

Mar 1st, 8:55 AM

Holding onto Holding: An Exploration of Brian Doyle's Storytelling Philosophy in "Leap"

Caleb Hoelscher
Taylor University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pillars.taylor.edu/makingliterature>

Hoelscher, Caleb, "Holding onto Holding: An Exploration of Brian Doyle's Storytelling Philosophy in "Leap"" (2019). *Making Literature Conference*. 2.

<https://pillars.taylor.edu/makingliterature/2019conference/ce3/2>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Campus Events at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Making Literature Conference by an authorized administrator of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.

Caleb Hoelscher

Dr. Dayton

Contemporary Literature

5 November 2017

Holding onto Holding: An Exploration of Brian Doyle's Storytelling Philosophy in "Leap"

During the Boston University distinguished Stanley P. Stone lecture, Brian Doyle did not leave the takeaway point of his talk ambiguous. He said, "I do have one theme: story, story, story, story, story." In fact, Doyle so desperately wished to communicate this emphasis to his audience that he even called "story-catching and story-telling the single most important part" of one's life, grounding it as the foundation of "citizenship, religion and membership in a clan." (Award-winning Writer, Essayist 00:03:30- 00:04:05) This type of sincerity, this plea for reflection from someone so respected and established in the field of contemporary literature should move the writer and scholar alike to probe into Doyle's philosophy concerning the function and nature of the story.

Although time constraints prevent me from exploring the breadth of Doyle's creative work as well as his frequent appearances to speak on these topics, I do believe Doyle gives his readers a concentrated look at his philosophy of storytelling in his work entitled "Leap," a creative non-fiction piece about a man and a woman holding hands as they jump to their deaths during the terrorist attacks of September eleventh. From this work as well as several other interviews and lectures, one can deduce that Brian Doyle believes in the tactile, instinctually human nature of stories that, by extension of that nature, allow humans to connect with one another in times of uncertainty, chaos, and—a word he uses often—duress.

Let's start by considering "Leap" from beginning to end. Firstly, one must consider the main body of the text, which is a retelling of eyewitness accounts of people falling. In a review of Doyle's collection "Leaping: Revelations and Epiphanies," Madden calls these retellings in "Leap" "a litany of simple sentences with subjects before verbs and objects trailing, revealing a mind numbed by reality, seemingly unable to do more than retell, from multiple perspectives, the happening" (184). I think this is a psychologically astute description of the text. It is obvious from these passages that Doyle is in extreme duress. The prose shifts from one perspective to another in a chaotic fashion. One might even call it stream of consciousness writing, an instinctual overflowing of the heart and mind under fire. And, because of this, the prose is nearly void of complex sentences, and very few demonstrate a detailed analysis of the events. It is just the facts, and the facts are grueling. Doyle describes the reports of pink mist due to bodies hitting the pavement, eyewitnesses viewing fireballs that they later realized were people, pedestrians killed by falling bodies—all with great velocity. He sets a scene of senseless and meaningless suffering.

And how does Doyle handle this senseless suffering, this horrifying scene of chaos and duress? He finds and latches onto meaning—instinctually. As Doyle writes, it is as if he *cannot help* but gravitate toward one particular detail, the detail that he starts and ends the piece with: the man and woman jumping hand in hand. In the beginning, the retelling of this event is just like all the horrifying others. He moves on as soon as he describes it. However, unlike the others, this one keeps coming up until he eventually comes to rest in it, focusing on it with extreme precision, holding on to it in spite of all others. Doyle writes, "...but I keep coming back to his hand and her hand nestled in each other with such extraordinary ordinary succinct ancient naked stunning perfect simple ferocious love" (166). He later describes it as a prayer when he says,

“Their hands reaching and joining in the most powerful prayer I can imagine, the most eloquent, the most graceful” (166). And after that, he discusses the instinctual nature of their reaching when he writes, “Maybe they didn’t even reach for each other consciously, maybe it was instinctive, a reflex...” (166).

This brings the reader to the culminating final line as he explains, “Jennifer Brickhouse saw them holding hands, and Stuart DeHann saw them holding hands, and I hold on to that.” Although his commentary on the nature of storytelling is set up all throughout the story, this last line, perhaps even the last clause, prompts the reader into thinking more broadly than the nine eleven terrorist attacks. I would argue that by using the metaphor of “holding” to describe what he is doing with the eyewitness accounts detailed in the piece, he opens up the image of the man and woman holding hands to the possibility of being interpreted with a powerful, multi-layered, symbolic weight. By using the holding metaphor, Brian Doyle is, in a way, placing himself on that ledge, that “lip of hell” he imagines the two people are on, forced by fire to jump into the unknown. And how is he coping with this leap? He is coping in the same way as the man and the woman; he is reaching, instinctually, toward something, someone, so that he doesn’t have to jump alone. In his case, he is reaching toward the eyewitness accounts (the stories) of the man and woman holding hands. And in this way, “Leap” broadens its scope. It becomes a commentary on the nature and function of sharing stories.

If what I have explored thus far is true, then what Brian Doyle believes about stories is quite clear. For one, he believes that they are tactile (in the same way the man and woman reach for something concrete and physical, Doyle grasps onto a concrete detail). Secondly, he believes that this type of meaning making is instinctual and illogical (in the same way Doyle gravitates toward the eyewitness accounts in his stream-of-consciousness prose as a kind of illogical

instinct, the man and woman gravitate toward each other even though it won't save their lives). Thirdly, he believes that they connect humans together (in the same way Doyle connects himself to the eyewitnesses (Jennifer Brickhouse and Stuart DeHann) via their story, the man and the woman connect with each other, hand nestled in hand). And all of this is happening in front of a backdrop fraught with great uncertainty and duress (in the same way Doyle is pushed to metaphorical ledge of uncertainty by the sheer onslaught of senseless suffering, the man and woman are pushed to a real precipice by fire, forced to jump into a canyon of smoke. They are uncertain when they will hit the pavement, and they are unsure of what their tomorrow will be like in the afterlife).

But I think this metaphor casts an even bigger net. Not only does it include Doyle, but I believe it also contains Doyle's readers as they consume *his* story. In other words, I think he is asking his readers to hold on as well. This certainly makes sense given the state of the nation following the nine-eleven terrorist attacks. Everyone was concerned about the future of America's security. Mothers, fathers, brothers, daughters and friends were mourning the loss of their loved ones. Many in the United States were searching tirelessly to find some scrap of meaning to latch on to as they faced uncertainty and heartache and stomach-lurching terror about the future.

The idea that Doyle is reaching out to his reader also makes sense when you consider the title: "Leap!" Although the exclamation mark is only my added emphasis (there are no punctuation marks after the title in the text), I believe this may demonstrate Doyle's intention in using this particular form of the verb here. He doesn't call this piece "leaping" or "leaped," nor does he pair this with any plural noun to indicate that it is "they leap." Taken on its own, he seems to be using a command: "(understood you) leap!" Therefore, when I read this piece, I find

it very poignant and true to imagine Brian Doyle extending his hand to his fellow Americans as if to say, “We are all on this ‘lip of hell’ together. We have all lost so much in this attack: our security, our stability, and our loved ones (I myself have lost three close friends). We have no choice; we have to make this leap of faith into tomorrow, into the darkness, at the edge of the world. But as we do, hold onto me. Because—as you hold on to me—you also hold on to Jennifer Brickhouse and Stuart DeHann and everyone and anyone who sees that faint glimmer of love in this darkness. Leap, my friends, but don’t leap alone.” In fact, it may be a little too heavy handed to assert that he is *actually* saying any of those things because I think, as the man and woman may be unconscious of their reaching and its significance, perhaps Brian Doyle is unconscious of his reaching toward his readers as well. Perhaps this metaphor runs so deep, perhaps the practice of grasping onto meaning in the form of story is such a natural part of human nature that people don’t always recognize when they invite others into a loving, relational web of strength and connection with their extended hand.

And, to further corroborate my points, I not only derive these ideas about his storytelling philosophy from this creative non-fiction piece, but I also see traces of all of those aforementioned qualities (tactile, instinctual, connective, and important in times of duress) in many of his lectures and interviews.

Firstly, the ways and metaphors he uses in describing stories are almost always tactile and concrete. He talks about the process of story telling as “trading that coin between us” (Award-winning Writer, Essayist, 00:04:20- 00:04:30). And in introducing his reading of “Leap” and a couple other stories about nine eleven, he compares the tales to little pebbles to keep in one’s pocket forever (Award-winning Writer, Essayist, 00:42:15- 00:42:35). Also, he frequently calls himself “the story catcher” because, in his mind, stories are not conjured up in the isolation

of one human's mind, but they are caught (like, perhaps, a ball or a frisbee) and passed on (The story catcher...).

Secondly, although this is a little bit more difficult to deduce, he definitely refers to stories as instinctual (or, at least, fundamental to human nature) in his lectures and interviews. Although I don't have any specific quotes for this quality in particular, the amount of times he talks about stories being deep, persistent, or foundational in his talks are likely to convince most.

Thirdly, he frequently (though not exclusively) refers to stories as being incredibly important in times of chaos, uncertainty, and duress. In describing his reaction to nine-eleven and finding out his three friends had died in the attacks, he said that he was starving for a story in the midst of the horror (The story catcher 01:19:30- 01:20:10). He also mentioned the Sandy Hooke elementary school shooting and gave his audience a homework assignment to read the story of Dawn and Mary and their courage and then share it with ten people (The story catcher 00:27:10- 00:28:28). Whenever he spoke of these tragedies, his emphasis of story increased dramatically, claiming that humanity must "give the darkness the middle finger" (Visiting Author Series 00:45:20- 00:45:37). Clearly, he emphasizes the need for stories in the midst of great trials.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, he most definitely explains stories in relational terms. In a most humble way, he doesn't even consider the work he pens as *his* stories. For example, during the Visiting Author Series at Wabash College, he said, "More and more I realize they [the stories I write] are not my stories at all...I just caught a story and shaped it and gave it to you, and now it is your story" (00:45:50- 00:46:35). Amazingly, he has not accepted any money for "Leap" even though it has been published in dozens of magazines, journals, and anthologies (Visiting Author Series 00:33:50- 00:34:30). Clearly, he just thinks of it as communal act, a way to connect to other human hearts, instead of a way to express individuality.

Furthermore, he also has strong things to say about self-obsessed writing. He says, “So much writing does not matter to me because it is about the writer; whereas the writing that does matter, that connects, that has that electric love in it, and respect and roar, is about other people and their stories and their grace” (Gulyas 7). With his selfless and sometimes self-deprecating charm, he continually shows that the true power of the story is connection to others.

This storytelling quality is most poignantly expressed when he described the rage he felt against Bin Laden and his attacks on September eleventh. A little while after bringing up a quote by William Stafford, “Violence is the failure of the imagination,” he said that if he ever got the chance to talk to Bin Laden he would say, “you fool, you fool, you fool, do you not understand that your story is small and old and going out of business? I got stories that are bigger than your stories, you fool!” (The story catcher 01:22:50- 01:23:04). And my guess is that he condemned the size of Bin Laden’s story of violence and rage against the American infidels because it is not big enough to fit others’ stories. His story is a failure of the imagination, since it doesn’t leave enough room for anyone to reach out one’s hand, connect, and invite another in. It simply doesn’t compare to the story of the man reaching for the woman and the woman reaching for the man, a narrative of “extraordinary ordinary succinct ancient naked stunning perfect simple ferocious love” that is vaster than what anyone can truly comprehend (166).

Works Cited

- “Award-winning Writer, Essayist, and Editor Brian Doyle.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Boston University, 9 April 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tt8B0N3t-d4&t=256s>.
- Doyle, Brian. “Leap.” *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*, edited by Lex Williford and Michael Martone, Simon & Schuster, 2007, New York.
- Gulyas, Lee. "Answers and Questions: Lee Gulyas Tries Heroically to Interview or at Least Effectively Interrupt, Just for a Second or Two, for Heaven's Sake, the Garrulous, Chortling Essayist Brian Doyle." *Bellingham Review*, vol. 30, no. 59, Spring/Fall2007, pp. 86-93. EBSCOhost, ezproxy.taylor.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lkh&AN=25948494&site=ehost-live
- Madden, Patrick. "Leaping: Revelations and Epiphanies." *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*, vol. 9, no. 1, Spring2007, pp. 184-185. EBSCOhost, ezproxy.taylor.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lkh&AN=24690124&site=ehost-live.
- “The story catcher: Portland author Brian Doyle at the inaugural Les Bailey Writer Series.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Saint Martin’s University, 16 November 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19lrezJNF6s>.
- “Visiting Author Series – Brian Doyle.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Wabash College, 1 March 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=If8MBI2Tw6c>.

