social cohesion in a universe which at times seems almost to shout its objection to any such cohesion. Sometimes the tricksters are hardly more than cheap charlatans (some Duke or Dauphin on his way to a presidency or vice-presidency perhaps). But the best trickster stories seem to me to lie at the heart of great cultural myths. Among these are the Ananse tales from Africa, a charming and somewhat gross example of which concerns Ananse's tricking a king to gain his daughter. Ananse pretends to describe

the king's daughter's physical features while in reality scratching himself in a garden of prickles which he has to clean in order to win the daughter. Later, when he explains his trick to his new bride, she indignantly moves to her own mat. Ananse then pours water on her and threatens to expose her apparent enuresis to one and all in the village if she does not reunite her mat with his. She is conquered, not by male superiority but by an uncomfortable practical joke with a moral such as lies at the heart of Petruchio's trick of love for Kate. When the mats are together, the loving order of heaven is established on earth.

These assignments and discussions led to other assignments such as requests for stories without endings. These would potentially lead the student (and the teacher) into the region of myth where the supreme trick and trickster lie in artful anticipation of human attention. A student thought up a situation in which, in the eighteenth century, a slave had escaped from his master after killing his brutal owner. Hunted down, the slave took refuge in a cave where he watched a spider spin a web in the fading light. In the morning, as the slave foresaw, the dead master's friends and household and soldiers of the local militia came seeking the slave. They were approaching...

In answer to the question, "What did the slave do?" my students were now wiser than ever. The slave had thought all during the night of all sorts of tricks by which to get away. He may have blocked up the cave, left footprints that pointed away from the cave—or, overslept because his alarm clock failed to go off. Students were well on the way to greater discoveries through critical listening, critical thinking, and critical writing. *Critical* came to mean *creative*.

Having resolved the slave's seeming dilemma with a variety of tricks, I offered the following to their collective ingenuity: "A young wife fed her husband's old mother every day. The old woman was unable to move, except to eat. One day she suddenly sank her teeth in the young wife's hand and refused to let go. Her eyes told you she knew what she was doing. No one could figure out what to do."

Some students thought of cutting off the young woman's hand; others suggested pinching the old woman's nose. Rising higher, a trickster of negotiations suggested asking the old woman to nod her head once in the affirmative and twice in the negative about various propositions, such as: Would she let go if she were moved to a decent nursing home, were guaranteed three edible meals per day (instead of stale rice that was forced down her throat by her daughter-in-law), and given proper medical care? The old woman nodded once. The trickster asked both women to sign and say, "I do." When the old woman said, "I do," the trickster whipped the young woman's hand out of the old woman's mouth. As screams subsided, all were satisfied, heaven was again in order, and out in the yard the merry note of Chanticleer was heard.

Yet, I was still not certain that we had entered deeply enough into the region where the trickster artist ultimately dwells. I therefore told a famous tale in language appropriate to the English proficiency level

of my English as a Second Language students. This tale (set in the eighteenth century) concerns a young Indian silversmith, with a limp, named He-Who-Discovers-Something. He had come to a neighboring Cherokee village to find his uncle. He failed to find his uncle but did find a wife. Most of the time he sat around making silver buckles and necklaces to sell to the pale people of the town nearby, but occasionally he would take a walk in the woods and sit by a tree and listen to the leaves talk as the wind inspired them. His favorite tree was a huge oak that seemed as high as heaven and whose roots reached down into the eternal beginnings of the tribe. He-Who-Discovers-Something began to sit more and more frequently by his oak tree, and finally began staying out all night, to the indignation and consternation of his wife. To her endless inquiries as to what he did out all night, he would merely reply that he was listening to the leaves talk. To him, the side of the oak was like a door of a great and mysterious tepee whose splendid skirt covered the earth and was stitched to the stars. The leaves seemed to whisper in their own language about the mysteries within the tepee, but He-Who-Discovers-Something could not make out what they were saying. After a long time, however, the brave began to make out a word or two. The words became a sentence and the brave suddenly realized that the leaves were speaking to him: "This door is for you but you are not permitted to go in at this time." Well-pleased with his discovery, He-Who-Discovers-Something picked up pieces of bark and began to carve the syllables of the talking leaves on each chip he picked up. These chips grew into piles. Villagers came by. His wife came by. Enraged by the sight of worthless chips, she set them on fire, wounded the old tree, and nearly asphyxiated the talking leaves. The forest sang unkindly of the Polluting Squaw. He-Who-Discovers-Something still sat by the oak and began to dream again of its mysterious interior as the leaves sang their lullabies. Many years went by, during which a Cherokee woman who loved the sounds of the talking leaves came to sit with the brave. A daughter was born to them by the oak and the busy leaves sang a birthday hymn to the baby girl. He-Who-Discovers-Something taught his daughter the meaning of the syllables of the talking leaves, and by the time she was twelve she had carved the syllables she had learned onto eighty-six bark chips, smiling the while at her father and mother because she had need of so few bark chips for the multitudinous speeches, songs, and outpourings of the whispering leaves. He-Who-Discovers-Something was himself now frequently whispered about by the talking leaves. The mysterious tepee that reached to heaven beckoned him always within but the leaves spoke, saying that it was not permitted for him to enter. At last, near death, he importuned the leaves once more. The branches bent to hear his last words. "Why has no one else ever come to enter this way in all these years?" The leaves spoke saying, "Because this way was only for you, a gateway now closed." The child of He-Who-Discovers-Something listened to the leaves and wrote down every word. She held her father's head in her hands and sang out to the mysterious tepee, word for word,

what the leaves had said, verse after verse, minute after minute. Then she began to smile through her tears, sighing, and singing, “Because this way was only for you, a gateway now closed. Because this way was only for you, a gateway now closed.”

He was tricked! Why did he believe the leaves? Maybe he should have listened to a higher authority. But look what happened to him: at least he was able to trick the leaves into giving him the gift of written language! It chanced that He-Who-Discovers-Something is one translation of the name Sequoia, and by this charm of language, we are involved in both a trick and revelation. Thus, there is more to critical thinking, listening, reading, and writing than principles and logical deductions. There are also intuitions and perspectives. Sometimes the trickster cannot make this point without absurdist logic, without pouring water on his wife, without poltergeisting his situation.

As you may have supposed, Lynn, my students were at first baffled by tricksters and dilemmas and I learned to be very careful (and slow) about introducing them. The trick, however, was always more powerful than their frustration at not being able to think of much, at not being able to reason culturally or think critically. In their impatience, they first offered crackpot, slapdash, immoral, demeaning, and coarse solutions (“Kill her!”). Their solutions at first mirrored only one level of consciousness, but soon higher levels and superior solutions were found.

I heard recently that the 500 most common words in English have 54,000 different meanings. So, it is not surprising that these trickster and dilemma tales radiate many options and complexities, many ambiguities and branchings that lead to imaginative solutions. For example, one discovers in one of the Ananse tales, that the “high” god is tricked by the son of the trickster. How high can such a “high” god be? And yet, how much more human such a high god is, than one “high” in other senses! If students can be thus tricked into imaginative thoughts to be written down for an assignment, we may find ourselves in the celestial domain of true trickery at long last, and see why the trickster is at once so loving, so comical, so whimsical, so imaginative, so paradoxical, so obnoxious, so dangerous to stability, so functional in stability, so rangy in his manifestations—sometimes a Mr. Apollinax, an Apuleius, or, for those who have read *Marius the Epicurean* ten or twenty times, he will sometimes seem even a Walter Pater.

Editors, teachers, writers come to realize that there is a trick at the heart of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. There are the complexities of code creations based on random selections of symbols which are then figured out by the receiver who knows some trick lurks at the center of the mysterious signal system. Simply, we may say or hear something about wanting or having a light or a cigarette, knowing that such is merely a trick to establish communication, to bring our mats together. Or, we may compose an epistolary account of tricks to trick readers into more imaginative and artful writing assignments, to lift the level of trickery in the classroom and establish communion with the

countless tricksters in our world in the heart of their dilemmas (for a trickster sometimes solves a dilemma but is sometimes lost in one). It is not necessarily a shame to be a trickster or suffer a dilemma, for if Shakespeare was James's magician of a thousand masks, Chaucer may serve as our master juggler of a thousand tricks. Students begin to sense the sheer glee involved in thinking in this way—this newly legitimated way perhaps—and they write little sallies, in our tricky language, which, especially in my students' papers, are often strung with the mysterious, idiosyncratic interlanguage gewgaws of the second language learner en route to trickster fluency in the target language.

Assignments yet to come will seek dreams from my students. They will wake up, write down the dreams they remember, bring their reports to class, and ask the class to help them understand their dreams. Then they will write more about themselves and their dreams. Thus, by a strange return to their beginnings, they will gain insight into the tricky ways our psyches are constructed, for many dreams are extraordinary tales of dilemmas from which there seems no escape until we awaken and drown in a reality of another kind by a trick of our psyche.

As you can see, Lynn, this epistolary account has become a story without an end. Just to show the unexpected twists and turns which innocent in-class activities may have: I attended today an all-day Faculty Seminar at Mercy College on "Ethics Across the Curriculum." The witty speaker seemed to me to have caught the fancy and attention of our 250 faculty members to an unusual degree. The substance of his remarks was effectively illustrated, even punctuated, by numerous stories which characteristically concerned some trick of thought or language or deed and some dilemma of a moral kind. As I listened, I reflected that, at heart, the expository mode and the narrative mode do not seem very different. As for He-Who-Discovers-Something, the gateway may in some sense be closed after revelation—after exposition or narration—perhaps because the revelation has been made. Such is my modest gloss on Kafka's famous parable, as enabled by a Cherokee linguistic trickster. What difference morally or intellectually if the mode is one or the other? We can hear both, for Linnaeus could love and name a tree and so could, and did, Sequoia.

Faithfully,

Warren

Warren Herendeen

P.S.: *Correspondences Two* is a broadside published by Boynton/Cook in early 1985. Those interested in tricksters and dilemmas will find handy sources, such as Paul Radin's *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, with commentaries by Karl Kerényi and C. G. Jung, with a new introduction by Stanley Diamond for the 1972 Schocken Books edition (originally published in 1956); William R. Bascom's *African Dilemma Tales* (Mouton Publishers: The Hague, 1975); and Robert D. Pelton's *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight* (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, 1980). But the thoughtful listener will realize that tricksters and dilemmas suffuse our universe, and examples are not far to seek.

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