

## Daring to See when Your Empathy Dies: A First Step in Reconstruction

By Erika Duncan

I don't remember when I first began to correlate charting shifts in the evocation of empathy with constructing viable narratives, but I suspect that it happened on the icy cold day several months into our Herstory project when I experienced a flooding of impressions without a shape, startlingly similar to the experience with Dorothy that propelled me into looking at the mission of writing for a stranger.

I will never forget how Hazel first burst in on the scene, after calling several weeks in succession to alert us to look for her wheelchair, so that we might help her up the ramp, and then never arriving. For she needed to write a book—she'd described the need more vividly with each call. Nor will I forget the morning, long after we had given up on her, when we first heard what was soon to become the familiar sound of Hazel's metal crutches, clacking on the ice, as she made her way panting, but without ever halting, through the double sets of heavy doors, her face expectant, and her whole being full of words.

Without pausing to take off her wraps, which were whirling all around her as she lowered herself into one of our overstuffed chairs, in a single run-on sentence she was telling us how she had come from a very religious family in which three of nine children died of sickle cell anemia. She was telling us about incest and rape.

I can only recreate with my own run-on sentence the speed with which we learned that because she was the well child in a family where there was so much sickness, the birth defect that would cause the paralysis that would later afflict her, but not until she was a grown woman in her thirties with children of her own, had been missed—how also, since she was the next to the last child, there was no doubt in her father's mind when she got stuck in the birth canal that the doctor must think of the life of the mother who needed to care for so many, even if it meant hacking the child struggling to be born into pieces. But, just as the doctor was going to do whatever he had to, in order to save the mother, the mother had cried out "God Bless," and Hazel emerged from the womb.

Somewhere in the middle of all of this, we learned that three of the four boys who lived into adulthood became preachers, while three of the five women who survived disappointed their religious parents and their brothers by having children out of wedlock or turning to drugs—as Hazel described how even once she had become paralyzed, with no family support, she had continued to raise her own child and

### Experiencing shifts in your attention without fear of being unkind

Do note as you read this, what happens to your attention. Without slowing down and rereading, try to see where your mind stops and what you retain.

In another couple of pages, I will have you join me in juggling it so that each of the pieces will be able to occupy a spot ample enough for the unfolding it deserves.

But for now, merely try to experience it.

### Giving the “bones” of each narrative an equal chance

As teachers, we ask ourselves to be sure to give our students an equal chance. Yet for each of us, certain people hold out such an instantaneous appeal, it is hard to set the standards we maintain for everyone else. When something does go wrong, it is hard to detect it.

If you love language—which of course we all do, if we have chosen to work with writing—you will have to be careful not to give special leeway to those whose words are particularly magical to you. (You will also have to be careful not to turn away from those who have “wooden ears,” but to listen for the stories that are hidden in their hearts.)

From the moment Hazel made her way up the many stairs to our meeting place, I had to watch out not to be seduced by what was stirred in me, by her language, her persona, and of course by the history she told.

Because of my attraction to this woman’s whole way of being—an attraction that never diminished in the five years we worked together—the sudden feeling of distance that came over me when she flooded me with her images was particularly perplexing.

the child of her younger sister who died of sickle cell anemia, managing to send both of the young people through college, telling us how now she was the only one of the six surviving children who was caring for their aging mother, zooming all over the house they had grown up in, making dozens of coconut custard pies for a celebration of the mother’s eightieth birthday.

This whole list, which we received rapid-fire in our first ten minutes together, of course inspired tremendous compassion along with an almost unbounded admiration. As the daughter of a fire-and-brimstone sort of preacher, Hazel had a way of oration that made every thought swell into a crescendo. Hellfire-like exhortations blended into painful stabs and then, without missing a beat, turned into Biblical scenes of bliss, until after a while it was hard to sort one triggering event from another; each one was so powerful and strong. Yet, as I had found with Dorothy, with each new addition, I was becoming increasingly worn out.

Everything that was being told was ordering me to know that I cared, but I found that in another part of me I was warding away the caring. Even with all of the beautiful language and the passion, I was turning the woman in front of me into a stranger, a case history.

### Staying with Yourself as a Listener

As each Stranger/Reader will respond out of her unique history, I had to draw on my past in order to sort out my reactions. As a child very much confused about where my therapist mother’s patients’ stories ended and her own began, I had absorbed early on both the good and the bad of being exposed to people’s very intimate stories.

I had grown up sitting on my mother’s lap, listening to stories about her patients’ recoveries and woes (in a way that of course was a violation of their privacy, but that is a story for another time). In a home where there was a great deal of unhappiness, these became my legends of hope. I was mystified by the fact that my mother, who could heal other people, was so unhappy herself.

As if this might give me a clue, I paid careful attention to the way that she told her own story, as compared to those of the patients. Theirs continued to fascinate me. Was it because they were told with a sympathy she couldn’t muster for herself? Whenever she started to talk about herself, something was always just a little bit off, as if I were listening to a wrong note in music. Especially with the stories that should have most made me weep, it was as if a part of her was still

struggling to experience them, so that it was the struggle I witnessed instead of a freely told story I might enter however I chose, which left me feeling battered rather than invited to join in.

As one by one, my mother's stories "died" for me, I kept in a secret, idealized crevice of my mind, my picture of her as the wizard whose compassion could transform even the most boring patient's story into a moving episode. Still, I tried hard to listen with the same compassion she seemed to have when she entered that mysterious cork-lined office, sound-proofed so I could only know vicariously what went on inside.



Hazel had been right in the middle of giving the goriest imaginable description of her birth when I stopped her. She'd been imitating, in all of her father's fire-and-brimstone glory, the exact inflection of his voice, proclaiming that because of her position in her mother's womb, they had told him that there was no way that both mother and baby could survive. "So with seven children already at home," she'd said, swinging one of her crutches for emphasis, "he'd decided that they had no choice but to dismember this new one."



It was a quite conscious decision I made not to ask why they didn't attempt a Cesarean, nor to probe into her Biblical rendition of the "beginning of the dismemberment with forceps," that scarred her forehead and permanently maimed her spine, "before my mother suddenly cried out 'God Bless,' and I was born!!" For just when I should have been feeling this all most intently, I found myself hurled so far outside what had become a very private nightmare belonging to somebody else, and then for a horrible moment wondering how much was true.



I could see that the birth story had been preserved in Hazel's heart, in exactly the way she had told it. It was her illuminated truth, so to speak, made up of her own special mixture of second-hand stories: myths and accurate pictures, so entwined that there would not be a way or a need, ever, to take them apart. My job was to find a way to help her place the memory/birth myth in a moment of Book Time where all of its layers might shine.

### **Creatively using your listening discomfort**

It is this "trying-to-listen" feeling that I want you to tap, when it comes upon you unannounced. This will guide you into alerting your students to those moments when their stories no longer can be freely heard.

My discomfort when freely given listening becomes forced remains as acute as it once was when I was a child. While this used to distress me, I have learned to allow it to come into play as a positive thing, as I work to help others shape their secrets so that they will be desired and cherished, rather than ignored or thrown away.

### **Illuminated truths, boundaries and second-hand stories**

If we accept the fact that memoir is made up of the stories that people tell themselves, our wondering if something is true is a signal that something is amiss in the telling. We are no longer inside the church, looking at the stained glass windows. Rather, we are outside, seeing only dull panes set in lead.

The remedy usually resides in the resolution of boundaries, so that the Listener/Reader will be able to enter the story as the teller is experiencing it, or has experienced it.

### **Solutions that would keep the boundaries clear**

► Take a moment to imagine a scene in which Hazel's mother would be telling the birth story either directly to Hazel (at a variety of possible ages) or to someone else (with Hazel unseen, overhearing). Do you see how such a scene would allow us to know which versions belonged to whom?

► Now take a moment to imagine how a magical realist might have treated this episode. Imagine the birth images first as a vision and then as a dream, perhaps occurring when Hazel herself is getting ready to give birth.

This would create a different sort of boundary, even as it invited us into the phantasm.

“I know how hard it is to stop you, especially at this moment when you are just being born, but I really do feel we must backtrack,” I said.

“Once we as readers have known you a while, we will care profoundly not only about this story but about how it was passed down to you. However, for right now, there is no way a reader can enter into this with the depth of feeling that you deserve.”

### Interrupting in the Middle of Emotion—A Gift or Taboo?

Often whether my students are reading or speaking, I find myself wondering whether it is better to interrupt at a moment when something goes off or to try to return to it later.

In normal discourse it is horrible to interrupt when another person is speaking with passion.

In teaching I have found that if done with respect for the intensity, it can be quite effective to interrupt at the moment when a point becomes most clear.



When it had become clear that Hazel wouldn't stop herself, I decided that I would have no choice but to stop her, so that we could start to figure out a place where just a couple of the many threads she was introducing intersected. But I didn't want to do so until I had found a clue as to what part of the story might bear fruit.



I can best compare this process to making a left turn into rapidly moving traffic. You pause at the intersection, envisioning your maneuver in your mind, and wait for the space that will allow you to move as quickly as you must. Having startled Hazel into momentary silence, by cutting in at the point of escalating emotion, I was able to return to a moment that she quickly bypassed in the course of her rhythmically galloping crescendos and diminuendos.

In that moment where my mind had inopportunistically wandered, somewhere in the swell and the sweep of Hazel's speaking, hidden so subtly I would surely have missed it had I not reminded myself to make a mental bookmark, she had mentioned that her youngest, sickest sister had become pregnant at the age of sixteen, despite the fact that the doctors had said she might die if ever she became pregnant. Hazel had been 22 years old at the time and had just given birth to her own child out of wedlock.

“At first I couldn’t understand why my sister would ever want to have a baby, and I wanted to kill the boy who made her pregnant,” she had said so quickly before jumping to the next collection of facts.

Now I drew out my mental bookmark.

“There would be ways of making that birth story your opening page, which would be quite dramatic,” I said, “but now, just for the sake of playing with structure—and to give us as listeners a rest for a while—might you slow down in order to play-act that moment when you first learn that your sister is pregnant?”

I explained that I personally adored her way of placing layer on top of layer, but that even with such a technique we needed to have one main story to become a container for the rest. Once she’d tried a few possible containers for size, she’d be able to choose the one that best suited the story she wanted to tell.

Already Hazel’s speech had slowed down as she said: “I began to realize that my sister really did want to be a mother and that in some ways she was wiser than I was. I had been very much alone when I had my baby just a few months earlier. For, as the well one, it was assumed that when I was sent off to college I would succeed. When I came home sick and pregnant, no one wanted me. Now here was my baby sister, the sick one, the apple of everybody’s eye, doing the very same thing. I was terrified to think what would happen to her. But I could tell how much she wanted to create life.”

Even if we had missed her words (which we couldn’t, for she was speaking more slowly even than before), we would have known from her manner that this was the place where her story should start.

While the other students waxed eloquent about how moved they were and how they knew that this was where she had to begin, I explained that beginning in a place such as this would give her the chance to go backward and forward, and yet be spinning her tale from an immediate enough vantage point so that the stranger would have no choice but to feel empathy. I let the group share their musings for a while on why the outlines of this particular situation propelled us immediately into concern yet simultaneously gave us enough time to know the characters, so that the caring would be cumulative instead of transitory.

“I’ll call the first chapter ‘The Promise,’” Hazel was able to say, even on that first day. “For when my sister finally dared to talk about what would happen if she died, she made me promise that I would raise her baby for her. And that was the hardest part for me, because I was so unsure of myself as a mother, even with my own child.”

### Mental bookmarks

I want you to note how many times, when you are in the middle of listening, you find yourself making mental bookmarks to return to at a later time.

In the moment of making a mental bookmark, dare yourself to remember as much as you possibly can.

This will prove very valuable when you start to work with text read aloud, when you will be unable to interrupt.

Many of us are afraid that if we do such thinking while another person is pouring her heart out, we are not as caringly engaged as we should be.

In reality the opposite is true.

### Replaying what is heard in told stories

There is often a lag time between when a writer articulates something clearly out loud and when she is able to convey it with force on the page. Here the function of the other group members was to replay the feelings embodied in the first telling, helping the writer to keep them inside herself while she gathered the technique and courage to give them written voice.



### Containers and springboards

As we further explore structure, we will be talking about how to use the image of containers and springboards in order to build scaffolding strong enough to support the story that each new writer wishes to tell.

The advantage of such terminology is that it is accessible to those without any sort of literary background, even while it is intriguing to those who get tripped by relying too much on their own theoretical knowledge.

There is a nuts and bolts way that everyone can picture one story contained in another.

When this visualization is used specifically—for whatever stories are offered—it becomes a bit like deciding what will be the house and then how to move the furniture inside it.

It becomes remarkably easy for students to try out possibilities—to say, “Well if this is the container and this the contained, the picture will look something like this . . .”

Once the pictures are visualized (working aloud with the group), it is both satisfying and calming for the student to make a choice.

I think of the way we go about rearranging furniture, whenever a new piece is added—partly for efficiency, but finally following our own taste. So too, once the group has mapped the possibilities, the final decisions will be up to the writers.

As with final decisions about furniture, the student will have to be able to say to herself, “I can live with this arrangement. This house will be sturdy enough to hold all of the pieces that I’d like to put inside it.”

### Keep your Role as Moderator of Structure, Not Content

As I’ve mentioned before, although it would be unreal to stop the inevitable book-related questions that come up when group members are actively engaged, I tend to ward off questions that jump beyond the facts that the speaker has chosen to divulge.

In this case, it would have been unnatural for the other students to wait for the story to unfold before asking if the sister did die before giving birth.

(Note that the answer to this question leads directly to thinking about planning out structure, which is why I let it pass.)

“No, actually she lived another seven years,” Hazel said slowly, “and in the course of those years she taught me to be a mother, so that when she did die, I was ready to raise her child along with my own.”

Then suddenly her eyes lit up, so that it was hard to tell whether she was grinning from ear to ear or crying, as she said: “Oh now I see it! That will be a perfect ending for my book, the moment when she dies and I know that I can keep my promise.”

As she said this, and as she prepared to embark on the hard work of delaying the telling of what she was so clearly recalling in her own memory—until the reader too would be ready for it—tears flooded her eyes, tears of awe at how whole, suddenly, the memory became, and at her own capacity to articulate it, even as she was feeling it.



As we found both her beginning and ending, despite the content of the tale, we couldn’t help but delight in the fact that it made “a perfect circle.” None of us could have known on that day when the tears flowed that Hazel would write over one thousand pages, calling back with forgiveness her preacher father’s wonderful Victorian church English—with all of the lilt and dramatic old-fashioned vocabulary of that tongue she so loved, the up and down power in every new paragraph, like a sermon—nor that she would teach me some of the more important principles of what it means to people who have been wounded, who have promised their past selves to remain silent, to finally break that promise in order to speak.

I warned her not to expect too much of herself in the first writing.



Would Hazel be one of those people whose writing would only slowly swell to meet her speech? Or would what she said blossom more when

quite privately she was alone with her pad? Would she be one of those dry-eyed writers, who only when she read what she had written to the others, would be surprised by her own tears?



As we worked together, Hazel learned how to inhibit her urge to tell seventeen stories at once, so that her dramatically swelling sentences could be contained within each single scene, building power within increasingly small moments of time. She learned to put aside her (and our) knowing where the story was going, so that with each new chapter she was able to lead us as readers into hoping against hope that the inevitable (the predicted) would not come to pass.

To our amazement and delight, the scene that enfolded between the Book Time Moment of discovering that her sister was pregnant and her sister's asking for the promise occupied one hundred packed pages, all set on a single evening in her sister's bedroom, during which multiple flashbacks and sub-stories unfolded.

So it was that her penchant for nesting story within story came to its own sort of fruition, even as it was given a container to set the main narrative in relief. What she had created, among many other things that would keep her going for years, was a perfect circle.

## Book Time

In the course of this manual, we will be defining all of our invented Herstory terms, as we just did with **There-ness** as opposed to **About-ness**.

**Book Time**, one of my favorites, simply means the time in a narrative when something is taking place.

The power of these invented terms lies in the fact that they are universally applicable, regardless of the subject matter or style at hand, so that professors of literature and absolute beginners are able to play with them together on entirely equal ground.

### ONGOING TOOLS FOR FACILITATORS

#### *In your daily meandering*

When you are sitting around chatting with friends, or exasperatedly listening to what seems like an endless outpouring of details from someone who is really very upset at an outcome, but refuses to tell you what it is:

- ▶ Note the number of possible circles that rise out of any given narrative.
- ▶ Note the various time sequences these circles take in, be they minutes or years or decades.
- ▶ Note how they find their boundaries.
  - ▷ Is it the resolution of a particular problem cited at the very beginning of the tale?
  - ▷ Is it the coming true of a prediction?
  - ▷ Is it the return to an event that was mentioned already in the first sentence, once the narrative of what led up to it has run its full course?
- ▶ As you do so, remember that circles are only one of a multiplicity of possible shapes that a story might take.

#### *And again in your reading*

- ▶ Find examples of circular structures.
- ▶ Note factors such as:
  - ▷ the building of suspense
  - ▷ how you keep a predicted ending in your mind even as you agree to forget it while reading.
- ▶ Note differences in how each writer uses the circular form.

### “There-ness” and “About-ness” as they play out on the page

Another of my favorite Herstory notions is that of “There-ness” as opposed to “About-ness.” Unlike the more common notion of “Show, don’t tell,” true There-ness returns us to any given moment of time, so that we are no longer telling **ABOUT** what occurred, but rather we are reliving it, in that strange collage of sights, sounds, sensations, fragments of remembered speech and meditations on hopes, fears and thoughts.

Arriving at that trance state when you are truly **THERE** in a remembered moment of time is not something we usually do in front of an audience, but that is what creating scenes for a reading stranger is all about.

How gently yet securely you can facilitate the journey **BACK THERE** will have everything to do with how accurately you will pinpoint scenes that will be fertile containers or springboards. It will have everything to do with whether your partnership will generate enough energy to keep your students going for the months and years it often takes to write a sustained work.

One long-term workshop member compared this trying on scenes for size to standing in the middle of a bridge, quietly holding out a hand, while inviting the other to cross backward into the place of her memories.

While the speaker provides the story line, with the coaching of the facilitator, the others in the group provide a kind of drumbeat in their listening responses.

The trick for you as a facilitator is to stand on that bridge with a quiet enough engagement so that, before you lose the story fragment’s shape, you draw an outline around it, first in your mind, while you are actually listening, and then later, out loud, when your speaker has come to a stopping place, so that you will be able to lead the other group members to join in the drumming in a way that will not break the trance.

### Modeling other “houses”

When I am asking you to model a possible scene for someone else, I am not talking about second guessing their content.

Rather, I am asking for something so sim-

### Partnering in Creating Shapes

Note that Hazel came up with the notion of a circle by herself, although it was I, with the other workshop members posing with me as Imaginary Stranger/Readers, who helped locate the kernel that had enough dramatic action to propel the story forward to the spot where the resolution occurred. I had more than enough to do in helping her locate a spot that combined enough intimacy to bring the reader into her world and enough story compressed into a scene, so that she wouldn’t have to leave the emotional realm to offer explanations.

Hazel hadn’t yet taken us **BACK THERE** when she had let drop the sentence or two about her sister becoming pregnant when she knew that to carry a baby might hasten her death, nor when she dropped the sentence that followed explaining how she was so impatient because she had just had a child of her own which had brought about her exile from the family home. I didn’t yet know if she would want to take us back, specifically to **THERE**, when I suggested that she make a scene that would capture her in that time frame that held so much story inside it. What I did know was that with two separate stories, both so potent, her own and her sister’s, they almost couldn’t help but begin to tell themselves, once Hazel situated them in what we would later be calling “Book Time” and let them begin to unfold.

What I did was dare her to try on a possible scene for size. When she did this, she found herself with her sister combing her hair. As she followed my lead to add enough detail to make the scene real to a stranger, the emotions that came to her made it again fully hers, and not ours.

Once she was there, all I had to do was give her permission to add as many Backstitches as she needed to make us the bearers of the memories that would make us feel that we had always lived inside her, even as I dared her to stay tuned into the quality of listening that staying there stirred. Only by keeping her tuned in to our listening, so that it became a support for the next word and the next, was she able to give to each new revelation the complexity and space that it needed.

### Keeping Our Structural Options Alive

As I look back on the structures for books that grew out of Herstory, Hazel’s is still the one of which I am most proud. However, I want to make sure that as facilitators, none of us imposes our own framing on another. Therefore, before we leave Hazel behind, let us imagine build-



ing other “houses” out of the materials contained in her initial outpouring. As an architect will present us with a choice of designs, explaining the advantages and caveats built into each, so too I would like you to join me in seeking alternative ways to construct Hazel’s story, looking at the opportunities and obstacles contained in each one.

Let us imagine that Hazel decided that staying with the sister story was getting too hard and that therefore we had to draw on one of her other threads to find a window to open into her journey.

### EXERCISE THREE

#### If You Were the Puppeteer

Below are four spots that I mentally bookmarked before I got to the sister moment.

I’d like you to choose the one that most attracts you as a possible opening that might work for Hazel, from what you have been able to glean from my second-hand tale. Jot down your reasons for that choice and how you might guide her into imagining an opening scene.

1. Hazel’s birth moment, when because there were so many other children for the mother to care for, the father and doctor decided to dismember the baby with forceps, if necessary, to save the mother’s life.
2. Any moment in time when the brothers became preachers and the sisters began to take drugs.
3. The current moment, where Hazel alone, wheelchair bound, out of the nine sisters and brothers, some living, some dead, has become the caretaker for their eighty-year-old mother.
4. The moment in her late twenties when she finds she cannot stand up, leading to the realization that a birth injury to her spine never treated in childhood will now make her an invalid for the rest of her life.

Offer a way that an opening scene might unfold for all four choices, jotting down the opportunities and obstacles in each.

ple as suggesting that one might be starting in a room where a family member is retelling the birth story, or starting at a moment when one of the preacher brothers is speaking to one of the drug addict sisters.

I am suggesting that you play

- ▶ with the way certain parts of the plot might be revealed through the scene.
- ▶ with the way suspense or concern might be established.

#### Articulating opportunities and obstacles

I see this a bit like contemplating moves in a chess game. One says to oneself, “If I move this knight here, then this will be the consequence. If I advance my bishop, this will be an opportunity to do this, that and the other thing. However, I must be careful to protect my rook and my queen.”

In finding your own way to articulate opportunities and obstacles, take this simple hint for question #3 of this exercise.

**Opportunities:** Starting with the narrator’s present-day situation could allow her to move freely back and forth through her memories in order to put together the pieces of a lifetime. (Be specific as you suggest various ways to put together the pieces you already know from what Hazel has shared.)

**Obstacles:** We begin at a point where the narrator is not already bolstered by the reader’s caring. One facilitator suggested that Hazel might have to be careful not to fall into self-pity if she chose this opening.

**Solutions** will lie in how dramatically the Backstitches into memory are made, without violating the sense of being in the **BOOK TIME PRESENT MOMENT**.

Take your chosen starting point from the list on the previous page and make a convincing argument for why you chose it.

Circle your chosen starting point ① ② ③ ④:

**Your argument for your choice:**

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For each of the starting points repeated below (including the one that you chose), note the opportunities and obstacles.

1. Hazel’s birth moment, when because there were so many other children for the mother to care for, the father and doctor decided to dismember the baby with forceps, if necessary, to save the mother’s life.

**Opportunities:**

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**Obstacles:**

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2. Any moment in time when the brothers became preachers and the sisters began to take drugs.

**Opportunities:**

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**Obstacles:**

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3. The current moment, where Hazel alone, wheelchair bound, out of the nine sisters and brothers, some living, some dead, has become the caretaker for their eighty-year-old mother.

**Opportunities:**

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**Obstacles:**

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4. The moment in Hazel’s late twenties when she finds she cannot stand up, leading to the realization that a birth injury to her spine never treated in childhood will now make her an invalid for the rest of her life.

**Opportunities:**

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**Obstacles:**

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