Chapter 12. Prisons and Pathways to Rhetoric and Composition

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With many professors across time, Patrick Berry completed undergraduate studies later than the presumed norm. He then held several positions in advertising, marketing, and journalism before deciding to begin doctoral studies in English and writing studies. His family's experiences with imprisonment led him to begin a pioneering career in studying, advancing, and developing prison literacy programs.

This chapter explores my pathway to the academy with particular attention to issues of compartmentalization and the critical role that personal narrative plays in contributing to the understanding of individual journeys to the academy and, in my case, the field of rhetoric and composition. In sharing these reflections, I aim to make visible pathways that are often omitted in discussions about the construction of an academic life. Before offering my own narrative, I reflect on a few narrative works in rhetoric and composition that provide valuable historical insights. My own journey involved twists and turns that are organized here around two themes: prisons and pathways.

Narrating Our Lives in Rhetoric and Composition

In Duane H. Roen, Stuart C. Brown, and Theresa Enos' (1999) edited collection *Living Rhetoric and Composition: Stories of the Discipline,* prominent scholars reflect on their pathways to the academy and specifically the field of rhetoric and composition. Many arrived as the field was first emerging, when graduate programs like those of today did not exist. Some senior scholars came from literature, education, and other fields, and as Andrea Lunsford (1999) points out, several told stories of "the GI Bill, 1960s activism, and programs like open admissions," which had afforded them access to the field (p. xi).

Others brought up commitments to working with what was then called basic writing as well as "the struggles for disciplinary recognition and legitimacy and the (very) troubled marriage of literature and composition," concerns that reverberated for years, leading to a growing number of independent writing programs (Lunsford, 1999, p. xi). Aspects of these stories will likely be familiar to senior scholars in the field, while others may find them new.

Mike Rose's (1989) *Lives on the Boundary* was especially valuable to me as a literacy researcher and educator who was a new scholar in the field. I was drawn to this

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genre of writing and appreciated many of the narratives that followed in succeeding years. If there were a canon for composition, Rose's text, which is both a literacy narrative and a story of building a life in the academy, would be, as Mark Wiley (1993) argues, "a unanimous choice." Perhaps all accounts of navigating the academy are literacy narratives to some extent. Such stories highlight the continuities and contradictions experienced by those who build a life in rhetoric and composition. As Kathleen Welch (2003) noted, such stories are also invaluable for tracing generations in our field and the lineages resulting from various forms of mentorship.

Reflecting on the experiences of "first-generation scholars" in rhetoric and composition, Welch (2003) discussed anticipating future stories from the field's luminary figures, saying, "I hope that Horner, Lauer, and Lloyd-Jones will write longer autobiographical accounts of the earlier days of composition-rhetoric." Narratives like these have allowed Welch to trace the tensions between the terms "composition" and "rhetoric" as well as training in the field extended across generations.

However, such explorations can also highlight omissions. For example, in her foreword to *Living Rhetoric and Composition*, Andrea Lunsford (1999), while praising the book, highlighted the absence of scholars of color. Such a lack would be unimaginable if such a collection were published today. Of course, there were fewer scholars of color in the field then, but this omission demonstrates how the field was then read in less capacious ways (see, for example, Kynard, 2013; McComiskey, 2016).

As demonstrated by these narratives, stories frame our histories—stories we remember, those we forget, and those we have never heard. They also are valuable in tracing the pathways of a broad range of scholars. The Writing Studies Tree (n.d.) continues this work through a crowdsourced online database of academic genealogies within the field.

In this chapter, I focus on issues of compartmentalization because I see that as a potential obstacle to understanding our histories. My own pathway to the academy was marked strongly by compartmentalization; as an undergraduate, I never envisioned myself as part of the university; instead, I operated under the assumption that it was *not* a place where people like me could find a home.

Later, I read collections like C. L. Barney Dews and Caroline Leste Laws' (1995) edited collection *This Fine Place so Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class,* which emphasizes how the academy leaves many people believing that they don't belong and that it is a place where "blue-collar work is invisible." Though I neither was blue-collar nor identified with the label "working class" (for various reasons, few people in my immediate family worked), I still found myself drawn to such stories as I heard others speaking about the difficulty finding and navigating a life in the academy.

Prisons

I begin by focusing on prisons because I had kept the role that prison had played in my life hidden until it became part of my scholarly identity. Not until my

mid-thirties, in graduate school, did I begin to write and talk about my father's incarceration. The reason I took so long was shame, though this was not limited to within the academy; I had compartmentalized my father's history, rarely letting others in on that part of my life.

It was only while teaching in prison—listening to incarcerated men at a medium-high-security prison talk about their estrangement from their children and families—that I began to feel compelled to share my story, which I discovered was not only therapeutic for me but also valuable to others. At national conferences, after I gave a talk and mentioned my father, I was often approached by a faculty member or graduate student who told me about their own experience with incarceration, often involving an incarcerated family member. It showed me how the act of narrating my experiences could open a space for others to talk about the impact of mass incarceration on individuals and their families.

In my family, no one went to college and most people did not complete high school. It was an environment, at least on my father's side of the family, in which going to prison was much more a possibility than going to college. My father, his brothers, and some of their children moved in and out of prison, their lives ruled by alcohol and drug addiction. I did not see my father often, as my parents divorced when I was very young and my father was often incarcerated.

According to Brian Elderbroom and his colleagues (2018), one in two adults in the United States has a family member who has been incarcerated: "Despite limited recent declines in the jail and prison population, an unprecedented number of people continue to be impacted by incarceration and the collateral consequences of that experience, which can last a lifetime" (p. 10). Given this, it's perhaps not surprising that I met others in the academy who were impacted by incarceration but for many years did not talk in academic spaces about this aspect of their lives. People's reasons for not discussing a connection to mass incarceration are numerous, but for many, embarrassment and shame play a role.

While I was an undergraduate (see Berry, 2018), my father was released from prison. Without a home and struggling with alcohol addiction, he panhandled on the Lower East Side of New York. From time to time, I would see him and then drive to the university—the two scenarios were worlds apart. Once I took pictures of my father and other men without homes as part of a photojournalism assignment; as we viewed the photographs in class, I never told anyone that the man standing in front of the liquor store with a smile on his face was my father. He passed away from complications related to cirrhosis while I was still an undergraduate, but for me at the time, this history was hidden—or, as I am using the term here, compartmentalized.

One exception to the compartmentalization of my life was Dr. Joan Digby, an English professor and director of the honors program at my school. We had built a strong relationship, and I felt I could share this hidden part of my life with her;

she was consistently supportive. At times, I would cat-sit for her in Oyster Bay, New York, when she and her husband traveled, and I was mesmerized by their walls of books and the life they had built, which appeared satisfying and very different from mine at the time. Joan remains one of the most important mentors in my life today, more than thirty years later. Nevertheless, many years passed before I felt comfortable talking to others about my father and prison, let alone writing about it in my scholarship.

When I was a graduate student, in 2004, prison education programs were declining; a ban on Pell Grants was then in effect that did not end until 2023 (Weisman, 2023). The lack of financial support for such programs meant that fewer of them existed. Still, I volunteered to work with the Education Justice Project, a dynamic program housed at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, that provided upper-level courses to incarcerated students who had earned the equivalent of an associate's degree.

I was drawn to this work because of my interest in literacy, broadly conceived; I wanted to better understand what literacy could do in this context. I was also interested in the pathways that did and did not exist for this population. Could the students in this program enroll at the university after they were released? There were no guarantees. Increasingly states have worked to "ban the box," an initiative committed to removing criminal history questions from admissions (Allen, 2023).

Yet barriers continue to exist well beyond the university. Making such obstacles visible remains important work and is something I continue to advance through Project Mend (n.d.), a program that provides humanities and publishing experience to people affected by the criminal legal system. Supported through various grants, the initiative invites a group of these individuals to learn through the production of an annual publication, *Mend*. I do this work in addition to my responsibilities as an associate professor, which bears mentioning because such "community" work is too often pushed aside in conversations about life in the academy and becomes compartmentalized and dismissed when it comes to discussions of promotion and tenure.

We cannot entirely escape compartmentalization in our lives; however, boundaries between the personal and the professional and between the university and the community need to be constantly examined. Some community experiences may be celebrated in some contexts and dismissed as separate from the scholarly work of the university in other cases, and personal narratives are sometimes dismissed as gratuitous or indulgent. Nevertheless, personal narrative holds value. As Jerome Bruner (1994) has written, "[A] life as led is inseparable from a life as told—or more bluntly, a life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold … " (p. 708). Such narratives can also help us understand historically and personally how people experience the academy in various times and places. For those impacted by incarceration, the process of reflecting on such experiences can be liberating.

Pathways

It took time for me to find my way to doctoral study. When I was 38, I was working in magazine publishing at Hearst Communications in New York City. Having spent 14 years moving through various positions, most of which I enjoyed, I was now overseeing the production at one of the company's flagship publications, *Good Housekeeping*. Married and with a four-year-old daughter, I was living in Brooklyn, NY. I wanted to make a change, which involved navigating compartmentalized aspects of my life, my father's world being just one. My path to graduate school included the bringing together of disparate worlds and a few less-than-perfect decisions.

I had applied for and was accepted to a master's program in literature at New York University but ultimately declined to attend because of the cost. I instead enrolled in a master's program in English at Brooklyn College while working at Hearst. Throughout much of the 1990s, I began a long slog of taking classes at night, often selected based on the times they were offered rather than for their focus. While some were wonderful, others were less engaging.

In 1998, I found myself teaching at two schools. I took on a teaching gig in New York University's publishing program. A supervisor at Hearst had been invited to teach a few classes on manufacturing and asked me to join him. We wore suits and ties, prepared PowerPoint presentations, and shared with students various publishing artifacts that illustrated offset and rotogravure printing. I liked teaching—preparing materials and engaging with students.

However, teaching a writing class at Brooklyn College revealed to me that there was a distinct academic field that studied writing that I thought I might call home. One of my earliest assignments was to teach a class for students who had failed the school's writing assessment test. The era of open admissions had ended, and my job was to prepare students to take a 50-minute writing test at the end of the semester—they would need to transfer to a community college if they failed.

I wondered why the college had assigned me to teach this course, as I had limited experience with teaching and no experience with teaching writing, and the stakes seemed so high. I remember telling my advisor about my teaching assignment: "No one wants to teach that course," he said. Some faculty in literature saw it as beneath them to teach a remedial course, but that was not at all how I saw it.

My class was composed of students of color, most from the West Indies, who appeared to be older than I was. They were intelligent, and many were frustrated that their academic careers were in jeopardy, and they had to pay for this no-credit remedial course. I cannot say that I followed all the best practices in my field, which I did not even know at the time, but I worked closely with the students, teaching to the test—and to my surprise, they all passed. My teaching mentor noted that this rarely happened, let alone in a class with a new instructor.

I was delighted by this result but also troubled by the way writing was taught and evaluated. The course had a gatekeeping function, and I wanted to learn more

about the relevant history, which led me to apply to graduate school in rhetoric and composition. That was when I first read Rose's (1989) *Lives on the Boundary*. I was captivated by the long journey Rose had taken and the roles that literacy and mentors played. Despite Rose's sharp critique of the educational system, his narrative never loses its connection to a sense of possibility. I was interested in what writing afforded those coming from marginalized spaces.

Eventually I wrote a thesis on socialism in Bernard Shaw's plays, working with Karl Beckson, a Victorianist and an Oscar Wilde scholar. Beckson was demanding, blunt, and sarcastic, but ultimately he endeared himself to me. I trusted him and was delighted when he offered me praise because I knew it was authentic. Following a production of one of Shaw's plays, I met Richard Nickson, editor of the journal *The Independent Shavian*, for which I became a volunteer editor, working on all aspects of the publication including design and layout. In another example of compartmentalization in my life, I fit this in around my work at Hearst and continued it during the first few years of my doctoral program.

Balancing a full-time job that involved working several late nights each month, taking courses at night, editing the *Independent Shavian*, and at some points teaching courses at Brooklyn College and New York University at night or on weekends, I was stretched thin. It was hectic, and yet I was driven to get somewhere through my efforts, even if I still needed to figure out exactly what and where that place was.

My graduate school application process started with two years of failure; I needed help to understand how to apply effectively, and though my MA grades were all right, they were not the highest. After talking to the graduate director at the CUNY Graduate Center, I decided to take two courses as a nonmatriculated student, fortunately with leading scholars in the field: Ira Shor and Sondra Perl. They encouraged me to apply widely to graduate schools, which would mean potentially leaving New York State. Shor read my statement, helping me see that I did not understand the personal statement genre; I also found myself studying for the GRE general test and the literature test, which schools often required even though I no longer planned to study literature.

From the 14 schools to which I applied, I received several acceptances and many rejections. One university in Florida wanted me to continue studying Shaw and offered me an extraordinary multiyear fellowship with no teaching requirement, but I declined because my focus was now on rhetoric and composition. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign also accepted me. I remember flying to Illinois with my wife and daughter and finding everyone there kind and supportive. I wondered whether that would continue once I was enrolled, but it did. The program provided me with a model of mentoring and support that I strive to emulate as a professor.

Money was an ongoing issue. My wife and I left our well-paying jobs and began a new life with me receiving a stipend of $19,000 a year and my wife searching for a job. My mother was living in Brooklyn and was to some extent financially

dependent on me, and within a few years she developed dementia, and I needed to help her move to a senior living home and then to an assisted living facility in Illinois. Also, I was the victim of a hit-and-run accident that led to memory loss and a lengthy hospital stay.

Despite these challenges, I always thought I had made the right decision. Working with extraordinary faculty members in Illinois—many of whom remain dear friends today—and taking graduate classes felt, despite the financial struggle, like a gift.

Conclusion

My work always centered on literacy: *What can literacy do to help individuals build a better life?* In many ways, my life has benefited from literacy. That said, I now feel that much of the real value came from mentors who helped me find pathways to a better life—in my case, an academic life—and who helped me see how I could blur boundaries and reduce the compartmentalization in my life.

Most of us like to think about how we are different, how our graduate student and faculty pathways are unique. And, of course, to some extent they are. Yet there are shared experiences, too, that make it easy to label someone as a "typical" faculty or graduate student. I think compartmentalization can lead to this surface-level reading of lives in the academy. I often find myself thinking about the compartments I create through how I read myself and others.

Some readers may argue that some compartmentalization is necessary; I agree, and yet the richness of an academic life is much more complicated than it is typically portrayed as being. I am not arguing for eliminating all compartmentalization. Instead, we need to recognize that we have choices and that movement through the academy requires that we make decisions about how we incorporate our individual lives into our work. Doing so can benefit the individual and dispel the myths that inform movement through the academy.

I recall a conversation I had with a new graduate student who told me he thought he might be the oldest student in his cohort. He told me about many of his past jobs, including one in construction, and I was reminded of how I had felt when I started graduate school as an older student and my own brief stint as a construction worker and shared these thoughts with him. Such sharing is valuable in helping reveal the richness of individuals' experiences and how our travels across time and place matter. Paying attention on this level can lead to a more inclusive and less compartmentalized academy.

When I talk to graduate students now, I listen carefully to their concerns. I admire their persistence in wanting to make the field to more democratic and inclusive and appreciate how their pathways are distinct in terms of both the historical moment and their own histories. In *Living Rhetoric and Composition*, renowned scholar Edward P. J. Corbett (1998) reflects on one of his articles in *College Composition and Communication*, in which he discusses "how much better

trained the younger teachers are today" (p. 5). Corbett's observation underscores how professionalization has changed over time. Despite his having received much acclaim as well as the field's exemplar award, Corbett writes that he felt like a fraud when he compared his education in the field with the rich training future generations would receive.

In moving through the academy, we can recognize the shifts undergone and the pathways taken and debunk the myths—literacy myths (Graff, 1979), yes, but also the myths that shape our narratives about graduate school enculturation and life in the academy. I still have compartmentalization in my life, as we all do, and yet I believe it is important to consider where it comes from and how it might be shaped by dominant narratives of individuals moving through the world.

We need to resist giving in to the fears that lead many of us to hide aspects of our lives that do not fit neatly into the tropes about what it means to enter the academy and our field. Resisting this fear is especially important for the many of us who have pursued the academic life from places and situations that may at least initially appear atypical. By making our histories visible, we gain the potential for a greater awareness of the value of diverse pathways to the same destination.

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