Digging Deeper:
Invite Students to Search for Meaning in Their Experiences

By Liz Prather

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One of the texts I use in my high school writing classes is Vivian Gornick's *The Situation and The Story*. Gornick's premise is that all literature has a situation and a story. "The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say" (2002, 13). In my class, we refer to the situation as **the Little S** and the emotional experience as **the Big S**. My students don't have too much trouble chronicling the Little S, but the second essential, the meaning making, is troublesome.

Several years ago, my student Griffin and I had a conference about an essay he'd written about a hunting trip he'd taken with his uncle. On the first night, he heard something scratching at the cabin window. "Maybe it was a branch in the wind," he wrote. The second night, the same thing happened. He thought nothing of it. On the third night, their dog started barking at the door. Griffin's uncle grabbed his gun, ran outside, and came face-to-face with a tall figure with the face of a man and the shaggy body of an animal.

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"Wow," I said. "That's intense. You handle the telling of that story well. So what's this story about? What's the Big S?"

Griffin shrugged his shoulders. "It's just a creepy story."

"It's definitely creepy."

I tried a new angle, explaining that readers read to find some insight into the human experience. "What truth emerges from this story? Is it about the mystery of fear? Our illusion of safety? Family dynamics?"

Griffin chewed a thumbnail and shrugged again. "Nope. That's really all it is, just a creepy story."

I looked at the clock. The bell was about to ring. I let the creepy story stand.

That night I told my husband this story, specifically how frustrated I was by my inability to help kids get below the surface.

"Do all stories have to have depth?" he asked.

This gave me pause.

Yes, I decided, all good stories do. The ones that stay with you. The writer must, according to Gornick, "convince the reader they have some wisdom, and are writing as honestly as possible to arrive at what they know" (2002, 14).

"Your students might not know what that meaning is yet," my husband said. "They may think you're asking them to fake it."

This was a watershed moment for me. What if my students had interpreted my request to uncover meaning as asking them to lie? Maybe they were manufacturing significance to please me, not because they'd arrived at a personal revelation.

Looking back over my career as a teacher, exchanges like that with Griffin had happened numerous times. "More details," I urged, when I meant "more meaning." I thought asking Griffin to search for meaning was asking him to give his experience weight and dignity. But to Griffin, I was asking him to spin the story in a way that didn't match his interpretation.

Interestingly, *art* comes from the same word from which we get *artifice* and *artificial*. What if students distrusted this imposition on moments of their past because they didn't know yet if the moment was momentous or not? And if they recognized it as noteworthy, what did that moment really mean? They saw my urging as a request for fakery or "to be all deep and sh#t," an actual quote from one of my students.

These days I ask my students to approach writing a little differently. I ask them to list twenty insights they've had about life. I ask them to state each truism in a single sentence, if they can. Students generate a personal list in their writing notebook, and I generate my list on the board. (Example: Nothing good ever lasts, but nothing bad ever lasts either.) Then we write each maxim on an individual three-by-five-inch index card, and on the back of that card, we tell the story or stories that taught us this truth.

The critical difference of this approach is I'm not asking them to tell a story, then tack a maxim on the end of it; I'm asking them to start with the wisdom they've gained over their fourteen, fifteen,

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sixteen years and support that insight with the stories that delivered it. In this way, the process seems more organic and sincere.

And along the way, I tell them Griffin's story. We have a conversation about how interpretation is an essential part of writing, even if it might feel fake at first. And how the meaning they discover might be different if someone else remembered the same story. And how the truth they see *this* time might be different the next time they tell the same story. And how when we impose meaning on a story, the story subtly changes. And how the details we select, consciously or unconsciously, support our interpretation, independent of whether or not it is capital *T* Truth.

Whatever that is.

Work Cited

Gornick, Vivian. 2002. *The Situation and The Story*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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