

A Flash of Memory

By: Anthony Calypso



In January of last year I began a nonfiction-writing residency at a high school, here in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. At an early point during the residency as a teaching artist, I asked my students to explore a memory. What I meant essentially, when I asked for an exploration, when I asked the students to use or employ their memories, a flash of a memory, a blink or spark from the corridors behind their collective eyes, was supposed to be rather simple. Pick or choose a moment within an event and use that moment like a flash card. Put that moment to work as a piece of a scaffold or, as a bone in the structure of a larger narrative.

From the onset of the residency, my goal was to have the students produce a collection of nonfiction pieces for our year-end anthology. The idea was to transform a memory from a fact or group of facts into a central thread in a narrative. I gave them an example, from my own days in high school, from an exceptionally different or perhaps foreign landscape.

My memory card example enabled my students to think of me as one of them. (This is not always bad, but it is rarely great. It can be difficult to get students to work, to write if they are busy laughing at you. So busy.) They laughed at my memory card. One student, a senior, shrieked that I was not over Kim, the girl in my own memory flash. Still.

But after the example the students went to work. And in their lines, in some of the memory flash cards some students wrote, I discovered memories that perhaps could not be put away. Some lines from certain students seemed to indicate that certain memories were still unfolding, still taking shape or still potentially painful to revisit. But not all the lines were like that. For instance, one student, another senior, wrote about going to the store to buy ice cream and forgetting her keys at home. Another student bent the rules and wrote about a memory that he wanted to have. (In this case, I thought that it was best to encourage a young writer because sometimes a rule breaks the imagination.)

The student, the rule-breaker, wrote, "Rachel is a green thumb. [She] is the type of woman you see skipping through fields of clover in the early evening under a faint crimson sky with the last rays of the sun fading against her face and shoulders."

And then a young woman, another student in the same class wrote, "It was my mother who told me my dad had gone away. My mother didn't come out and say, 'Your dad is in jail.' Instead she spoke as if my father had gone on vacation... It made 'sense' to me then, unlike today." Here were these lines, from a memory unfolding again for this particular student in a nonfiction piece that she called "The Visit."

With every story there comes a moment, an unconscious impulse in which a writer chooses a plot point, a big or small movement, by which he or she can examine the life or lives of a character. A memory flash card can be that moment, it can be a number of things, but with this student's example, I began to imagine her card as a part of a whole deck of unfortunate events. A card you might possibly find in any New York City public school environment. Several other students in the class had painfully similar memories to write on their own respective cards. If it was not an incarcerated parent they wrote about, then it was a relative, a close friend. On at least one memory flash card, another student wrote about an experience with a parole officer. It's not that all the cards or memories were about incarceration...it simply was that there were too many that resembled the card from the young woman.

It may be presumptuous to wonder if the young woman had cards that were stacked against her. It's an open-ended question stemming from hot-air balloon language. Perhaps she does not have her own cards yet. In fact, though this is just a thought, I may have to bend the rules a bit and imagine a flash-forward card exercise for non-fiction. Is it possible to use nonfiction as a way to imagine the future? A presumably better future.

A. Steven Calypso is a nonfiction writer and T&W teaching artist. You can read more about him [here](#).

Anthony Calypso's Memory Card Lesson Plan:

Genre(s): Non Fiction

Grades: 9-12

Common Core Learning Standards: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

3(d) Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Workshop Objective: To help students explore the various uses of memory as a way to discover critical moments in a nonfiction scene.

Guiding Questions:

What was the first thing you noticed about the essay as you read along? (Was it the language for example, or a detail?)

Can you name one fact that you heard or read in this essay excerpt?

How do you think nonfiction writers use memory as a way to help build or create scenes in Essays?

What were some of the most memorable sentences in the excerpt of the essay we just read together?

Can anyone share a memorable line from their own Nonfiction essay?

Lesson:

Direct Teach: In class read aloud "[Shooting an Elephant](#)" by [George Orwell](#).

Guided Practice/Modeling:

Memory Card Example:

Kim was the first girl who turned me down. (Just a fact...how do I use that fact along with my memory and my imagination to begin work on a scene in a short essay or short story?)

Memory cards are like flashcards. The memories in these cards can help to spark what I remember about the moment that I want to write about. Please use this example to conjure or pull up your own memories. Write two cards in class. The cards must relate to the essay you want to write for our upcoming anthology.

Example: During that summer, I remember the grass, the minty grass that stretched like a carpet across the courtyard where I lived. There were plenty of kids, like me, thirteen then, almost thirteen and in between the heavy age of eighth-grade and high school. I didn't know then how life was supposed to unfold. We played outside all day in the courtyard and on the grass until the superintendent of the building complex found us. Usually, when the superintendent arrived he would yell at us to get off the grass. It was like hearing a fire alarm. As I ran from him my shirt, a cut off tee-shirt with a Superman emblem, flapped against my bamboo thin body. Though I weighed less than a hundred twenty pounds, you couldn't tell me that I didn't have muscles. And when I ran, I always looked for Kim, the girl, the stranger, a visitor all the way from California. I ran perhaps in the same way that she ran from me when I told her that I liked her but I'm moving ahead of the story.

What I mean here is that during this summer, so many years ago now, there was a young lady named Kim. She was the color of a mulatto cup of coffee and there were streaks of light brown in her hair. She had large black, licorice ink bulbs for eyes and I often climbed, after walking through the forbidden grass, to the edge of her balcony to talk to her.

What are some of the details here in that memory card? How are those details used to transform the memory? (The grass becomes a carpet. The young boy has on a superman tee-shirt flapping against his body as he runs. The young girl Kim has ink bulbs instead of eyes.)

Independent Activity/Group Activity:

In class choose a specific memory, one that relates to your larger essay in progress. Begin working on the memory by choosing just one fact from the memory as a first line. Take that general fact and begin to create a descriptive paragraph around it.