

The Thing About Dorothy
Patrick Sebastian: Semantikon Retrospective Essay

In the summer of 1975 our family station wagon was on a seemingly endless stretch of Oklahoma highway that promised a campground eventually where we would set up and settle down but that promise seemed further somehow the further we drove and, of course, I had to pee. That is, I did just have to pee when I said so the first several times, now what I had to do was more akin to what happens when you release a can of shaken soda, so I tried not to move, while pressing my pelvis and tightening my belly and praying to “please God, don’t let me pee my pants in the car.” My dad, based on absolutely no other interaction with me my first nine years of my life, suggested again that we could “just pull over by the side of the road. For God’s sake, it’s alright! No one is going to see you” Now, I was even more unlikely to pee standing by the side of the road than I was to go play outside on a Sunday in my church clothes, but the pressure was on my bladder and my brain and I stifled tiny moans of restraint when my father raised the stakes,

“Well, young man, you pee your pants in this car and you’re gonna wish you had gone by the side of the road because you won’t be able to sit down for a week! Clear?”

So, okay, to recap: if I pee my pants I get the shit beat out of me. That’s great, total evacuation parenting.

“Jim,” my mom’s voice, scolding at first, then lifting, as she said,

“Jim, a house.”

And there it was and I believed even more in Bible Jesus, that could not only turn water into wine, but also, and personally more meaningful to me, He could also provide a decent place for a prissy little boy to pee.

We drive up the incline to the house.

I gingerly ease out of the car and head up the driveway, taking each step as though I might somehow slosh and spill. Approaching I see a woman who I think, despite her station and location, thinks she’s a movie star, oh not a real movie star; even she only thinks she’s Shelly Winters, but nevertheless, she’s stretched out, cornfed, on a lawn chair, wearing a bikini, holding a tin foil sort of visor and wearing dark sunglasses, both of which she lowers when I, dry-mouthed and bladder-full, nervously ask,

“Excuse me, ma’am, could I please use your bathroom, please?”

And she looks directly, coolly at me, like I was her husband’s divorce lawyer and not a little boy just too proper to go pee outside and she read the line as though she’d practiced it for my arrival, as though she’d been saving it for the first person to intrude on her sunbathing, she said,

“Now. Just WHO. Do you think you are?!”

My breath caught in my throat and I tried to swallow as I turned and moved as quickly as I dared back to the car, my face burning with inexplicable shame.

“Now. Just WHO. Do you think you are?”, she had asked, for some reason meaning to make me feel badly. It’s a damn good question. Don’t misunderstand, of course, she was an awful bitch, but the moment is clearly unforgettable, not only because of her bad B-movie actress impression but because it’s a good question.

Who Do you think you are?

Who do I think I am?

Who am I, as opposed to who I've been told I am?

When you tell your story, you frame your story. You reframe it simply in its telling without changing a thing. Even if the facts or circumstances in the story we share are unpleasant or painful, as is often the case in my own, even in simply telling the story we become a witness, rather than singularly a victim or actor.

The stories in "Growing Up Jimmy: Tales of Bible Belt Survival on the Yellow Brick Road" and the "Dorothy and Snakehandlers" series published on Semantikon are all filled with longing and challenging moments of discovering "just Who I think I am", who I've been told I am, and what rises and remains. A few of those stories, such as, "Rollerball" and "True Confessions of a Music Nerd", I've enjoyed dusting off, editing a bit, and doing readings of them with the pop music cues played that are already written into them for fundraisers as recently as 2013. Audiences seem to connect with the plight of the preteen character I was in these stories, the overt humor, and the soundtrack; music rises, the hope remains. Seventeen years after writing these pieces, I retain a fondness for them, not because I wouldn't edit and tweak this and that, of course, I would, but because of a courage in them that was new for me then and surprises me now looking back at them. That's true. It still surprises me that I could just tell a story in my own voice because I had no frame of reference for having a voice. Having a voice was a foreign concept for the five year-old I was who was so afraid to speak that I was presumed to be a mute or the ten or fifteen year old I was, legs trembling, fire red and switch-welted, crying, exhausted, pleading for the beating to stop. Being granted a voice, being heard, listened to had been almost solely the privilege of, well, someone else; someone assuredly heterosexual, someone with money, someone who might kick back with you at your favorite sports bar for a cold one, which is to say, not me.

I look back at these stories as foundational to finding my voice and Semantikon as the place and people who heard it, believed in it, and gave it a place of safety and freedom.

It was in 2003 that I self-published, "Growing Up Jimmy" and Semantikon invited me to join it's diverse collective of writers and artists. The self-published chapbook of "tales of Bible belt survival on the Yellow Brick Road" sold modestly well with what I had at my disposal which was satisfying, but being published on Semantikon, not only put my work along side the work of talented writers, but would grant these stories and future ones, an exponentially larger, worldwide, in fact, potential audience, which was both a little frightening and very exciting. Feedback was largely positive and I have often, for just a moment, but a very important moment, connected with someone with words on a page, a story from the stage, or text on a screen read by...a cop, yeah, a cop, who then, knowingly shared with me about the abuse he had endured as a child and thanked me. He thanked me. Under what other circumstance would That happen? Let me help. None. The depth of shared humanity of such moments is undeniable. To have risked my voice and to find it was safe to do so was an adventure in growth made possible by Semantikon and it gave me the space and time to build a bit of confidence that would be necessary later when essays such as "Do That To Me One More Time" garnered as pushback and name calling for me, as gratitude.

Not everyone was pleased with my voice but still the stories rose and hope remained and the stories I told are the stories I know – whether about the childhood faith healing of my dog in "Answering The Call" or calling out

the gay “community” for what I perceived as victim-blaming when my friend and local DJ was beaten to death in “Do That To Me One More Time”.

The practice of writing, for me, proves that I have been beaten but not beaten blind or deaf or out of my heart, or completely out of my mind. If there can be language and words and a story, then perhaps, I can manage a story that is manageable and imagine myself stronger than my struggle, bigger than my fear, and even if a happy ending isn’t guaranteed, we can, together, witness these transitions, these times, these moments and in our witnessing we, writer and reader, are mattered into belonging, and that alone, perhaps, makes the work and vulnerability of writing worth it.

The stories I know and tell help move me, and in very fine moments, move you as well, the reader, the listener, a little closer to not just who we think we are but who we really are and what we actually feel and really see, which is, I promise, no matter who you are, a kaleidoscopic witness of experience that defies Kansas dust bowl sepia tones. Because that’s the thing about Dorothy, isn’t it? For all of Dorothy’s outrageous adventures in the technicolor land of Oz, she longed to and eventually did return gladly to a world of desolate black and white, telling her Aunt Em, who you’ll remember left her to fend for herself when the cyclone hit, that “there’s no place like home”. Hmm, I don’t know. I think maybe if Dorothy had the Munchkin nuts of The Lollipop Kids she might have more likely exclaimed that there’s some place a helluva lot better than home, a place of friends, and wonder, and color, and choice, and empowerment, if not absolute safety. There’s a place better than home and that place is belonging.

Belonging is something Semantikon engendered organically through nurturing its writer’s authenticity, creativity, and growth, belonging us to ourselves, our voice, our story, and to the larger world through the power, weight, and breeze of often strenuously chosen words and fearfully shared stories that grow our shared humanity.

Pretemdas Kirtana (Patrick Sebastian)

pdk