

A Storyteller's Story

Frank O Smith

There was a time when I was a young boy when I thought I might go into the ministry when I grew up. But I lost my faith at age ten, and it was a very long journey to find it again. In the interlude, I went on to do other things, eventually deciding I wanted to be a writer. As is often the case with the ministry, writing can be calling. I believe it has been for me.

I'm a writer, a maker and teller of stories. The long path of words that led me here stretches back forty years and more. In that time, writing has become deeply ingrained in who I am and how I respond to life – both creatively and contemplatively. So how did I get here?

Let me tell you a story.

I was the fourth of five children. We assumed as many kids do that our family was ordinary. My father worked, my mother stayed home. He was a high school principal and my mother dabbled at writing and painting. My parents were well regarded in the small California town where I grew up. Dinner was served at 6 – and you'd better be there. Same for breakfast and lunch. Meals were pivotal to the small civilization of our family. Conversation was engaging and free flowing. No subject was off limits.

With one exception: that my mother was dying.

I remember the July heat the day my father announced this. There was an empty chair at the table where my mother usually sat, as she'd been taken away

again by ambulance in the middle of the night. He told us over lunch. Her doctor, a family friend, thought it best we be told. None of the five of us expected it, though she'd been in slowly declining health for years. She'd go to the hospital, get better, then come home. Then get sick, disappear, and come home again. It was routine. Ordinary. My father said when she came home this time we should do everything we could to avoid upsetting her. She wouldn't die immediately, but likely within the year.

I was ten. The news was like a bomb exploding, blowing each of us from the table, from the room, from the house. It ripped the fabric of our family forever.

We waited. No one spoke of it. Not once. Ever. The waiting in silence split me in two: I presented one face to the world, a mask of the old me. But the other me was remote and distant, constantly observing the world, trying to detect danger latent in every encounter while we all waited. My mother didn't die that year. Or the next, or the next. She died when I was fifteen. I felt no grief. I didn't feel anything – except a hollow relief that the waiting was over.

I started writing after graduating from high school, recording my silent observations. Reading that collection of words now is painful – not for what I said but for what I didn't say. The writing is self-absorbed and cryptic at once. I wrote in a secret emotional code to prevent

probing eyes from seeing behind the mask. All these years later I can barely decipher the code myself.

I had a nervous breakdown at twenty-one. Its roots were multi-threaded, including the stress of going to college full time and working full time in a state hospital for the criminally insane. In truth, my psychotic break was unstitched by all the pot I was smoking, particularly a virulent strain someone had given me the night before I unraveled.

Mostly, however, it was because I could no longer maintain the mask I'd been hiding behind. I remember going in to work, hallucinatory flashes firing like

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lightning, being terrified the guards at the security gate weren't going to let me out again. I got through the shift by hiding in the ward office bathroom. I stared in the mirror watching as a stranger wept uncontrollably. The next day, little better, I went to work but got only as far as the security gate. I couldn't go in. I turned and went to HR and quit. They wanted notice. I told them "here it is" and left.

I inhabited a dark shadowy world all that summer. I virtually stopped speaking. I got a job plowing immense fields on a wheat ranch where there wasn't a need to talk to anybody. Each morning I started at the edge of a new field and spent the day going round and round, ever inward toward the center as though into the eye of a whirlwind. Hour after hour, day after day, week after week. Until I found myself standing on the back of the big Caterpillar tractor that pulled the massive gang plow, looking down watching the heavy metal

disks cut and turn the dry sod as the Cat rumbled forward on its own. I was mesmerized by the hissing of the blades scything through the earth. I was comforted in my torment knowing no one would ever know what happened. I lifted a foot to make that liberating step. I was about to let go of the tractor seat when a voice in my head spoke: *Don't!* I stepped back. The voice offered me a proposition: You can have your voice back – *if* – you tell your story.

I told no one anything for more than a month. I was fearful I would be locked up in a hospital. I was no longer perched perilously on the edge, but I wasn't far from it. Out of long habit, I kept my silence.

I started at the university in September, still fragile, unsure that I should even be in school, but the campus in the redwoods at UC Santa Cruz was a soothing balm. I heard about a program where students could spend an academic quarter living on a small, isolated Sea Island off the coast of South Carolina doing community service. The island used to be a thriving center of Gullah culture at the turn of the century, but was now home to only a score of black families and a handful of whites. I applied and was selected and went in the spring.

I boarded with Miss Francis, an older black woman. I volunteered in the two-teacher school. I cut wood and hoed gardens, hauled groceries from the boat, and patched roofs. I passed the days in the company of the island people who fed me lavishly for my labors, and let me sit with them on their porches in the early evenings listening to their stories and the occasional mournful cry of a hermit thrush somewhere deep in the swamp. My time with them was a healing. They welcomed me and judged me not. Paradoxically, the program had been created in part to nurture non-judgment in students, to encourage more tolerance and well-intended curiosity about people

who appear on the surface to be so very different, whose life circumstances might indeed be different, but whose dreams and desires are very much the same.

I returned to the university the next fall to finish a major in sociology. My senior thesis was entitled "An Island in Time." It was a social history of the island people, from the elderly who remembered the island as it once had been, to the adults who struggled with the ruined, impoverished island economy, to the young who left after graduating from eighth grade to go to high school on the mainland, most never to return again.

After I graduated from the university, I went back to the island to teach. This time I boarded for a year with Plummy and Agnes, an elderly black couple who richly shared their lives with me. I cherished our time together – while also coming to the realization that I was not meant to be a teacher. What I wanted to be was a writer.

I went about learning to write the only way I knew how: freestyle. I did hackwork and free-lanced. I began writing features for local and regional magazines. I wrote about the life of a monk in a Trappist monastery. I wrote about civil rights leader Julian Bond, the first black legislator since Reconstruction to serve in the Georgia legislature. I wrote about walking across Georgia following the trail of one of America's first naturalists; and about crossing the continent by freight train in search of the American hobo.

But what I dearly yearned to write was fiction. I wanted to tell stories about loss and grief, about being lost; and about forgiveness and redemption.

I got married and started a family. Despite finally beginning to catch breaks with national magazines, freelancing was still a precarious lifestyle, insufficient to supporting a family. I took a marketing job at a software company and cried on my way to work the first day. In truth, it proved one of the smartest creative moves I ever made. With a regular

income, I was finally able to seriously start writing fiction. I got up every morning at four and wrote my stories until I left for the office at 8:30. I was very good at my day job, eventually managing to negotiate a contract to work half time from home while being paid twice as much.

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We moved to Maine to raise our kids. I continued to do my "money writing" and my fiction. I secured an agent. I got rave rejections. Twice I came close to getting published with two different manuscripts. In the end both were rejected.

The endless rejections year after year wore me down, so much so that I stopped writing. Characters that I abandoned in half-finished stories must not have gotten the memo, for they continued visit me in my dreams and in waking thoughts. They were persistent, in fact insistent that I answer for my behavior. Fair or not, like it not, writing unmistakably had become my passion. So I started writing again.

During the fallow years I had began to meditate. It was first thing I did every morning, before getting swept up by my day. Meditating deepened my spiritual curiosity. I read widely about many wisdom traditions, but was drawn especially to Taoism. Its central tenet greatly appealed to me, that everything of this world is impermanent; therefore it is wise to remain with the Tao as it flows and changes. To do so, you must free yourself of attachments – especially feelings of regret and anger for what was, and dreams and fears for what might be. As I continued to meditate and write, I

began to appreciate that writing could be dharma – a spiritual practice for learning how to “let go and be.”

I wrote... and I wrote. I submitted one of my novels to be considered for a prestigious literary prize. Though I was honored it was selected as a finalist, it didn't win the coveted publishing contract. The operative word here is 'coveted.' Lessons come in many guises. The quality of our existence is often only a matter of attitude. Here was an opportunity to let go and be.

I kept writing. I began to teach writing. And to work as a writing coach. I also began to ghost write books: business books, a memoir, a children's book that I co-ghosted with my wife. All the while I continued to write my own stories.

I wrote a novel about three friends swearing an oath of friendship forever the summer they're thirteen, drawn to each other because each has suffered a

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grievous loss. It's a story about friendship and loyalty and the vagaries of time that challenge the best of intentions. I wrote a novel about a lost, heretical Gnostic Gospel banned by the early church because it was written by Mary Magdalene and told of a Jesus and his teachings antithetical to the authority of bishops and archbishops.

I wrote a novel about a kid who grows up in foster homes and is plagued by unwanted psychic abilities that made him feel possessed. As a young man he is falsely accused of murder for telling the police where to find the body of a missing child. In prison, he comes under the protection of a powerful Chinese

godfather who once ruled Chinatown in San Francisco. Tempered and mellowed by prison, the old man instructs the protagonist in Taoism; and teaches him how to center in his body with Tai Chi; and in his heart through meditation. Eventually exonerated and freed, the protagonist travels to read the “unseen,” helping solve crimes against the innocent, and find children who are lost and missing.

A university press in Georgia showed interest in BOOK OF LIGHT, my story about a lost Gnostic text attributed to Mary Magdalene. The publisher, a former religious scholar, kept the manuscript for months. And months. I finally gave him a deadline, to which I received teasing emails asking for more patience.

Finally after more than a year, I received a short email from the man. He exclaimed how beautifully written and compelling the book was, how he couldn't remember a story that had so challenged his thinking on theology. Unfortunately, however, the press had to pass on publishing it. “Regrettably,” he wrote, “we only publish Southern literary fiction.”

Disappointed? Certainly. It seemed the most diabolical twist in the long path of words that had carried me such a great distance. It seemed purposefully cruel, almost pernicious.

I pondered it. What was the lesson? Again, let go and be. But I saw, too, that I needed to take a new leap. This time not into darkness, but into a new kind of light. I needed to embrace the idea that had been gestating for a good while, the idea of starting my own small literary press to publish my own stories. The new technology and print mediums that had become the bane of traditional publishing were also great democratizers, leveling the field that was once tightly gated.

DREAM SINGER was the story that was a finalist for the prestigious Bellwether Prize, given “to support a literature of social change.” The prize was created and

championed by best-selling novelist Barbara Kingsolver.

DREAM SINGER is the story of a Modoc, Native-American elder who lives in isolation in the mountains of Montana in the summer, then rides freight trains south to winter in the Feather River Canyon in California. Identified when he

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was a boy to have the power to see what is to come through dreams, he severed his connection to that power when, as a young man, he used it selfishly for his own gain. It was an act that caused him to become estranged from his family, from his Modoc tribal heritage, and even from himself.

When his path to the Feather River crosses that of a runaway boy from Seattle who witnessed a double murder in a Portland rail yard, the power begins to return. It glimmers as he reluctantly takes the boy under his wing to keep him safe; then grows stronger as he uses it to help guide the boy safely home as the serial

killer pursues them. In the end, it is a power that saves them both. The story is, at heart, one of forgiveness and redemption.

I am in the process now of establishing a small, independent literary press to publish DREAM SINGER. Artisan Island Press will publish DREAM SINGER later this year.

Which brings us back to the question: How did I get here?

By following a path of words, going where they led. That path enabled me to find and reclaim my voice, and finally to tell my stories – all of which have a piece of my own story within them.

The long-ago voice that admonished me *don't* simultaneously beckoned me forward. *Don't* leave before your story is over – for you always have everything you need to make your story turn toward the light.

I got here, to this very moment standing before you, by grace . . . and the way of the Tao.

Being here is a gift.
And I am grateful.
