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Making Literature Conference

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### Capacity

Whitney Martin  
*Taylor University*

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## Capacity

In the auditorium of West Chicago Community High School there is a prop room hidden behind the stage. It's not so much a room as it is a claustrophobic alleyway, its walls lined top to bottom with cluttered shelves of haphazardly placed items from decades of shows: the innocent product of well-meaning, teenage hands. The shelves are stocked with random yet perfectly necessary objects, from candelabras, toy swords, floral garlands, and barristers wigs to a number of stale, black paint cans.

It is the beginning of my junior year. Dressed in blacks for run-crew I am both important and invisible. After finishing all the tasks required for today's rehearsal, and to escape the shrieks of the actors onstage rehearsing an Audrey Hepburn thriller, I seek refuge in the prop room, determined to organize the colorful clutter and make an iota of improvement. I scan each shelf, debating whether to start with the wigs or the plastic cutlery painted silver.

I don't know if it's the innate quiet of this room set behind the action or a nostalgia for characters I never played or a sadness knowing I have only one year left, but my intent to organize turns into curious exploration. I fold my arms, walk, and gaze. There is Belle's magic mirror, the captain's hat from *The White Star Line*, Evita's suitcase, the cinder block walls painted in epitaphs of seniors past: endless variations of sappy gratitude in pink, purple, and orange.

I feel a sudden urge to preserve this shrine of storytelling. I hope no object ever leaves. I plop down on the concrete littered with sawdust and paint chips and I type in my iPhone 4s out of impulse:

*The Prop Room: Sitting on this dusty, grimy concrete, my eyes begin to wander. I see random items strewn everywhere, unorganized. In shelves and in stacks, falling towers of money-saving homemade objects. Obvious*

*evidence of years and years of teenage hands. The walls and ceilings, filing bins, fallout shelters, and random cabinets. All graffitied with names. Hundreds of names and phrases. Written with cracked paint, permanent marker, and dusty glitter. These are the legacies of young hearts. The presence of them is overwhelming. I feel as though I'm being watched by all of them, as though I'm intruding in their home. Etching my place in the brick is forbidden. This room is a shrine. A place filled with memories, and the aroma of confused and wandering souls, trying to come back to their signatures. Their reminder of better times. One wrote "remember this name, I'll be famous someday." That '97 graduate is probably making a regular, tedious living, having forgotten her senior year dreams. And me, well, I feel like an intruder. Like I'm stepping into someone else's home. Uninvited, and just as scared and confused as the artists were. I don't belong. And neither did they.*

I look up from my phone, both stunned and satisfied by the tangible proof of this mysterious urge. I notice dust collecting on my black leggings and attempt to rub it off; I have no idea how long I've been in here, but I cannot stay. As I reach for the light switch, I look back over my shoulder. I'll be here again tomorrow, but I feel the need to say goodbye, so I do. The question of this need suspends as I walk toward the shrieks of act three.

I have always been an observer. As a kid, teachers and peers alike perpetually told me to speak up. Life, for the sensitive and contemplative, is a battle of when and how to use our voices; my capacity to attend the minutiae of life competes with my capacity for self-preservation. Both propel me to poetry: the perfect medium to display the greatest amount of feeling without harming anyone but myself, or as Percy Shelley suggests in *A Defence of Poetry*, "the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought." I'm not certain that this is the healthiest way to process life, but I have yet to find another medium that allows me to wrestle as patiently. All I know is that I

cannot stop. The older I get, the more intense the urge becomes to fill my capacity for contemplation and, in turn, to interpret my life.

I often get overwhelmed by the number of moments I record, but as someone who dwells in depth out of an abysmal necessity that I do not know the origin of, I have to keep going. I have to make sense of rejection, to protect memory, to relieve the surplus of feeling and then refine until I see something new. Though it is often isolating, the art of noticing is ultimately freeing; by noticing, reveling, and questioning, I am continuously transformed.

The word *capacity*, in its breadth and multiplicity, refers to both our potentials and our limits, to how much we can hold of something and how long we can hold it, and whether or not we are equipped to hold it.

My twenties have been and continue to be an acknowledgment of both my potential and limited capacities; it has been a time of peacemaking with my boundaries and a reckoning with responsibility as my potentials are revealed. Poetry has made space, in the literal shifting of structure and diction, to explore the layers of my life that reveal new facets of humanity and the Divine and, by taking stock of my own complexities, I expand my capacity for welcoming the complexities of others.

Mary Oliver says that poetry “broadens our capacity for marvel...it makes our world bigger—different, and more...” She illustrates this in her poem “Heavy”:

*Have you noticed?*

*Have you heard*

*the laughter*

*that comes, now and again,  
out of my startled mouth?*

*How I linger  
to admire, admire, admire  
the things of this world  
that are kind, and maybe*

*also troubled—  
roses in the wind,  
the sea geese on the steep waves,  
a love  
to which there is no reply?*

I fear that I'll never organize it all, that this endless capacity will exhaust me forever. But who am I if I do not dwell in and expand my capacities? What use am I to the world if I choose complacency over humanity's endless potential of epiphany?

As a student of creative writing, transforming emotional rambling into art is equal parts pain and relief. In the consistent act of dumping and revising, I have learned that my capacity for feeling, though it is often terrible in its excess, ultimately deepens its sister capacity for *empathy*. My capacity for chronicling experience was born out of reading. As a student of literature, the study of character and craft analysis has prompted me to engage empathetically with the lives of others. I am often Anne Elliot persuading herself into silence for the sake of others while simultaneously I am Emily

Dickinson with a “cleaving in my brain,” so I do the thing that hurts, whether it’s listening to a story or writing it, to feel a momentary sense of release.

As a student editor of *Relief Journal*, I have witnessed how the chronicling of experience as a writer and sitting in the mess as a reader welcomes religious and societal deconstruction; provides comfort and healing; grows our capacities for love through our willingness to learn and unlearn on the page. It is, above all else, a necessary act. Complacency is the enemy and the opposite of poetry. Complacency is the belief that we somehow do not need to expand our capacities, that living means to settle comfortably in thought and deed.

Though poetry cannot obliterate the hatreds that divide our world, it offers a space of community between the reality of hatred and unachievable peace, or as Percy Shelley so eloquently explains of poetry’s nature:

The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others: the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. (844)

Poetry chronicles our lives so that we may not fall silent to the things that stir us; so that we may not only lean into our own lives but inhabit those of others, and therefore become better versions of ourselves and caretakers of the uniqueness of others. One of my favorite poets, Pádraig Ó Tuama, says it best:

We need stories of belonging that move us towards each other, not from each other; ways of being human that open up the possibilities of being alive together; ways of navigating

our differences that deepen our curiosity, that deepen our friendship, that deepen our capacity to disagree, that deepen the argument of being alive. This is what we need. This is what will save us. This is the work of peace. This is the work of imagination.

When he signed my copy of his book at the Festival of Faith and Writing, he humbly nodded, crossed out his name on the copyright page and wrote, *To Whitney—in honor of all that saves us*. What I didn't tell him was that his Irish titles rescued memories of my study-abroad from extinction; that his poetry saved me from abandoning my anger and grief out of shame and made space for me to reckon with it. As the Irish say, *Mbeasa chur ar scéal*: I put respect and value on my own story and, therefore, I have the capacity to put respect and value on the stories of others.

The act of chronicling not only saves us from the narrative of shame and irrelevance that the world whispers over our experiences, but it encourages the chronicles of others: experience is shared, we choose to listen, and our capacities for love increase. Like Ma-Li in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, when I feel “too wide” and “too full of feeling for the small space I [inhabit],” when the colorful clutter of my life overwhelms me with its lack of tidiness, I will choose to embrace the peace that comes with a curious exploration of it all; I will fold my arms, walk, and gaze. I will choose to empty and revise until the shape of my experiences takes new forms and I am ready for the next revelation. I will choose to dwell in my own narrative and the narratives of others to be filled with empathy, to overwhelm the poetic space I inhabit for the sake of oneness. *Mbeasa chur ar scéal*.

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