THE SHAPER

An essay by Walter Wangerin, Jr.

Part One:

When our children were young it was my custom to tell them stories in the dark, in their bedrooms, in the tender, dreamish warmth before they fell asleep. I sat in a chair tipped back on its hind legs. The children lay tucked beneath their covers. I smoked. I have since quit; but in those days I, the tale-teller and their father, smoked a pipe whose aroma (I hoped) would ever thereafter attend their memories of--could possibly even *trigger* their memories of--those holy, communal moments and the murmurous music of my voice.

I made the stories up, most often right there on the spot.

I shaped the stories to fit their days and each their individual personalities. Every child became the hero of his and her own story--though the names were changed and the settings were mostly at some safe distance from the grit world around us.

For an entire season, once, I raveled out in night-time episodes a longish tale about Orphay and Dice. It was loosely based on the myth of Orpheus, whose beloved Euridice had descended into the underworld, Hades, the land of the dead, after being fatally wounded by a snake. There the King of the Dead, also names Hades, ruled with his queen, Persephone. Orpheus, who was imputed to have introduced music to the world, the sweetness of whose music could turn a dead tree green again, begged to descend into Hades in order to bring his beloved up to sunlight and life again. Orpheus

played music so sweet, the whole underworld was moved even cold-hearted Hades. "Yes," said Hades, "she may go with you--but only so long as you do not turn to see if she is following!" And the treachery of so seeming-easy a task is, of course, that Euridice made no sound in the following. Orpheus had no evidence she was there. He had to proceed on blind faith and faith alone....

In my version, Orphay and Dice were much younger than in the myth; and rather than Greek, they were African American, as was the whole culture around us; yet Orphay's power remained in his music, the drumming, the sound and the subtle rap. For, though his brother Matthew was our black son and he our white, it was Joseph who was the artist, after all, filled with subtlety and sensitivity and remarkable music. This, therefore, was Joseph's story, his naming, and the early enunciation of his purpose in life.

Today he is a sculpture.

But I never wrote that story down.

Sometimes I would, as it were, toss a story out to all the children, just tell the tale until it found its ending (for it is usually the story that takes me along for the ride rather than I the story). If none of the four children asked to hear it again, then that was the end of its life. The tale had served its purpose, and then had passed away. There was no sorrow nor any loss in that: stories take up their existence always in relationship. It is the relationship that endures, affected deeply or lightly by the tale, which is its servant. The effect remains as a characteristic of the relationship. (It cannot be the other way around, that relationships serve an artist's art, a writer's craft, or the writer has begun to worship his talent and his vocation, and his art can become the god that consumes the people around him. This is dangerous and destructive.)

On the other hand, one of the children might ask to hear that story again. And again. And then I knew that she had made it her own: it nursed some internal hunger within her; and with every telling the story was reshaped not just by my creativity, but also by my child's tiny responses, sighs, gestures, words, dialogue, demands, requests,

exclamations, giggles, refusals. For this is the way it has always been with the best of story-tellers: what they utter is also forged in relationship. The thing is born and re-born in community. It is the moves of an intricate dance, requiring the tale-teller to be as alert to his audience as he is to his material.

In this way, for example, the story now published as *In the Beginning There Was No Sky* actually became my daughter's story, chosen by her and then shaped in the living nexus of our relationship, in our mutual love and trust. Only when she was done with it, her need of it having passed away; only when she and *No Sky* had detached from one another, did I tell it to others (to adults, in fact) and discover in their strong emotional responses how universal was the particular need of my daughter. Then, therefore, on account of the mute assent of the broader community, I chose to write the story down and offer it in print to the public. And though I cannot know the many who have read it since, yet it is my conviction that by means of this story we have, writer and readers, compacted together an enduring relationship: spiritual, if not physical; in the fictive place and time of the tale itself, if not in the fiercely fixed dimensions of "real" time and space.

Often the seed of an evening story came from the children themselves, some childish metaphor they may have used during the day, which I would then have taken seriously and permitted to become the controlling image of the entire story. In that case I became for them not much more than a sophisticated mirror, reflecting in large the thought they had produced in small and in a flash.

For example, Talitha, the youngest of our children, once said to me: "Daddy, your work eats you up, doesn't it?"

I was a pastor in those days. I was good. I mean, as a pastor I *had* to be good the day long; but by the time I came home, I was often wearied by my well-doing--and no longer good. I griped. I was impatient. I could utter thunder in my judgments. And I, like the storm, could chase my children inside--inside themselves, away from me.

But Talitha explained it, by the indirection of her metaphor, much in my favor: ministry consumed me. *Your work eats you up*.

Now, rather than peer *through* the metaphor to some simple, propositional interpretation of it (which must, finally, diminish all that is implied in such a rich figure of speech) the story-teller accepts it as is; blows a fuller life into it, so that it becomes not a single figure but an entire fantasy; and allows it to represent (in the experience of story) much more than his poor discursive mind could ever comprehend on its own.

I turned it into a story.

I allowed the major character to manifest characteristics of Talitha herself. She cried much when we first adopted her. And her tears embarrassed her, drew the mockery of her three siblings. But her tears, I sincerely believed, were born as well of tenderness (not only of vulnerability, but also of a watchful sympathy).

So the story was about a potato farmer and his wife, who had four children: Pine, the oldest and full of pride as a problem-solver; Oak, all full of pride in his physical aptitude; Rose, all full of pride in her beauty (in succession recognizable as Joseph, Matthew and Mary); and Thistle, who cried all the time, at which her siblings sneered, "Oh, Thistle, can you do nothing but cry? No, nothing but cry."

Near the beginning of the story, the farmer uncovers a potato twice as big as he is himself, whose thousand eyes, one by one, pop open!

The potato begins to talk.

"My name is Pudge!" it roars. "And hungry! I'm hungry and ready to eat! And here is my dinner before me. Man, I'm going to eat *you!"*

Which is exactly what the potato does: eats the potato farmer, "shoes, shovel and all."

Grim? Indeed. But not grimmer than my daughter's metaphor--and fantastic enough that it remains a figure at several removes from "real" life.

As the story continues, Pudge swallows down, one by one, the whole family, till

Thistle is left alone. And crying. But those tears become the salvation of the whole family, since her kindness allows an old crone to kiss them, at which each tear becomes a thorn--and when Pudge swallows *her* down, she sticks and stabs his gullet until he bursts open and the whole family emerges, now dancing gladness around the youngest child of all, Thistle--since they have been saved by her love.

Now, this is the same method I followed in the development of the story that precedes this essay: "The Resurrection of Karen McDermott." Its formative process is something of a reversal upon the method used for "Lily." In "Lily" the author makes up the controlling metaphor and offers it to the children in service of their need. In "Thistle" and in "Karen McDermott," however, the author finds the controlling metaphor already in use by the child, where it is already accomplishing a highly complex service for the child. (Karen affects indifference by investing her more sensitive self in a secret and separate object, as other children place their truest attentions, their fundamental loyalties in, say, a hobby, or a hidden and protected place, a pet, some self-affirming fantasy.) The author's job, then, is merely to give that metaphor latitude and sequence, space and time, for larger growth and a deeper investigation. As long as the metaphor remains intact--*not* analyzed, *not* interpreted, but only expanded--it continues to serve and to nurse in ways beyond the story-teller's capacity ever to comprehend. (Ever and ever, our stories should be smarter than we are, or else they might as well be lessons, teachments, preachments, instructions limited to our poor intellects.)

By this method, once more, the story is born in the relationship between a watchful artist and his watching audience.

It is an intense communion.

And I, as a story-teller, am for my child, for my congregation, for my community, for the public at large ... I am the Shaper.

+ + +

Part Two:

During the Renaissance, poets delighted in the Greek sense of that word, *poet*. Ben Jonson (in *Timbers*) defines it as "the maker." The poet was perceived as a creator not unlike the Primeval Creator of All.

But I personally find its older, Sanskrit meaning much more congenial to the task I think I do. The Sanskrit cognate, *cinoti*, makes of the poet "a heaper into heaps, and a piler into piles."

We artists, we writers--we come upon the stuff of our crafty attentions already there. But we find it a mess. Hopeless. A meaningless chaos. Our job is to organize. To order. To heap certain things with certain things over here, and to pile other things over there. To declare associations and differences and relationships. To make of this chaos a cosmos. Which we do by translating things into language, and language into character and episode, and episodes into whole stories. Under our craft, time is no longer a series of endlessly repeated *ticks*. For every tick we offer a *tock*. For every beginning, a palpable and satisfying end. An "end," that is, a purpose, a value, a "point to which" all these piled-up things do tend, and in which they may be fulfilled.

Our poems *are* that order. Our songs and our stories do more than persuade others that an order exists: they build the house; they weave a world; they companion our listeners *into* the experience of such ordered cosmos.

Another ancient word: the Old English word which is translated as *poet* today, is *Scop*. It's pronounced "shop." And it is the ancestor of our present word: *Shape*.

Our forebears knew that the task of the minstrel, of the community's tale-telling singer, was to sing amorphous, overwhelming event into shape.

Let's say, for example, that a seventh century community has just fought a day's

battle with their nearest enemy. Hand-to-hand they fought until the dark descended with forces more frightening than any human could be. The battle had been bloody enough to make a red mud of the earth beneath their feet; and one of their number had died; and now they've returned to the mead hall, exhausted, hungry, aggrieved.

They eat in silence. They drink that oldest of human drinks, a wine made of fermented honey. Their sadness deepens to a maudlin despair....

And just then the singer strikes a chord on his harp.

Every listens.

The singer develops the chord into melody. A familiar melody, in fact. One everyone has heard since childhood, and therefore one that carries profound, unutterable associations: parental comfort, an assurance of the divine. The singer sings familiar verses, and all the people nod: there is the weight of meaning in these verses. They remember. They remember and re-experience them now.

But then the singer begins to weave new words into the familiar verses: the details of today's grim battle; the name of the comrade who fell; the deeds he did in falling, all of which, fetching up in the experience of this song, find place within the precincts of the divine; all of which are no longer senseless, but do bear now the weight of genuine purpose and meaning. And the people nod. And the dead ascends into the Valhalla of heroes. It is well. Chaos is cosmos. Desolation is now heavy with purpose. The day has taken shape in the singer's song--

--and ever thereafter, it is the spiritual, artistic shape which is remembered as the truth of that day, not the cold, undecipherable, purely empirical fact.

In my day and in my experience as the singer, the song I might sing is the Twenty-Third Psalm. And the story I tell will always, always have a narrative familiarity to my wounded listeners; its pattern is ever the same. But the details will invite their particular sorrows, their particular persons and histories, to enter the tale anew. And the power of the old, old story will prop them up in all their leaning places.

The poet withdraws for the sake of the story.

And the story exists for the sake of relationship.