BEN AMENT

Arguing From Life in a Diverse Millennium: Story as Argument

"A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices."

— William James

My writing background is frustrating to me. Because I was given A's in high school classes that required writing, what little I actually did, I thought I was pretty hot stuff. I went from high school to many years of totally private writing not knowing what my real problems in writing were. Though reasonably coherent and grammatically correct, I did not know that I was wordy. I was unaware that my writing often went in circles. I thought that an argument was something filled with facts and that persuasion was inflated with passionate rant and rave. I thought that I could just bowl readers over with language, or simply spray facts at them and win.

When I got to college the second time around, after a long stint in the world of business, I was faced with instructors who, though they cared about grammar and sentence structure, emphasized thought. I couldn't just rant and rave, or pass off facts in lieu of thought. My grades suffered. It wasn't that I couldn't write. The flaw was in my thinking. I lived in a black and white world. I was right; you (whoever "you" was) were wrong. My job, as I had learned in the business world, was to prove it.

The first thing I learned from those instructors was that good arguments do not have to be aggressive or confrontational. I learned how writing can be used as form of inquiry. I slowly grasped the concept that argument could begin with a dialogue or serious conversation with those with whom I disagreed. So, I had serious conversations with my texts. I was not to bring those early dialogues and struggles into the essays, however. Consequently, what developed were not changes in my opinions and attitudes, but ways that I could argue against the offending texts. I learned to create a strong opposition that was not aggressive or confrontational. I learned that argument should be detached, unemotional, and reasoned. I was learning proofs. What I was absorbing was traditional, classical argumentation. I got A's again. I had learned the system. I assimilated. I learned that Aristotelian argument was valued and I used it. And when I got a teaching internship in graduate school, I taught it. What I got in return were dry, fact filled essays that were sometimes strong, but lacked any real understanding of the issues that were being addressed. What my students were doing is precisely what I had learned to do: prove points. The problem was, and still is, that most of the issues that they were dealing with were unprovable.

The issues that students are increasingly asked to write about in the composition classroom are inherently moral issues: racism, sexism, multiculturalism, gun control, death in its many guises (penalties, euthanasia,

abortion), ad infinitum. None of these is a provable issue, no matter what side a person takes in the discussion. But classical argument tries to prove points and win by making logical assertions and refuting the opponents'.

What I did not learn until graduate school was that classical argument was designed for a singular purpose: third party decision making. If we understand that the forms of argument used by the Greeks and Romans were court-based, we begin to see that they were devised to sway a judge, jury, or legislative body. Classical argumentation was never intended to argue directly with the person or persons with whom we disagree. As such, argumentation became a points-paying system of debate. This system depends on and assumes similar values among all of the participants in the argument, thus the maxim "a jury of our peers."

The problem? Our peers no longer exist. At least not exclusively. From Aristotle's time until quite recently rhetoricians could assume that their opponents were of like minds, like color, and like gender. Our society does not ascribe to one belief system, is not one color, and does not consist of one gender in decision making roles. This is not a deleterious change. It is a change that requires a change in our thinking. Though much debate still occurs in courts and legislative bodies, using court-based modes of argumentation in our diverse world is increasingly futile. Most decisions are made by individual people with their own biases, prejudices, and backgrounds.

Even the business world is learning this difficult lesson. Ferdinand Piech, Chairman of Volkswagen, AG, admits that mergers and acquisitions are "more complicated than logic"; they are more than just simple cases of weighing bottom-line economics (qtd. in Eisenstein 22). In business it is understood, though not always admitted as forthrightly as Piech, that decisions are not made by logic alone. Decisions are made on undefinable synergies that are based in culture. And though we in the United States tend to concentrate on embracing local diversity in order to have a just and civil environment, Piech's point helps us appreciate that even hard, bottom-line decisions affecting world-wide economies demand that cultural synergies and biases be understood.

How do we accomplish this understanding? First we must understand ourselves, our needs, and our desires. We must be willing to investigate our biases. We must know where our beliefs come from and why we hold them. We then must try to understand others in the same way. These are difficult things to do, and even more difficult to teach. If we truly value diversity, we must make the attempt. Parker Palmer puts it this way:

When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth.

One way to relocate personal truth is to reach into the past even further than classical argument in an attempt to tell our stories. Pre-classical argument reminds us of our connections: connections to the past, the present,

and to the future. What I am calling pre-classical argument is also known as the "Tribal Arrangement" (Veeder).

Rex Veeder teaches that "writing is always a form of storytelling." Further, he says that "in many cultures it is almost impossible to argue without at least some reference to a story." Story, then, is the basis of argument and the basis of communication in many Native American cultures, thus the Tribal Arrangement. It is also the basis of teaching children, therefore, it is the basis of learning. As the basic unit of communication, argument, and learning, I have come to view storytelling as pre-classical argumentation. Even Plato told stories through Socrates to make his points clear and to create understanding.

Though variations are likely, storytelling using the Tribal Arrangement might look something like this:

"Explain where you come from.

"Explain your bias in regard to the topic.

"Explain why you hold the bias.

"Tell a story that illustrates your views on the topic.

"(Optional) Give some concluding thoughts. (Veeder)

In Native American cultures it is considered polite to explain where you come from. This includes the physical location, but extends to telling an appropriate story that exemplifies the speaker's (writer's) family, education, and traditions. Beyond courtesy, this establishes a relationship with listeners (readers). It will help the reader (listener) respond. Classical argument anticipates the opponent's response, but only in the attempt to diffuse the response before it is given. Pre-classical is more concerned with total communication. Helping the reader (listener) know where the writer (speaker) is coming from enables communication.

Explaining bias is foreign to practitioners of classical argument. Logic is based on deleting bias from the argument. Remember Piech's statement that decisions can be more complicated than logic? This is because bias exists in humanity. Formal logic is an attempt to deny our biases, therefore it cannot, and is not, the be-all and end-all of argument. If it were, we might well, as Swift proposed, be eating children today. Our biases help us recognize our values.

Applying our values to the question (topic) at hand is what formal argument avoids. Pre-classical argument embraces the concept of values and understands that our values are where our biases lie. This approach to argument virtually requires an "up front" explanation of bias so that the listener (reader) can relate to the speaker (writer) as the story is told, and further enables them to understand why we hold the bias (Veeder). This pushes the focus to ethos, where classical arrangements, at least the way they are taught today, focus on logos. It is here that I believe that Aristotle would agree. We have rearranged argument from his initial formulation. If I understand Aristotle correctly, he believed that ethos was of primary concern in argument. We have artificially placed the emphasis on logos.

Spotlighting our bias also means explaining why we hold the bias. The reasons we hold the bias may have already been covered in the telling of who we are, but reiterating those reasons ensures that they are not missed. It also guards against any misunderstandings. Trust is the point of ethos. Trust is the point of understanding and communicating our biases. It is more important for the reader (listener) to trust the writer (speaker) than it is for them to agree or disagree with the bias (Veeder). Understanding, not agreement, is the purpose of this part of the argument.

So far we have explained through story where we come from, our bias regarding the topic, and why we hold the bias. The final step, outside of some concluding thoughts and clarification, is to tell a story that illustrates the speaker's (writer's) views. Simply telling the story, at least in academic writing, is often not enough; we must also explain what the story means to us (Veeder). Notice, we are explaining what the story means to us, not what it should mean to the listener (reader). Again, trust is the key. Is our interpretation of the story reasonable? Is our scenario likely? Is it the only possible scenario? Sometimes multiple stories are needed to make the point or explore other possibilities. Then, of course, multiple explanations will be needed. The key to understanding is that the reader (listener) will already know our bias regarding the topic.

The result is a shift away from purely logical argument toward a subtler persuasion (Veeder). Remember that classical argument is designed to convince a third party through a line of reasoning and refutation of the opponents' lines of reasoning. All persuasion contains an argument, but all arguments do not necessarily reach the point of persuasion. Veeder separates the two this way:

Argument	Persuasion
encourages a win/lose decision	changes attitude
wins points	hifts perspective
presents clear contention	presents alternatives but may emphasize one
logic is primary	ethics or emotion is primary

Again, recall Piech. The shift from argument to persuasion is what he was talking about in relation to decision making. In order to make a decision we often must change attitudes and shift perspectives. Sometimes our own. We must be willing to present alternatives and think about the ethical and emotional impact of solutions to dilemmas. Robert Darnton, in *The New Age of the Book*, says:

. . . instead of using argument to close a case, [we] could open up new ways of making sense of the evidence, new possibilities of making available the raw material embedded in the story, a new consciousness of the complexities involved in construing the past.

Simply, we need to find new ways to argue. There is no single right way to argue. Classical argument has its place. So, too, does pre-classical. But a truly new way to argue might combine the two in a mosaic of the old, and the older, creating something fresh that allows us to embrace the complexities of the coming millennium. As another option for argument, the mosaic can be more persuasive than merely arguing or merely storytelling. The mosaic might look like this:

"Begin with a narrative - tell a story that relates an example of the situation.

"Define the terms of the disagreement.

"Explain where we agree and disagree.

"Identify any points of stasis; areas where agreement is impossible; are there any areas that you are unwilling to acquiesce?

"Give reasons why your idea is better.

"End with a summary and a story (fable?) that suggests that agreement is a good idea.

A mosaic might, as an example, begin with storytelling. The writer (speaker) examines through story why the topic is important to her. This personal involvement in the topic conveys an immediacy to the listener (reader), but it also contemplates the speaker's (writer's) bias(es). This guides both parties in the communication toward a mutual understanding. This narrative should relate an example of the situation, preferably one in which the speaker (writer) is a central character. This implies a personal stake in the outcome of the disagreement.

Following the opening narrative, the terms of the disagreement are defined. Relating the terms of the disagreement to the story helps explain the story and create an atmosphere of openness. It is through definition that understanding is built. Defining the disagreement establishes a common perception of the problem at hand. Explaining where the parties agree and disagree further dissolves misunderstanding. To further avoid misunderstanding, it is a good idea to identify points of stasis. These might be defined as areas that the parties agree to disagree.

The final story ties it all together. This story can be a fresh look at the post-agreement future, or it can continue the introductory story moving it beyond interest, to the solution and its implementation.

I began this missive with a brief narrative of my frustrating past with writing. If the narrative is carefully read, and that is a must with story as argument, it can be seen that my writing went through phases. From fairly grammatically correct treatment of words, to rants and raves filled with passion, to logical argument that lacked conviction. I assimilated to my various environments. What is not shown through the story is that my collegiate writing worked at least partially because the praise came from like minded people. Difficulties arose when I would run into an instructor who thought in other ways. Instructors who encouraged me to think deeply about my beliefs tended to also be those from different backgrounds than mine, those who were different colors, and those of the opposite gender or preference, or both. The in-

structors who greeted my arguments with praise tended to look like me and share my values. All too often our students run into the same thing. In addition, we expect them to accept our arguments because, in the classical sense, they are logical. They make sense.

What I have found, though, is that a student must enter an argument with a sense of ownership. That sense of ownership is denied them when they are required to adopt a rhetorical stance without first examining their own beliefs. This is difficult, to be sure. But through story, students can and do take ownership of their arguments. The argument becomes theirs, not just something done for a grade or for a teacher. Perhaps the most valuable lesson that arguing through story teaches is that issues are not black and white. They are full of shades of gray, and some more vibrant colors, that are created from our beliefs, not from any intrinsic logic.

Gratifying moments come when students' writing comes alive with understanding. This understanding comes not only from self examination, but from the realization that their beliefs are not always as logical as they first thought, and that other people's stories, reasons for believing something, are just as valid as theirs. Just as gratifying is when a student examines their biases, follows that with the logical reasoning of their investigation, and still decides that their belief is the right one. Struggle is what storytelling is all about. Not necessarily coming up with the "right" answers. Success comes in small doses.

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