

The Story of Me: the Creative Rhetoric and Common Sense that Created a Technical Communicator

“The truth about stories is that that’s all we are,” (King, 2).

“Who are you?” or more appropriately, “Who am I?” It’s always seemed like a complex question to me. I probably still don’t have a clear, straight-forward answer to that question, but after taking Cultural Studies in Technical and Professional Communication, I have a way to answer it—with my stories. When I first read Thomas King’s *The Truth About Stories*, I felt a connection. He tells his stories and the importance of stories in a way that everyone can relate to. It doesn’t matter what your race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or age is—you can relate.

I recently took a test that was going around social media to see if I was left- or right-brained. Since I am left-handed, I assumed I would be right-brained but being 83% right-brained was a shock to me. According to brain hemisphere science (which is, admittedly, hotly contested) this means me that I’m more artistic, than organized; more intuitive than level-headed; and more big-picture than the parts. A University of Utah researchers report states that “Brain scans show no evidence that people are predominately right or left brained,” (Bateman, 1). For the purposes of this paper, the science, or lack thereof, doesn’t change my mind because the beauty of being right-brained is that I don’t need the science to believe it. Being so right-brained suggests that I lack common sense, which is not the case. As my sister tells people, I’m “100% book smart and 100% common sense.” But maybe this does explain

why I'm such a creative, open-minded person and chose careers that are creative. It's an interesting idea that may aid in communicating with others better.

Some people would argue that technical writing/communication isn't creative, but I disagree...more on that later. Several of my classes during the last two years have asked me what I think Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) is and whether it should be housed disciplinarily in an English Department, the Humanities fields, or in a department all its own. I think an argument can be made that there's a place for TPC in both English and Humanities as it possesses characteristics of both.

In *A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing*, Miller defines rhetoric as "....language designed to persuade or impress," (Miller, 2). In her article, she is proving the humanistic value of a technical writing course for other majors and I agree with a lot of what she says, but that is a simplistic view of what rhetoric is. She rightly points out the many definitions of technical writing: "Technical writing is expected to be objective, scientifically impartial, utterly clear and unemotional...." and "Technical communication has one certain clear purpose; to convey information and ideas accurately and efficiently," (Miller, 2) among other variations of these. This is exactly how I would define technical writing/communication, but the use of the word "unemotional" is interesting to me. I can understand the importance of not allowing emotions into technical documents, your reader doesn't need to know why you feel the way you feel about something, just why they need to perform that task.

Likewise, in *Technological Culture and the Ethic of Expediency*, Katz views technical communication as "....deliberative," (Katz, 8). Technical writers discuss what should and should not be done and have an ethical responsibility to the readers. But the writing or writer can't be devoid of emotions...it makes them the effective writer they need to be to be accurate and efficient. Understanding yourself can only

benefit you with understanding the readers or customers. If you can connect to their wants and needs as a reader, you'll be a better writer for it. But you must do so ethically and deliberately.

Then the creativity begins with learning who your audience is, and catering to their needs and wants. It's not always easy to know your audience, or write for everyone. You simply can't do always do that, but you can analyze the situation and decide on the best course of action based on your past experiences. This lends itself to the idea of Cultural rhetorics.

According to the Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab at Michigan State University, Cultural rhetorics "...is based on the premise that rhetoric has been and will always be a culturally located practice and study," and "...theorizes how rhetoric and culture are interconnected through a focus on the processes by which language, texts, as well as other discursive practices like performance, embodied rhetorics and create meaning," (Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab, 1). I'm not going to go in depth in cultural rhetorics because it's vast, but I give a brief definition here because it supports the idea that stories can interconnect back to rhetorical meaning making practices.

For now, I'll tell the stories that made me, and how these experiences made me who I am now, as well as the career I choose to be in. What emotions I bring to my technical writing and how rhetoric plays a role in my technical communication.

Similarly to King, in Brenton Faber's *Community Action and Organizational Change*, Faber addresses and understands the importance of cultural stories and community change:

"The stories we read, watch, hear, create, and enact are powerful, interpretive acts. They provide security and continuity. They create resistance, opposition and conflict. They provide a cultural record of who we are, where we have been, and what we hope to achieve. Stories document our **habits, successes, failures,**

and **lessons learned**. They place our culture's defining events, oddest moments, and strategic messages into common narratives we assimilate, refine, and then pass on to the next generations. In the process, we add to these stories different expressions, subtle distinctions, and small deviations. We leave out details we believe are unimportant, information we forget, and issues we would rather not remember. We suppress competing voices, conflicting dogma. And, all the while, we narrate change," (Faber, 21).

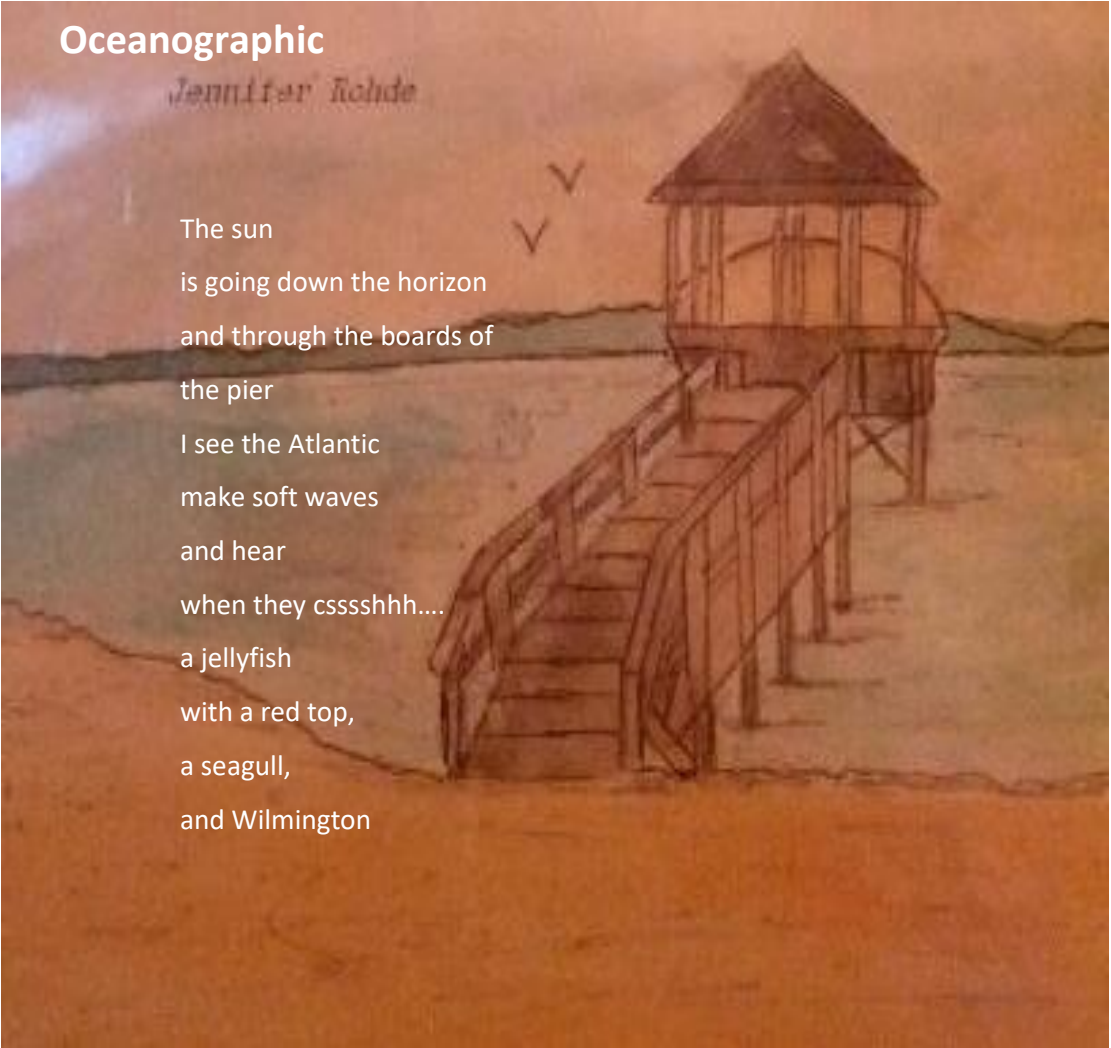
Writing

I've always enjoyed telling stories, but writing wasn't something I was necessarily drawn to. I didn't even complete a whole book until I was in the 8th grade. When I entered the writing contest to go to the Young Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, I did so simply because I wanted to win. I wanted to prove to myself and my family that I was good at something. And win I did. I had the best essay in the whole district and for once, I felt my self-esteem rise. I attended the workshop for two years in a row, but realized my shyness really prevented me from growing from the experience—I was too scared to share my stories and get critiques (I can't say I'm much better with this now). So, I took a break from any extra-curricular writing activities for awhile; however, I still had to write for school.

The Poem

Oceanographic

Jennifer Rohde



The sun
is going down the horizon
and through the boards of
the pier
I see the Atlantic
make soft waves
and hear
when they cssshhh....
a jellyfish
with a red top,
a seagull,
and Wilmington

*This poem, “written” by me, makes me feel like a fraud. The assignment in my 8th grade Language Arts class was to write a story about our summer vacation. I wrote about my annual summer trip to see my dad, who lived on Wrightsville Beach at the time. That summer I was stung by a jellyfish, (a major event in my life) and my older brother became my personal slave for a few hours, which was not his usual role. After I turned in my story, my teacher gave it back to me with certain words circled. These words became the poem. And then it was published in a literary magazine for middle and high school students. Am I the author of it? It doesn’t feel like it, but, they are my words, so maybe my teacher was just my **editor**. Or maybe it has no distinct author. My parents were so proud that I was published, that I never told them or anyone the truth—I even created the original artwork above to go along with it (that*

awesome artwork really is all me). It doesn't feel legitimate to me, and this is why I have a problem calling myself a writer.

Sabbatical

After the poem, I took a sabbatical from writing. I couldn't distinguish between the writer I thought I was and the poet my teacher created. However, my new outlet was still creative—architecture. I love architecture in the way where I want to visit places (New Orleans, Paris, Rome, etc.) simply for the architecture. But there was another draw for me. I was often the only, or one of the few, females in the classes. I enjoyed the feeling of empowerment I felt as a woman in a “man's world.” I started attending these conferences on the campus of Iowa State University geared for females in architecture and engineering fields; all the speakers were even female. I looked forward to these more than anything else. I felt like I was doing something, like it all meant something. I don't know if I would say I was (am?) a feminist, but I do know I am very proud to be the first female to graduate from the architecture program at the school, and the only female to do so for a couple years. Several years later, I met a woman that had graduated from the same program and most of her graduating class was female, and I felt really happy about this. Being a female in a male-dominated world wasn't always easy. I wasn't always treated the same (when the secretary was out, I handled her duties), or made as much money (men doing the same thing often made more money), but I persevered and believed I was able to do so by all my experiences throughout my journey. Even with all of these successes, it's surprising that my mom's still held me back.

Family

Family is important to me, maybe the most important thing in my life. I attribute this to being raised in the Midwest; there's a certain value-system that comes from the Midwest. I come from a family of farmers and teachers, so I always understood the importance of hard work and helping others. We

were poor though. We moved a lot after my parents divorced when I was four, often living with family. My mom worked hard and eventually became an RN when she was pregnant with her third child, my little sister. In some ways, I'm grateful I had such a strong role model. She was fearless. If I had a problem, one phone call from her and everything was fixed. She was a strong woman...until she wasn't. My stepfather was highly abusive and I never understood why she stayed so long. He abused my older brother, and my mom, but never me. He tried once, but I told him he wasn't allowed to do that and left the house. I was 9. Where does a nine-year-old girl get that kind of strength? Wherever it came from, it's the strength that helped me get my bachelor's degree while working full time as a civil engineering technician, go through pregnancy and the first five months of my daughter's life while my (then) husband was deployed (my mom was *certain* that I would have postpartum depression), and enroll in a graduate program while mourning the loss of my older brother (but I admit the first semester was rough).

Whenever I achieve something positive, my mom is shocked. My older brother was the golden child—if only I could be as smart as him! His intelligence worked against them though; he knew early on he was smart and got bored. I, however, grew into my intelligence, often not believing that I was in fact smart. This didn't stop my mom from constantly putting me down. Eventually, I gave up even trying since there was no way to impress her. I graduated from high school from a 2.1 GPA, simply because I didn't try. And why should I? I would always be inferior to my brother, but I still idolized and wanted to be like him...until I didn't. It's taken me some time, but I think this is why I've never felt like an academic; I'm a learner.

I grew up in a middle class family where education is important. My grandfather has his doctorate in education and my dad and aunt have their Master's degrees. My grandfather was very well-known for his work as a superintendent in Iowa; my dad is renowned his field of ichthyology. Yet, I never identified with that side of my family, even though my dad has always been supportive of my educational

endeavors. I was always classified as “slow.” I would learn things eventually, but not on the schedule of most kids. Because of this I’ve felt a little disabled. I know this is a very mild disability, but it has unfortunately held me back in my life. In Dolmage’s *Mapping Composition: Inviting Disability in the Front Door*, he believes with advances made to disability studies and using the metaphors for “steep steps” and “retrofitting,” professors can properly access and teach disabled students. “The *steep steps* metaphor puts forward the idea that access to the university is a movement upwards—only the truly fit survive this climb,” (Dolmage, 16) and “To retrofit is to add a component or accessory to something that has already been manufactured or built,” (Dolmage, 20). Dolmage uses these two metaphors to explore ways to overcome these issues in teaching disability studies. I can relate to this because I’ve had steep steps to climb and they took me longer than I would have liked, but I climbed them thanks to a few teachers and professors. I also like how everyone often can and does interpret things into their own way; the space is there for anyone to grow into who they are. Relating to others and making connections helps form the rhetorical ideas I use in my writing. My mom’s emphasis on my slowness was a direct result of my brother’s brilliance.

The Brother

I first found out my brother was a drug addict when I was in the 7th grade. I was called down to the assistant principal’s office so my mom could pull me out of school. He told me she was coming to pick me up to take my brother to the hospital. I just started crying. Uncontrollably. She obviously hadn’t told him much because as I burst into tears, he started asking me what was wrong with my brother. I responded through my tears that he’d had a sore throat. He looked at me completely confused. I can be theatrical and missed my calling as an actress. Several years later, I was so impressive that a cop wanted to give me an Academy Award for my stellar performance. But, that’s a different story for another day.

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"I think a lot about ghosts. No, not white-sheeted apparitions, but the ghosts who appear in the stories we tell each other here in the academy," (Powell, 12). In Malea Powell's "Listening to Ghosts: an alternative (non)argument," she refers to ghost stories as, "...both the stories of material colonization and the webs and wisps of narrative that are woven around, under, beneath, behind, inside and against the dominant narratives of "scholarly discourse," (Powell, 12). I use the term "ghost stories" more literally than she intended, and use my stories about my brother in the hopes of changing others, and honoring him. It's not just that though, his ghost is with me all the time. That loss and that grief has changed the way I am and how I write, relate to others and tell my stories.

I was really oblivious to the extent of my brother's addictions. Like my dad, I kept blinders on. It was easier that way. My brother, Chad, and I were always really close though. He was over-protective and he was always there for me, no matter what. He moved down here from Wisconsin while I was pregnant to take care of me since my husband was deployed. He was a good son and brother and a wonderful uncle. I lost part of my identity the day he died. We went from Chad and Jenny (1976-2011) to just Jenny (2011 on). It's a difficult transition to lose such a huge part of your identity, but his addictions had been separating us for awhile when I chose to follow my academic ambitions.

In 1982, the Christmas after my parents separated, my mom didn't have enough money for a tree, which depressed all of us. While my mom was at work one day, Chad and I walked (actually I rode in a sled), the three miles to the grocery store to get a tree. I don't know where he got the money for the tree, but we loaded it onto the sled for the trek back. Now that I think about it, maybe we did steal it...who's going to stop a five and a nine year old with a tree on a sled anyway? Besides, I was in the snowsuit, I wasn't running anywhere fast. When my mom got home, she was ecstatic and Christmas has remained the most important holiday since then.

My brother will continue to be the ghost in most of my stories. They may not always be good stories, but most of them will be. It doesn't matter how good of a person he *was*, he will always be overshadowed by *how* he died. Damn the unfortunate power of labels. Gloria Anzaldúa was a powerful voice in the Chicana and LGBT community who rejected the use of labels and thought they constricted a person. She herself would label things and thought that lesbians were "...predominantly white and middle-class women..." (Anzaldúa, 263), but she rejected them as well. She wants the ability to label herself, much as I do or anyone else does. I don't always feel comfortable with the label of "academic" or "writer," but that's what I am. And there are other labels that I'll never be able to get rid of: "white," "heterosexual," and "working-class." While other labels may change: "single mother," "writer," and "caretaker." Focus on the labels you give yourself, and not the labels others give you. What labels you, rarely defines you.

Friend

After my (then) husband returned from Iraq, we agreed to rent out a room to one of his soldiers going to UNCW. I didn't realize doing that would open a whole new world for me. He was gay, and while I knew, my husband did not. There was still the law of **Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT)**, so he couldn't know without reporting it. It was hard to keep that secret when Mark was going through so much, but we managed it until DADT was eradicated. And Mark was there for all of it—he organized events at UNCW and was invited to Washington, D.C. for all his efforts. Mark has always felt like family to me and I "won" him in the divorce. ;) He graduated from UNC at Wilmington, with the same degree as me, and is now a technical writer as well. We have a connection that is hard to explain since we met so late in life, but it's there.

In the three years he lived with me, he's gone from playing the field to married, and from student to writer and entrepreneur. His quest for knowledge and equality is unlike anything I've ever been around

before. I, and my family, had the unique opportunity to see a new perspective on life. We rejoiced when they were finally able to marry legally. While others in the LGBT community embrace the term “queer,” I’m still not that comfortable using it because it doesn’t fall under the idea of “write what you know.” Is it disingenuous for me to use the term or write about queer studies if queer is a term I have always heard used negatively? I hope not since most in the academic community use it in a positive sense to mean “anything outside of the normative.” Warner asks “What do queers want?” (Warner, vii) in *Fear of a Queer Planet*. It’s not a question some are comfortable with asking. Warner suggests “...that the new wave of lesbian and gay studies is at the point of having to force a thorough revision within social-theoretical traditions, of the kind being won by feminism,” (Warner, x). Judging from what Mark has accomplished already and given the huge changes and gains being seen in acceptance socially and culturally for LGBT and queer people, I believe this to be true.

My daughter was almost one year old when he moved in and almost four years old when he moved out. She was also there for everything. She and my mom helped one or the other plan surprises for the other. One time, they were in charge of the music and lighting. Mark and his husband danced around the room and enjoyed a romantic moment. When the song ended, Mark and his husband kissed, and my daughter clapped. She has grown up knowing that love is love, no matter who it’s with, and that family is who you make it with. These are the stories that I hope she carries with her to the next generation.

You can’t judge anyone by what you think they are, because they may see themselves in a completely different light. Look at the light, read with the light on. Labels may be easy but they’re not always accurate.

Me Now

And now, I've come full circle. I'm a writer again. There are days I doubt myself, or let other's doubt of me affect me, but ultimately, I'm happy where I am. People often ask me what I do for a living and when I respond that I'm a technical writer, they say, "How awful, but someone has to do it." I love my job and I love being able to take complex information and make it understandable. My experience helps others learn and grow, and it works for me. I feel connected to what I do. The stories that show my habits, successes, failures and lessons learned are the ones that have built me.

For some, my life may not seem that difficult, but I would disagree with that. I always felt I had something to prove for one reason or another, and sometimes I would fail (thank you University of Northern Iowa for rejecting me at 17), and sometimes I would succeed. But it's everything in between that matters. It's everything in between that makes me, me.

Cultural rhetorics is a fundamental approach to my every day. This approach to technical and professional communication applies to all of my cultural communities, which include my academia community, as well as my work community. These stories, my stories enable me to define myself as a technical communicator with meaning making practices in every aspect of my life. Being myself has helped me be successful in academia and the workplace.

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