

Jennifer Sinor

CRAFTING VOICE

Two weeks ago, I lost my voice. When I opened my mouth, nothing came out, no words, no whisper. I had been sick, so I didn't worry my inability to speak would be permanent. Instead, I stuffed a notebook in my coat pocket and set off to meet the morning. For the next four days I played charades with the world, gesturing for my coffee, pointing to the peas I wanted my son to eat, writing long notes on the white board in hopes my students would understand the glory of the novel before us. Each day I grew more depressed, shrank into myself. What had first been a novelty, even a vacation of sorts from parenting and teaching, started to stifle. Without a voice, I was cut off from everything. Conversations happened all around me while I scrawled notes to make points no longer relevant. I couldn't even call the dentist to complain about the bill.

On the second afternoon, my four-year-old son, not yet a reader, burst into tears when he was unable to decipher my gesture for "get dressed."

"Just use your regular voice, Mama," he cried. "Talk regular."

I couldn't even explain to him why that was impossible.

Voice, I tell my students, is one of the most vital yet ephemeral qualities of writing. We can't point to it on the page, pin it down, say that here, right here, in the way this sentence runs or in this choice of words or in this use of detail, we have voice. Rather, we note its absence by the distance we feel from the writer, from the subject, or from the words on the page; we feel cut off.

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Not unlike the genre itself, voice in creative nonfiction is best defined by what it is not. Voice is not point of view, although the two are related. When we ask about a writer's voice, we aren't asking about the vantage from which a story is narrated—first or second or third person. We might be asking about the intimacy of that point of view, a distinction Dinty W. Moore makes, but voice and point of view aren't interchangeable. Voice is also not tone or the emotional stance of the narrator toward the material: angry, ironic, remote. A chosen tone may help register the voice, but, again, it isn't the same thing. Nor is it style. An essay can have beautiful, lyrical language and syntax and be devoid of voice. Voice isn't about narrative perspective either—Virginia Woolf's "I now/I then" distinction. Because the narrator tells the story from different perspectives—as a child, then as an adult—doesn't mean the voice changes. The voice remains the same; the perspective switches. Finally, the voice of a piece does not align neatly with the voice of the narrator or a character in the essay. Voice doesn't inhabit a pronoun. The speaking "I" in a memoir or essay doesn't provide the voice, or at least not entirely. When we talk about voice in literary nonfiction, we mean the voice of the writer, the one crafting the narrator, the sentences, the deeper subject. And you can't point to a paragraph or a detail or a line of dialogue and say, there, that is the writer's voice. It exists behind the writing, infusing the prose. In writing flash nonfiction, where every element of craft must be lean and taut, the writer's voice is present from word one.

Thankfully, while voice may be seemingly impossible to point to on the page it is not impossible to practice. Like all other aspects of writing, voice is a made thing. You don't "find" your voice; you make it. While the intimacy of a chosen point of view or an author's style or tone is important to voice, the real work of creating strong voice is work that takes place off the page. It requires focusing on two aspects of writing: internalization of subject and vulnerability in approach.

Knowing Your Subject

When we say a piece has a strong voice, what we are really saying is that the writer fully understands her subject. Not cerebrally, but internally, even bodily. It is not enough to research your past—if you are writing

memoir—or your subject—if you are writing research-based literary nonfiction. Well-researched pieces are often devoid of voice. Think of a textbook. To fully understand a subject means to let that subject inhabit you, to live with it, sleep with it, fully know it not in terms of fact but in terms of complication. Only when you fully understand a subject—why your parent's divorce hurt so much when you were 12 or the chemical process of radioactive decay—does that confidence translate to voice on the page.

Look at Brian Doyle's "Leap," given as an example essay after the exercise below. When initially approached about writing a piece in response to 9/11, Doyle replied to the magazine editor, "No, there is nothing to write. The only thing to say is nothing. Bow your head in prayer and pray whatever prayers you pray. There is nothing to say." He felt the subject was not his own. At least not initially. But the events of 9/11 would not leave him, and he began to realize that as a writer the only way he could assemble a life post 9/11 was through meeting the event on the page.

In less than 600 words he tackles one of the greatest tragedies in U.S. history. Three thousand people died. Our way of reckoning time and place forever altered by one morning. What can Doyle say in response? He does not live in New York, and was, like most of us, hundreds of miles away. How would he have begun?

With falling bodies, I imagine, with the newspaper accounts of blood-filled air. I imagine those bodies kept him awake, that they stalked his sleep. I imagine he couldn't put the bodies down, that he dragged them to the shower in the morning, to work, and home again, that the bodies piled behind his students when he conferenced with them, that he tucked the bodies into bed at night with his children. One morning, though, he must have realized he wasn't sure where his body ended and theirs began. They inhabited one another. I imagine it was at that point he began the piece. But not with writing, or at least not only with writing. He finds his way into the story not by retelling an event we saw repeated again and again on our televisions, but by going to the library, to the archives, learning what he could of the people who leapt to their deaths. He researches the science of falling bodies, the names of the dead. He reads first-person accounts, perhaps interviews witnesses, maybe stands in the middle of New York

and looks up into an empty sky. He puts his body in motion to understand theirs. And the result of that work—physical work, leg work, as well as reflective work—is an essay that draws us in at the first word and never lets us go. His voice is quiet and confident, as well as urgent and pained, but most importantly it's there. The writer is there, even though the first person initially is not. The writer is behind the prose, leading us through his understanding of the disaster. It is because he has so deeply explored his subject—literally in primary and secondary source material, as well as reflectively in the way he has carried the piece with him through the days—that we recognize an author, one with authority over what he writes. We hear him speaking to us, know he embodies each of the 600 words.

Vulnerability

Doyle's actual body, his "I," does not appear until late in the piece, but it is at that moment that he names his stake in this story, brings forth the sleep-shattered "I." In revealing his investment in the subject, his humanity, we see the second element necessary for crafting voice: the writer's vulnerability. At the moment the "I" enters, the prose changes, signifying the shift in responsibility for the story. He moves from a newspaper accounting of the event—simple sentences pierced by facts, quote-filled lines reporting what witnesses saw—and moves into the lyric, a space defined by emotion rather than reason, a space defined by association rather than chronology, where his sentences tumble across one another, falling like so many bodies down the page, only to topple into a heap at the end, leaving his body holding onto their bodies "against horror and loss and death."

The form of his piece, the way he strings his sentences together, his diction, his images all conspire to name his stake in the story: the human capacity for love. And we join with him in his whispered prayer, unable to ever see the events of that day in the same way again. We now hold those bodies in our own because Doyle was first unable to lay them aside. And because we know that a real body, a person whose humanity replicates our own, is writing, is behind these words on the page, we listen. We hear the writer's voice—not some projection, some flimsy prop—but a person who has been changed by his subject, embodies his subject, just the way his voice embodies the prose, calling us from our sleep.

Time and Practice

Voice takes time. You cannot internalize your subject or name your stake in a story quickly. You must live with your subject, learn its movements, its manners. And voice comes forth through revision, each draft coming closer to what you really want to say. The easiest way to understand voice is to watch it evolve over several drafts—either of your own work or another's. And as Doyle's essay so brilliantly captures, when the voice of an essay is vibrant and strong, the words cannot remain unheard.