

## Revising Narrative Truth

**Truth:** *noun*. Where I get my pride and grace.

**Agency:** *noun*. The belief that I am here for a purpose. I'm not a nobody, I'm a someone.

—Abraham's Definitions, 11th Grade English

This chapter considers how revisions to narrative truth can help a student derive constructive meaning from stories with themes of humiliation or shame. It centers on the narrative work of Abraham, who was one of my toughest students and the one I worried most about. Even now, I am not completely sure how to “write” him. The theme of truth pervaded his narratives and his personal story. His writing conveyed harsh truths that he perceived in his life that colored his sense of self, and he wrote himself as a character imprisoned by them. Over the course of his narrative work, his tone and self-characterization evolved as he realized that he had agency in deciding what truth meant to him.

The purpose of personal narrative is not to arrive at *objective* truth—since there is no such thing—but to create *narrative* truth, or what is true to us (Spence, 1982). Narrative truths are the truths we perceive, and they define our stories in ways that are central to our sense of self. Singer argues, “What ultimately matters is not the sheer number of bad events . . . to which individuals have been exposed” (2001, p. 274). What matters instead is the extent to which a writer has “configured the events of their lives into a narrative that supplied meaning and hope” (p. 274). Our well-being depends on our ability to draw wisdom and constructive meaning from even the most painful or cruel experiences, and, in our class, Abraham's narratives best represented the struggle to pull constructive meaning from a destructive story. He did this by revising his understanding of the concept of “truth.”

For Abraham, school gravity was dependent on his relationship with teachers. He was adamant that he needed relationships with teachers in order to learn from them, and he would not work for teachers he did not like. When I asked him if he could learn from a teacher who he did not really know, he answered, “Well personally I can't . . . I won't. I won't let myself. I will like shut myself

down and close the door.” Abraham’s academic success was inextricable from his ability to develop and sustain positive relationships with adults. More than any student in my class, however, he struggled to trust adults and peers, which made it tough for him to build the relationships that he needed to engage. He explained, “It’s like I don’t really open up to my friends or like anybody really. Only to certain people.” He also had a negative association with school. He had a learning disability that had made academics a challenge for him, and he could point to few school experiences where he had felt successful, as he told me, “I felt like dropping out freshman year.” Overall, he found school an alienating place.

Abraham and I built a tenuous relationship in our first few months of working together, which was a credit to both of us. We shared real conversations about real issues, and we valued each other, which could also be a trigger for either of us when conflict escalated. Our relationship could become antagonistic, but not in the traditional sense where teachers and students are disconnected or unable to relate to each other’s positions. Abraham struggled to maintain closeness without eruptions of anger or distrust, and I struggled to handle conflict without taking negative emotions personally and stepping away. This dynamic between us became a pattern in the two years that this chapter captures. Our conflict was an interaction of our personal issues that we were each trying to work through and understand, and our student-teacher relationship was evidence of our common skill in reading each other’s defenses and paying acute attention to signals we gave that our doors were open or closed.

### **PRELIMINARY CONVERSATIONS: “IT’S WHATEVER, YOU KNOW”**

Abraham stared hard at me for the first several weeks of school. He has sharp features and an intense expression, so I *felt* this look and deciphered it as his attempt to either scrutinize or unsettle me. I soon sensed that I was being studied, and I intuited that he was trying to start a conversation. He would linger after class on the fringes of the room and observe, or he would establish my doorway as a place to meet others during passing period. Eventually we started talking, and he initiated the conversation.

Abraham was one of several students who were eligible to spend a period each day in the resource room for extra academic support. There, he was supposed to work in a small group setting or one-on-one with the resource specialist, whose job was to support kids diagnosed with learning disabilities. Our school used a full-inclusion model, meaning that the resource specialist collaborated with students’ core subject teachers to make academic accommodations and support their work in the general education classroom. Abraham’s resource period was fifth, and he had astutely figured out that this period was my prep, so he began a pattern of finding me in my room

at this hour. The routine was usually the same: he would ask the resource teacher for permission to come to my room to work on assignments, and about 10 minutes into the period she would call to ask if this was okay. Moments later a shadow would appear in my doorway, where he would wait for an invitation to come in. Sometimes I would talk with him for 10 to 20 minutes before dutifully trying to redirect him to the work he was supposed to do. Other times I would sit next to him and work through an assignment with him, especially if it was one from my class. This was a useful way to ensure that he would attempt my work, and it allowed me a valuable glimpse into his academic dexterity and his thought processes. Then there were days when we would just talk, and when this seemed like quality time that was important enough to both of us to make a priority.

These one-on-one sessions were valuable from an academic and behavioral standpoint. I grew to appreciate the sharpness of Abraham's mind, and I also learned that it could be a challenge to get him to produce anything of quality. His attention span was short, and he would grow impatient with himself or with me if he got stuck on his work. This was a particular issue with writing. Asking him to elaborate or rewrite something could trigger a reaction where he took criticism personally and dismissed an assignment completely. Working effectively with him meant walking a line between challenging him and accidentally pushing him away, so I learned to structure his feedback based on a constant risks-benefits assessment of whether it would have the desired effect or make me lose my leverage.

The time that Abraham and I spent talking and working one-on-one also helped me learn how to engage him constructively in a group setting. If Abraham was uncooperative, the whole class would feel it, and our relationship gave me the leverage I needed to redirect him publicly without sparking an argument—at least, most of the time. Overall, I observed that Abraham's behavior tended to create a pattern of highs and lows in relationships with people he genuinely seemed to like. Some days, he actively engaged in my class and wanted to please me, which contributed to the flow of things in a way that made me feel like a better teacher. On other days, he would grow negative, explode in anger, or walk out of class. There were stretches when our relationship was rocky, and some of his outbursts felt excruciatingly mean. I had to step out of the room one day to collect myself when he glared at me mid-lesson and told me that I was pathetic. His remorse followed within the hour, and the dean and I spent the next two days convincing him to return to my class while he crucified himself for having ruined it.

Abraham's mood was unpredictable, and he bore a certain contempt that was difficult to read. In many ways, he fit the profile of a student whose actions in many schools would lead to exclusionary discipline, like suspension or referral out of class. His demeanor was resonant with Bruce Perry's description of "people [who] believe that others can 'sense' that they are 'unworthy' or 'bad' . . . they project their self-hate onto the world and

become sensitized—indeed, hypersensitive—to any signs of rejection” (2006, p. 195). Abraham was also gang-affiliated and had had negative encounters with police. He worried that he would be incarcerated at a future point. He was quick to fight with anyone he perceived as disrespectful. Our administration and I knew that we needed to handle these incidents with concern for how the messaging would affect his sense of self. Students who have negative encounters with law enforcement and school can internalize the labels put on them and defensively embrace the stigma that comes with being “deviant” (Rios, 2011). It was critical that we communicated caring. We wanted to disengage Abraham from disruptive behaviors, but we did not want to disengage him as a person. We *did* want to engage him as a student, which required us to provide learning experiences that would show him how education could bring self-awareness and other tools to ease the pain.

These tools were precisely what I hoped the narrative curriculum in our class would offer him. The tool that seemed most helpful by its end was the notion of “truth,” which emerged the first time in a conversation we had about one of his papers, when I asked him if there anything he felt he had left out or wanted to explain more. His answer was that he wanted to learn how to “how to put the good and the bad together,” by focusing more on “more good times than bad” without “covering up the bad times.” This led us to a conversation that I detail later in the chapter about finding truth in the balance between the positive and negative aspects of our lives.

Abraham engaged with all of the writing assignments, and he grew more and more engrossed in the novel as we came to its end. The writing that he did in the first few weeks lent evidence to suggest that something in his self-narrative led to his self-contempt, which in turn influenced his relationship patterns. Early in the curriculum, he began to express his internal angst through cryptic words. On an open-response in which I asked students about their early impressions of *Song of Solomon*, he wrote:

In *Song of Solomon*, most of the characters have deep secrets that can end lives and I can relate to that. I have secrets that just won't come out. And the reason I at times don't like to listen or do homework is because it doesn't just bring back bad memories, it feels like I'm replaying the moment. If this helps at all. I grew up with my sister, my brother, mom and dad. As the years passed by secrets have been revealed that kinda hurt me in different ways. But I just never showed it and if I tell my mom what's bothering me she will be like *get over it*. I don't feel like saying what it is because it's whatever, you know. Over the years it just became locked away.

The first time I read these lines, I naturally wondered what *it* was, and while it was not my business to know, I wondered to what extent *it* underlay his manner and the stress in our relationship. This writing was not the first

time that Abraham alluded to something he kept to himself. He spent the first 17 months in our conversations referring to his “secrets” without elucidating what they were, and I never directly asked him.

### THE ANTI-STORY: “LORD PLEASE ERASE MY BIRTHDATE”

The people who come to see us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly.

—Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories*

Abraham’s initial love narrative stated squarely, “I hate the truth.”

While he did not pinpoint what the “truth” was, his references to it seemed to identify it as a source of shame. He wrote, “I hate the truth. I close my heart, my past is deep, I can’t look at a mirror, I can’t even sleep.” Truth functioned metaphorically in his writing as a force that seemed to imprison him in his own story. He craved it even as it haunted him. I would later learn that there were two main parts to this “truth.” He would reveal one part in his narrative template and the other in his *why me* revision. The first hard truth would deal with learning who his mother was, and the second hard truth would deal with learning about his father. He doubted whether it was better to know the truth when the truth was hard to know, and his sequence of papers questioned how someone could confront hard truths without self-destructing.

Abraham’s first love narrative was fragmented and obscure, and it revealed only shards of information. His words had a tone of self-sabotage and he referenced a character named “MA,” but there was no plot. Nor was there sufficient context in his lines, “Hey ‘MA’ are we family or just friends, cause this thought and feeling never ends. I wish this feeling fades away, it’s building like a box of hate. Everytime I wanna tell you I love you, I hesitate. Sometimes I wish I was never made Lord please erase my birthdate.” Abraham spoke of a love that seemed beyond his grasp to actualize, and he rejected a truth that seemed to have power over him, rather than the other way around. This truth seemed to render his existence somehow wrong. The only agency that his narrative offered him was the ability to rid the world of his existence. He also appealed to a source outside of himself to do this in the line, “Lord please erase my birthdate.”

Abraham’s first love narrative revealed an association with “truth” that undermined his ability to see himself as deserving of love or compassion. His writing veered toward what Singer (2001) calls the “anti-story,” or a default pattern of thinking that takes agency in saying “fuck it”—as a substitute for resilience—when we lack a better story. This anti-story

subsumed his sense of self in the lines that read, “If I had the chance to change my identity I would just to make my family happy. . . . I notice when I get mad I erupt without a reason. I get madder my feeling’s deep in.” Gregory Boyle writes in *Tattoos on the Heart*, “Resilience is born by grounding yourself in your own loveliness” (2010, p. 94). Abraham struggled with resilience because his story grounded him in anger and self-aversion. His own loveliness was not something that he believed in. To build resilience, he would need to revise his meaning of truth to one that grounded him more deeply in love.

While Abraham’s narrative was hard to understand, its theme of rejection was clear. It conveyed a fractured self-relationship that hid between the lines. It was fragile because its destructive and disintegrative elements threatened to overwhelm it. It needed hope to fortify a different reading of truth.

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Maxine Greene contends that personal narrative writing can “provide occasions . . . for a reaching out towards alternative ways of being human, of being in the world” (1994, p. 24). It can offer students the chance to “articulate the themes of their existence” until they can “name what has been up to then obscure” (1978, p. 18–19). Her words capture Abraham’s slow struggle to revise his concept of truth from a life sentence to a more malleable interpretation of events.

Abraham’s second love narrative—his template—opened with the words, “When I look back at this I see and feel reality, then it turns to horror. My whole life’s been feeling like this for quite a while.” After his opening reference to “this,” however, he shifted from the vague language of his prior narrative to more substantive content. The language that shielded the truth began to dissolve, and a more complete story emerged as he began to break it down: “See I grew up with my grandma raising me. When I was small I always thought that she was my biological mom . . . till she broke it down to me at the age of ten.” He downplayed this statement with the words, “It was whatever,” and continued with the narrative:

Because half of my childhood my grandma always told me that my real mom was my sister. As I started growing up I started asking questions like *who really gave birth to me?* *Who’s my read dad?* I would never receive an answer. I would ask my other family members but they would shut down on me.

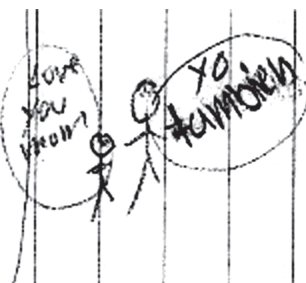
Abraham created a storyboard with drawings and captions to illustrate his narrative template. His first storyboard scene portrayed his mother handing him to his grandmother to raise. He was a wrapped-up, faceless bundle who was passed between two unsmiling women.

1. Real mom had me. She had to give me up to her mom. My mom was 17.



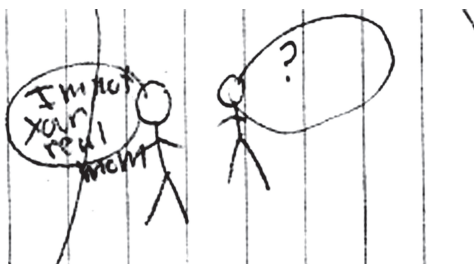
The second storyboard read, “Grandma raised me, real mom forgotten.” The drawing showed a small child saying, “Love you mom,” and an adult figure who replied, “Yo tambien.”

2. Grandma raised me. Real mom forgotten.



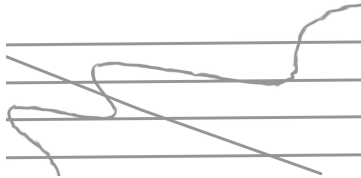
The third scene simply read, “THE TRUTH.” The image depicted an adult telling an older child, “I’m not your real mom,” and the child’s response read simply as a question mark. The figures in this drawing were different from the previous two in that the faces had no features. They were blank.

3. The TRUTH.



The fourth scene read, “Hell breaks loose.” There were no people in this drawing. Inside a box, Abraham drew a diagonal squiggly line that he slashed through with a thicker, straight line.

#### 4. Hell breaks loose.



In the process of trying to uncover information about his family, Abraham discovered a disturbing truth. The woman who he thought was his mother was not—she was his grandmother, and his mother was someone who he previously knew as his sister. His interpretation of “hell breaks loose” aligned with an image of crossed-out empty space. Abraham’s love narrative template depicted a turning point, and he did not know how to pull constructive meaning from it.

A turning point is defined as a pivotal moment that signifies a change in our life course (Schultz, 2001). How we choose to narrate a turning point is important. It can instill resilience or stymie our progress and growth (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Once again, the defining principle is that our experience matters less to our well-being than how we interpret it, and I wanted to emphasize this to Abraham, so I asked him to talk about his paper with me one-on-one. The conversation went as follows:

*Ms. LaMay:* What would you wanna add to that paper, if there’s anything you feel like you left out, or didn’t get to, or wanted to explain more about?

*Abraham:* Um, the good times me and my mom had. Like, ok, when you read this paper did it seem negative or positive?

*Ms. LaMay:* It seemed like you were looking at things and trying to frame them. So you’re saying you would actually write in there some of the good times too?

*Abraham:* More good times than bad. But then that’s covering up the bad times.

*Ms. LaMay:* It could be but it doesn’t have to be because it’s interesting how we choose to write our stories. Know what I mean? I could write my story like it was one big tragedy. I could write my story like things were fine. And in a sense both stories are, have truth



to them. But how do I capture what was most true to me—by balancing those stories out? 'Cause you know that paper that I gave you guys that was part of my memoir with my baby pictures in it and stuff?

*Abraham:* Um hm.

*Ms. LaMay:* Like there were parts where I just, I wanted to write my mom, I wanted to capture some of her charm, I wanted to capture some of her quirkiness that was kind of actually funny, um, and I didn't just want to focus on how messed up she was. But I think I definitely struggled with how to balance those two. Like the bad can overcome the good in your life but then how you choose to use those memories to frame them as being, you know *my life is fucked up* versus *from this experience I'm drawing a meaning that allows me to think positively about my ability to overcome things*. See what I'm saying? Totally different conclusions drawn from the story.

In my conversations with Abraham about his writing, I did not assume a therapist role, nor did he ask me to. Newkirk (1997) identifies a paradox about personal narratives—that their therapeutic value may lie in our refusal to treat them as “*directly* therapeutic” (p. 20). I did not ask Abraham to think about *what* he was writing as much as *how* he was writing and which strategies he was using to interpret and convey meaning. My approach paralleled a curricular method like Schoenbach, Greenleaf, and Murphy's (2012) *Reading for Understanding*, or Kylene Beers' (2003) *When Kids Can't Read*, where the focus is not to probe students' memory of a text, but to engage them in a discussion of how they are reading, and focus them on metacognitive strategies they use to make meaning. Along these lines, I wanted to raise Abraham's awareness of the strategies he was semi-consciously using as a writer and to help him develop and own these so he could find more control in how he constructed his story.

Rather than ask Abraham directly about his story's content, I tried to direct his attention to the perspectives that he took, so he knew where he could focus to revise. Patricia Stock argues that the process of writing can serve a therapeutic role for a student, and she defines her role as “[confirming] that her work demonstrated she was learning to entertain from multiple perspectives concerns she had once seen from only one perspective” (1995, p. 77). I suspected that if Abraham could find points of agency through his perspective, then he could gain a stronger sense of control over his story, instead of wrestling with a story that seemed to be controlling him.

Abraham's academic writing played an important role in this process. He carried his narrative themes of truth and love into the essays he wrote on the character Guitar, whose alienation and anger he could relate to. His interest in this character's thinking was the reason why he became more invested in

the novel toward the end. He was particularly intrigued by Guitar's painful sense of betrayal by someone he had considered his close friend and brother. Abraham understood why this led Guitar to show his love through "what he believes in and what he fights for and . . . just his mentality in life. And how he tries to help out others but in really hard core ways." When I asked Abraham later if his essays on Guitar had affected his thinking about himself or his life, he replied, "I'm here for a purpose, I guess. I need to do something and I'm not a nobody, I'm a someone. That's it."

Abraham's academic work was key to his narrative's revision, and in his essays, he conveyed awareness that painful experience can profoundly impact how we give and receive love. In his analysis of Guitar, he wrote, "Love in some cases is too strong for a person to recognize and accept." He argued for an interpretation of Guitar as a well-intentioned character whose struggle to deal with hard truths is misunderstood and whose love is misguided but true. He identified Guitar as an example of how anger can twist love into forms that are hard to recognize. He explained, "This can happen to people in a way that gets them confused about what they're doing and how they try to do it." He argued that Guitar's need to prove his legitimacy in the conditions he had been dealt could drive him—or anyone—to extreme actions, which could explain why Guitar "crosses the line and doesn't recognize it." The concluding lines of his analysis read, "Guitar has helped me in real life deal with searching for the truth and accepting it in my personal life. I will stand my ground and not let this pain overcome my goals."

### **RESILIENT TRUTHS: "WHERE I GET MY PRIDE AND GRACE"**

When young people begin to feel that their lives are insubstantial, it's hard to convince them that this is only a phase in a stage of their lives, that they are meant to overcome all this, to overcome the idealizations and delusions and come to grips with their own makeup and that of the world.

—Luis Rodriguez, *Hearts and Hands: Creating Community in Violent Times*

Our class practice of sharing writing had a noticeable impact on Abraham. The school gravity this practice held for him arose from the extent to which he genuinely craved feeling part of a family and community. He had trouble building the sense of family that he wanted in his life because it was not within his power to do so. He had trouble building the sense of community that he needed because his trust issues interfered with his personal relationships. David Johnson and Roger Johnson (2004) maintain that one of the two most important social and emotional competencies is *interpersonal effectiveness*, or the degree to which the outcomes of our interactions with others match

our intentions. The authors stress that someone's interpersonal effectiveness "largely determines the quality and course of his or her life" (p. 41). Abraham wanted to cultivate meaningful relationships with others that he did not always feel empowered to build. Our practice of sharing writing helped him use writing as a kind of substitute for in-person interactions that could become confrontations. Writing was a way of communicating in our class that offered him acceptance and an invitation to join the community. So he began to offer to share his writing, and he essentially wrote his way into our class dialogue in a way that profoundly changed the experience for all of us.

On another note, Abraham and I went through one of the most tumultuous periods in our relationship a few weeks after our conversation about the positive and negative balance of truth. Our conflict and its escalation in class would usually follow a storyline that went something like this: Abraham would say something to me or emit an attitude that I interpreted as dismissive of me or my teaching. I would take this personally and push back by being a victim and putting emotional distance between us to communicate that my feelings were hurt. He would take this personally and get angry. He would then begin to challenge me directly or make comments under his breath. I would take this personally and not know what to do, at which point my flight response would kick in and I would try to resist the urge to send him out of class. Catching myself here was important. I was the adult in the situation, but I would quickly get triggered in these moments, and my default pattern of communication (withdrawal) would kick in, which usually worked well to escalate his default pattern of communication (anger), and so it would go. He was the student who, without trying to, called me out consistently on my own detrimental tendencies by churning them up and then handing me a figurative mirror to look at myself.

Our learned behaviors around conflict tied to both of our love narratives and templates. Fortunately, the curriculum offered us the opportunity to talk about our battles on this deeper level. I was not the only teacher who had conflict with Abraham, but the intensity of our desire to hurt and feel hurt by each other came from the fact that it was a relationship we both cared about, which was, on the "love template" level, a trigger for us both. It seemed to me that Abraham sometimes had an impulse to antagonize teachers to their breaking point and then take their rejection of him personally. It was crucial for me to remember in these moments that he was *handing me an invitation* to validate the stories of rejection that he held about himself. The fact that I was someone whose judgment he cared about meant that I got these invitations more frequently. I could treat them as rule violations and send him out of class, or I could choose to see them as solicitations that came from a place of pain and unconsciously attempted to prove the legitimacy of his line, "Sometimes I wish I was never made Lord please erase my birthdate."

In the psychological literature, this pattern of behavior ties to a construct called the "internal working model," originally developed by John

Bowlby (1973). Our internal working model links our self-image with the people we want to attach it to, in a way that assumes and often produces a familiar story. Internal working models originate from the interpersonal dynamics that mark our early developmental years. Researchers suggest that “a child who experiences—and hence represents—attachment figures as primarily rejecting, is likely to form a complementary working model of the self as unworthy or acceptable” (Greenberg, Cichetti, & Cummings, 1990, p. 275). To be effective in the moments of conflict that surfaced with Abraham, I needed to respond to his anger with a disconfirming stance that did not reject *him*, but did reject the *story* that was operating in him in that moment. This meant that I had to remain conscious enough of my actions to refuse to respond with the rejection that his actions were seeking. The problem was that my *own* internal working model also had an impulse to seek out and read rejection onto conflict situations, which compelled me to take his actions personally in a way that made it difficult for me to “show up” calmly. Abraham and I were both stubborn, and we were masters at targeting each other’s weak spots. This explains why, on a fundamental level, we were also able to challenge each other on uncomfortable intrapersonal work.

Abraham’s case is important because he represents a student who tries and often succeeds in receiving disciplinary measures that can result in suspension or expulsion. The problem is that school discipline is traditionally structured in a way that plays directly into the interpersonal dynamics that I just described. Pedro Noguera, who has written extensively on this topic, argues that “the marginalization of students who are frequently punished occurs because schools rely primarily on two strategies to discipline students who misbehave: humiliation and exclusion” (2008, p. 133). Humiliation and rejection *were the exact themes* that lay at the core of Abraham’s love narratives. Punitive discipline policies are usually ineffective with students like Abraham because they reinforce over and over again the self-story that is driving the behavior. They aim to teach a simplistic form of cause and effect, in that students should come to see how their misbehavior causes consequences in the “real world.” Yet most students already know this, and the shallowness of the approach is dangerous for a student with Abraham’s mindset, because it circumvents the root cause of his behavior—embedded in the line “if I had the chance to change my identity I would”—and inadvertently reinforces the causal connection implicit in his story that *who he is* causes problems. Abraham’s love narratives and consequent behavior patterns illustrate a principal point: disciplinary measures that employ humiliation and exclusion to address behaviors that stem from internalized humiliation and exclusion are not only counterproductive, they are unethical. Yet they are what many schools do. They embody our larger systemic inclination toward consequences and punishment that compels the increased marginalization and potential incarceration of young people like Abraham.

At Escenario, I was fortunate to work with administrators who intuitively understood these social justice issues. As a teacher, I was given administrative and counseling support to push conversations with students about root causes of their actions in a way that could translate to real learning experiences for them—and for me. A shortcoming of traditional discipline is that it does not connect consequences to learning in a way that teaches a moral lesson or ties to the educational mission of schools (Noguera, 2003, 2008). Noguera contends, “[Exclusionary] strategies . . . do little to enable students to learn from their mistakes and develop a sense of responsibility for their behavior” (2008, p. 133). Every student in this book exemplifies how we can better influence changes in behavior if we help students build and sustain school gravity in their relationships with school and education. Moreover, Abraham’s sense of responsibility for his actions was inextricable from his sense of agency that he mattered in the world, and that his desire to be accountable would make a difference.

The concepts and strategies embedded in the narrative curriculum were my approach to classroom discipline for Abraham. I believed that he could more easily learn from his behavior if he could connect it to the templates in his meaning of love and develop a sense of agency in his interactions with those he cared about. I wanted to deal with our conflict by engaging him in conversation about its root causes, rather than rely on positional power in a way that would hold no real power with him. Although my vision for this was clear, I still struggled in the day-to-day work to transform the tension that kept recurring between us. A few weeks after spring break, Abraham and I had a series of disagreements that intensified to the point where we had a mediation in the counselor’s office. This led to my decision to take a break from our conversations outside of class. As was my pattern, I responded to his anger by putting distance in our relationship. I found out later that Abraham was almost arrested around this same time. He told me several weeks afterwards that he was caught with an illegal weapon and could have had a charge of resisting arrest. He explained, “Yeah ’cause I ran . . . and then I think the cop kind of knew me so he kind of turned it down to a misdemeanor. And I guess I now have counseling ’cause I asked for it.” I asked him at this point if he would have taken the counseling option a year ago, and he said, “I would have denied it. I wouldn’t even have liked to hear that word.”

Meanwhile, right at the time when students began working on their *why me* revisions, Abraham and I were at a communication impasse. He was the one who reached out to me and broke it. This explains why his third personal narrative began as a text message. Two nights after our mediation, he texted to tell me that he had started the *why me* revision. He told me that he had written it as a Google doc that he had just shared with me. He wanted to know if I would read it and tell him if it was what I wanted. I read his first few paragraphs and wrote him back and told him to keep working because I was excited about it. It looked to be a more exhaustive paper than any of his that I had seen.

The next night, he texted that he had finished and he asked again if I would read it. He also told me that he wanted me to share it with everyone in class the next day. I asked if he wanted to remove his name, and he said no, because he wanted everyone to know his story, and he knew that someone in our class would learn from reading it.

So the next day, I turned his narrative into a class set of copies. When I passed it out, I did not tell the students whose it was, because I knew that they would quickly figure this out. Our usual protocol for sharing student writing was to read it out loud. Either a student would read, or I would. But for Abraham's paper, I decided to tell them to read it silently to themselves, because I wanted each student to have his or her own private experience with it.

As students read, the response in the room was palpable. In his opening, he revealed the "truth" he had alluded to many times.

See my story begins with me laying on my mother's lap, confused as fuck and only eleven years old. Mom was just bursting into tears. I just saw fear and mercy in every tear that would drop. She would look at me with a blank stare that I will always remember along with the words that came out of her mouth. "YO NO SOY TU MAMA ABRAHAM," meaning *I'm not your mom Abraham*. At first I felt like it was just a joke, but I saw more tears. I said in Spanish then, *who's my real mom?* My mom couldn't take it. She hung in there and said the sister you think that's your sister is actually your mom. I replayed, but she's only 29. Confusing right. Imagine how I felt?! Basically the mom I thought that was my mom is grandma and her daughter is my real mom. They tell me this at age 11.

He continued:

I started to question who's my real dad. I asked my grandma, I asked my aunt. I would get different stories every time. At one point I think I even asked my real mom and she just said *fuck him he's dead*. I hated it, I wanted the damn truth . . . There was one solution in my book. Gangs and drugs. This was where the change was beginning for the worst. I started to graffiti my feelings out while hanging out with the gangs and doing drugs for quite a while. Still today I might be on this path. All I wanted is the truth.

Then the second part of his story read as follows.

One day I was sitting in my great grandma's home with my grandma and my ex-girlfriend. We were sitting conversating. I don't know how the theory of who and where is my real dad. At this moment it became too real. My grandma that I still call mom told me without hesitation

that *your mom was raped and you're the child of that rape*. I felt so empty, angry, rebellious and enraged at everything that was in my view. I got up and walked to the bathroom crying like a baby. I couldn't look at the mirror. I felt disgusted in my face, my body, everything.

This was the core of the internal narrative, laced with humiliation and shame.

Toward the end of his narrative, Abraham made a slight revision from rejection to affirmation. He wrote, "She could have aborted me but didn't. And that's where I get my pride and grace." This was his first revision of truth. There were hard truths that he could not change, but he could adjust his construal of what they mean. He had accepted that truth was what he chose to interpret, and his agency lay in his power to define. The second-to-last sentence read, "This is what made me just open new space in my brain to understand everything." This was the "Milkman moment," when Abraham pulled his own truths to open his mind to stories he had never considered as possible accounts of experience.

As Boyle notes, "Love . . . doesn't melt who you are, but who you are not" (2010, p. 103).

**Figure 5.1. "He ran back to Solomon's store and caught a glimpse of himself in the plate glass window. He was grinning. His eyes were shining. He was as eager and happy as he had ever been in his life."**

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When Abraham shared this essay, the other students embraced him and we captured the moment on film. I turned the photo in Figure 5.1 into a slide, and I wrote beneath it the line from *Song of Solomon* that captures Milkman's revelation at the end of Chapter 12: "He ran back to Solomon's store and caught a glimpse of himself in the plate-glass window. He was grinning. His eyes were shining. He was as eager and happy as he had ever been in his life."

## RESTORING LOVE: CHANGING OUR WAYS OF CARING

And so the voices at the margins get heard and the circle of compassion widens. Souls feeling their worth, refusing to forget that we belong to each other.

—Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*

A goal of restorative justice is to pull students in to school and education, rather than push them out the door and farther away from seeing school as a resource to work through life problems. George Galvis, the founder of Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice, maintains that restorative justice is not "an initiative or a neat new program or curriculum. It's a way of life and a way of being with each other. It's really about how we rebalance" (Yale, 2015).

The philosophies of restorative justice are rooted in indigenous traditions. They are relevant to Abraham's story and the challenges he confronted to grow as a person and student. A key principle of restorative justice is that violations in the school context are not just violations of institutional rules but are instead violations of people, relationships, and communities (Zehr, 2002). The rights of both victims and perpetrators matter. Terms like these allow a student like Abraham to connect his actions in school to his ability to build the sense of family and community he craved. A restorative approach focuses on who has been harmed in an incident and what individuals and communities may need from others to repair this harm (Zehr, 2002). These emphases hit at the heart of the interpersonal dynamics at play in human relationships and should lead to authentic conversations that can keep students like Abraham believing in school and education as a positive force in their lives.

Through the narrative curriculum, I hoped that the students and I could together create a restorative class community that would provide academic support and school gravity for Abraham. This support was most evident when Abraham's classmates responded to his *why me* revision with a disconfirming stance—in other words, they responded to his story of rejection by confirming his belonging. Abraham's writing, and his desire to share it so that others could learn, allowed him to play an important role in our class. This sense of community was the most important school gravity factor for him, because



his desire to develop and sustain positive relationships was such a vital part of his will to connect.

Abraham also appreciated the growth he watched other students in the class make, and he discussed this with me: "I notice in my friends who are in the class, that I seen them doing a lot of writing too . . . like, most of them like last year they wouldn't do a lot, and now that I see them with papers, busting out papers, it's like wow they improved a lot you know, I'm not the only one improving, they're the ones improving too."

Abraham's effort to use writing to revise his understanding of truth tied to changes he perceived in himself as a writer and a person. Prior to the 11th grade, Abraham did not consider himself a writer. He told me in one of our conversations, "I wouldn't even like carrying a pencil with me." Over the course of our work together, Abraham began to use writing on his own to work his way through difficult thoughts. He explained to me, "It was like a diary, like keeping it inside it was bad for me, I didn't like it, I felt kind of trapped. But letting it out and just reading over it and reading over it, it just like, made me feel better kind of like if I was talking to like myself." Writing was a tool that helped Abraham dialogue with himself, and at one point in our conversation, he patted the paper next to him and said, "It's like if I had another me right here." Abraham also spent time rereading his own writing. When I asked him how it felt to reread work that carried strong emotions, he answered, "I didn't like reading over it but then I had to face it, you know? It was my past and it's still kind of like my future."

Abraham also made a connection between his writing and his ability to process his thoughts in a way that helped his clarity of mind: "I feel like I can think more clearly through bad times or . . . I can process what I want to think about more easily. Like last year I couldn't really process anything like I wouldn't let myself or I wouldn't function right. Even if I wanted to try to write about it, I wouldn't be able to think that well. But now it's like . . . I read over it and I was like *wow I actually did this?*" Like Hazel, Abraham was able to see himself on the written page. His tendency to reread his writing gave him a sense of his changes as a person, and the more he wrote, the easier the writing process came to him: "I can see my full potential in the paper. Something I can write pages and pages without even noticing. That's how it is for me . . . it's a new identity. Old identity, new identity. And I believe that I changed a lot."

A notable change occurred in our student-teacher relationship after Abraham shared his *why me* revision with the class. Through the remainder of the school year, we both noticed that our conflicts somewhat ceased, and we had fewer troubles communicating with each other. From Abraham's perspective, he told me, "I think what you're doing is real teaching. You called me out . . . then I was just, I wasn't in a shell no more. I was out. Doors open." From my perspective, I felt that Abraham pushed me to the top of my teaching game and pushed me to notice how I reacted to conflict. As I mentioned, we were both stubborn, and this could play out in positive ways because neither of us wanted to step back from the challenges that we

posed to each other. The song “Under Pressure,” by Queen and David Bowie, ends with the lyric that “love dares you to change our way of caring about ourselves,” and this is essentially what Abraham and I did—we dared each other to change our way of caring to a degree that was slightly intimidating. At the same time, neither of us was comfortable admitting defeat. In the end, our stubbornness worked to our advantage and helped us manage to redefine the terms of the game, so that if one of us appeared to care more, we both “won” without either of us having to concede.

On the second-to-last day of the school year, Abraham handed me a paper that expressed how some of his feelings about school had changed. It read:

Education to me felt like a deathtrap. At the start of this year my attitude was nasty and not willing to make an effort. I would do unreasonable things just to get out of class. I would push my teachers way over the edge to make my day, because that’s how it normally started. It all changed from the start of this year.

I never saw myself having a relationship with school, one because it was boring, two because I felt like it wouldn’t take me nowhere. Three, I been going for all my life! I felt like a robot listening to teachers that in some ways I felt didn’t care about me. So as years passed I started to change for the worst. Angry was the mindset.

Now in high school with a mindset of *I don’t give a fuck*. It was hopeless. It got worse. I used teachers as a stress reliever. With too many problems at home I couldn’t take problems on a paper. Many teachers gave effort to help but no I didn’t want to recognize it. One teacher out of the bunch stood her ground and pushed back.

This teacher is a kind teacher. One that I would hate to lose contact with. We started off on the wrong foot. I was really mean and gave her so much trouble. I felt like I was the stress factor. She would take it. Till one day she started talking back and taking control. Constantly hitting me in my weak spot. I got worse to the point where she didn’t want me in her class. This made me realize she gave it her all to make a change for the better. I would sit at home crying like a baby just thinking how stupid I was. Milkman moment!

School is now a pull factor in my life.  
School is now a must if you want to succeed in life.  
School is my only way out of this gruesome pain.  
School is the only way to stop this pain.  
With school I know I’ll gain to stop the rain.