

Who are we? essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Who are we? The question is not simple. What we call the self is part of a larger matrix of relationship and society.

Had we been born to a different family, in a different time, to a different world, we would not be the same. All the lives that surround us are in us (Griffin 168). The question “ who are we?” is asked by Susan Griffin throughout her essay “ Our Story.

” In the above quote, she provides less an answer as an acknowledgement of the limitations of an individual’s point of view, experiences, and era can have when attempting to learn about something, or somebody, that feels alien to us. In Griffin’s case, she attempts to trace Heinrich Himmler’s history through his family, lives he has directly or indirectly touched, and the effects his life had on the world at large. Griffin notes that the ability and tendency that human beings have of standing outside of ourselves, attempting to make ourselves ignorant to what we know, is encouraged by “ a social structure that makes fragments of real events” (153). Freire’s banking concept of education, where “ the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (page 53), is a part of this structure that encourages ignorance through compartmentalization.

In secondary education, history classes and textbooks are set up chronologically, yet still manage to make events seem distinct and isolated. In most of my classes, particularly in high school, the teachers would state their commitment to active learning and sometimes even ask for our opinion on the curriculum. This meant that we would take a field trip to a museum and chose between lists of three books which one to read. There was no

effort to connect seemingly disparate cultures, or to link what was learned in one year to what was learned the next. If a student wishes to engage in lifelong, experiential, or active learning, they're on their own.

The time it takes to cultivate curiosity is not present in the lives of high school students. It was only in art history classes in college that I began to connect the many dots that I had “banked” during my earlier education. Art cannot be easily extracted from the politics and culture in which it is created, so general history becomes a natural part of any art history course. Through visual images I found myself better able to comprehend the scope of world events than I had been in high school, where history classes consisted mainly of memorizing the correct dates for various battles. This “banking” system of education has another consequence which Griffin touches on in her exploration of Heinrich Himmler’s early life and education. If we accept that there are acknowledged historical facts, and use the banking system of education to deposit these facts into children, there will always be the risk that what society has accepted as fact will later be disproven or, in the case of Himmler’s reading on the scientific bases for the superiority of Aryan races, used as a foundation for fascism and genocide. In Himmler’s diary, Griffin finds mention of a book he read on the history of the Russian secret police which disappointed him because there is no reference made to the so-called “fact” that Jews controlled the Russian police force (Griffin 136). Freire says that “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (page 53).

Without teaching critical analysis and engagement with facts, education remains trapped in our current worldview, which may in the long term turn out to be fatally flawed. This is especially true when it is a case of one group of people writing the history of their encounters with another group of people, as Jane Tompkins discovers in attempting to sort through the various histories of Europeans' first dealing with North American Indians: Knowledge of what really happened when the Europeans and the Indians first met seemed particularly important, since the result of that encounter was virtual genocide. This was the kind of past "mistake" which, presumably, we studied history in order to avoid repeating" (Tompkins 103). If, as Freire argues for, we replaced our current "banking" system of education with what he terms a "problem-posing" system of education; where instead of depositing facts educators instead contributed to the ability of students to activity ask their own questions and examine humanistic, societal, and environmental problems; it could be a protective measure towards the inherent limits of point of view (Freire 60). Tompkins maintains that often, what we see as oppressive and prejudiced attitudes are not necessarily a result of a kind of evilness, that they were "there by virtue of a way of seeing which they could no more consciously manipulate than they could choose not to have been born" (114). The point of view of the person describing what they consider to be historical fact is inextricably bound up with their own experiences.

While Griffin acknowledges this to be true, in her own essay she attempts to sidestep her own point of view by taking on a multiplicity of them: while her ancestry is Irish, Scottish, and European, she traces back through several

generations a possible Jewish ancestor, and claims the family she lived with in high school as her own, though not related to them through blood (Griffin 180). Her arguments lose some of their steam when she goes off into her own history in this way, since it appears she is trying to make a case for why she isn't like her (racially prejudiced and anti-Semitic) great-grandfather. Being Jewish myself, it feels like a stretch for her to claim membership as a Jew based on family friends and one possible Jewish ancestor. It would have been enough for her to simply acknowledge that the Holocaust is relevant to all human beings, Jewish or not, and that the incomprehensible inhumanity of it draws writers and historians to try to understand it in some small way. Anthropology and ethnography are the most common methods through which non-Native peoples “know” about Native Americans. These methods are flawed in many ways, but the most important one is that they, by their very nature, rely on a middleman, the ethnographer or anthropologist, in order to transmit information.

Often, the voices of Native Americans get drowned out, or worse, are simply not there at all. In Tompkins' examination of Perry Miller's New England history, written in 1956, she notes numerous phrases and ‘facts’ that Miller uses which, to today's ears, sound anachronistic (Tompkins 103-104).

Producing a “failure to see that the land into which European culture had moved was not vacant but already occupied by a varied and numerous population” (104), Tompkins finds Miller's history severely lacking, largely through his own failure to see outside of his own point of view. Griffin makes extensive use of oral history in “Our Secret.” Using first-person interviews with a wide variety of sources, as well as diaries kept by Heinrich Himmler

from boyhood, she is able to draw links between people that a traditional historian might not. Oral history is often perceived as the ugly stepsister of “real”, that is verifiable, history.

I consider this to be a denial of our very nature as human beings. Griffin notes her own reactions as well as subtle changes in the atmosphere of the room when she relates her interviews. She recognizes the effects that stories have: The telling and the hearing of a story is not a simple act. The one who tells must reach down into deeper layers of the self, reviving old feelings, reviewing the past. Whatever is retrieved is reworked into a new form, one that narrates events and gives the listener a path through these events that leads to some fragment of wisdom.

The one who hears takes the story in, even to a place not visible or conscious to the mind, yet there. In this inner place a story from another life suffers a subtle change. As it enters the memory of the listener, it is augmented by reflection, by other memories, and even the body hearing and responding in the moment of the telling. By such transmissions, consciousness is woven (178). The stories we are told about our families and ancestors growing up are instructive, and serve to delineate the values not only of the family but also of the wider societal structure they live in. Griffin sheds light on the family structure and histories of Himmler through her examination of his diaries, and makes a convincing case that this early history played a role in his eventual life choices (Griffin 115-138). One of the common arguments against oral history is that not only can it often not be verified, but also that memory is an elusive, untrustworthy ally in writing history.

Indeed, the human memory is rife with shifts, hills, and valleys, and often the end result is not remembered the same by two people present at the same time or event. It is my argument, and that of many oral historians, that not only is the memory more useful than previously thought, but also that oral history is important regardless of whether or not it is “ truth.” Perhaps two different accounts of the same event reflect the “ truth” for each person, subjected as it is to individual experiences. It is the “ truth” not included in the dominant discourse’s version of history that Griffin and Tompkins seek out.

Oral history as used by Griffin can be a tool for bringing disenfranchised peoples to the table of traditional politics, where they can make change happen on a national level. It can also be used as a way to observe our own society “ against the grain” and to consider the intersections of history and truth. And an expanded definition of “ truth” to accommodate the multiple truths of so many of our lives is what is needed to make our identities whole again.