

Idea, Energy, and Power:  
Sayers's Creative Process Model and the Storytelling of Jay O'Callahan

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## ABSTRACT

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This research uses an adaptation of Dorothy L. Sayers's 3-step theory of creativity to analyze the self-described creation process of contemporary storyteller Jay O'Callahan. Sayers wrote that *Idea*, *Energy*, and *Power* are foundational elements of the creative process. *Idea* is the invisible image that provides vision and unity throughout a project. The *Energy* is the working out of art into a medium. The *Power* is the connective force that binds artist to art and both to audience. (Sayers, 1987). This hermeneutical study develops subcategories within each of those 3 primary elements of creativity, then uses qualitative methods to explore connectivity to the creation process of O'Callahan. It was concluded that a high levels of correlation can be drawn between the *Idea, Energy, Power* model and O'Callahan's methods of story construction and delivery.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past 20 years I have kept close community with a number of artistic friends. It has been a delight to follow dancers, writers, visual artists, storytellers, and musicians innovating in their respective realms. Yet their work has also revealed a dark side to creativity that is a common heartache common among makers of all sorts. There are seasons when inspiration dies and the production of art slows to a trickle. These are times of “long incubation producing no chick” (Eliot, 2003). During times of artistic dryness, a creator can feel lost, mute, and stuck. This is not only frustrating, but it can also be a financial hazard to those whose livelihood depends upon their creativity.

The problem is widespread. According to the book *On Writer’s Block*, “Artists beyond count have lamented the tortures of this condition, which can strike the seasoned veteran as unpredictably as it does the beginner” (Nelson, 1993). Because the problem is also emotionally wrenching, it can lead to fear, doubt, and depression. In *Unstuck: A Supportive and Practical Guide to Working Through Writer’s Block*, Staw stated that writers block is, at its most severe,

the near-paralysis of movement — of thoughts, ideas, even single words — from head to hand. It is as if a circuit has been broken, and although energy exists at the point of origin, the pathway for the waves to travel has been destroyed (Staw, 2004).

Scores of self-help books have been written promising to unlock the elusive eureka moment. Yet, as I have watched artistic friends wrestling through seasons of frustration, I have begun to trace the stream of creative technique back to its fountainhead, asking questions about the foundational nature of creativity. Primarily, I have sought a core model of inspiration that transcends disciplines and personality types. This paper explores one concept that I have found during that search.

To support this discussion, I narrow the nearly-infinite field of creativity to a single art form, a single artist, and a single theory. The **art form** is storytelling, for it is one of the oldest known to man, and it transcends limitations of culture, age, and literacy. The **artist** is Jay O'Callahan, a storyteller who has received (among many other decorations) a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Storytelling Network, a Circle of Excellence Award from the National Storytelling Association, and commissions ranging from N.A.S.A. to the Boston Symphony Orchestra (O'Callahan, 2012a). The **theory** is Dorothy Sayers's trinity of creative thought that is composed of three steps: Idea, Energy, and Power. It is hoped that some of the findings uncovered at this three-way intersection will provide insightful suggestions for stalled creators to test. Furthermore, perhaps a few new concepts will be added to the critical vocabulary of the field of storytelling.

I was introduced to the work of O'Callahan several years ago during the National Storytelling Festival. I was new to the art of storytelling at the time, and I was strongly biased toward the power of written narrative. This was because most of my formal undergraduate training had analyzed story in literate terms. I viewed orality as a sort of colloquialism-speaking, overall-wearing grandfather whose offspring might eventually

stop spitting off porches and evolve into a polished, Times New Roman debutante. I considered oral story rustic, saccharine, and haphazard.

Sitting in the shade of that Jonesborough tent, however, I was humbled and transported. The steady pulse of O'Callahan's voice won my trust, his imagery captured my inner sight, and the structure of his narrative created a new world that caused my physical surroundings to fade. He was brilliant. He was careful. He burned like fire. When I walked into the sunlight an hour later, tears were running down my cheeks. I wasn't alone. As I looked around at the exiting audience members, I noticed hundreds of faces affected by the experience we had shared. At the time I didn't understand how he had done it. Could something as simple as the spoken word hold so much power? I have sat through movies with million dollar special effects that didn't captivate like this one single man speaking one word after another.

I have now spent months studying O'Callahan's thoughts on story creation. What I first experienced as aesthetic enchantment I now respect as a lifetime of intentional devotion to craft. O'Callahan has explored creativity through a variety of means that have resulted in a powerful repertoire. Since the spring of 1996, O'Callahan has published newsletters that share his growth as a teller with the world. Through these he has offered not only his successes but also his epic battles with story. His vulnerability unpacks seasons of dryness and struggle, and it reveals a number of dragons he has faced along the way. I have heard it said true leadership is the willingness to grow in public. This is the gift O'Callahan has given to those willing to listen.

If there is such a thing as an American storytelling canon, O'Callahan's place in it is secure. For over 30 years he has been telling stories actively in national and



international venues (O’Callahan, 2012a). He has led storytelling workshops, and he has written reflections about the creative process. He has won a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Storytelling Network, an ALA/Carnegie Award, National Educational Film Festival awards and he has secured commissions throughout the country (O’Callahan, 2012a). He is a much-loved comrade of his fellow storytellers in his New England region and the greater United States. He is a father who learned to spin tales for his own children. Not least of all, he treasures words and causes me to treasure them also. For these reasons O’Callahan has been chosen to lend his unique perspective to this discussion on the creative process of oral narrative.

### Problem

The primary theory explored in this paper is sourced in the writings of playwright and author Dorothy Sayers. Sayers wrote that *Idea*, *Energy*, and *Power* are the three foundational elements of creation (Sayers, 1987). According to Sayers the *Idea* is an invisible, inner image that provides vision and unity throughout a project. The *Energy* is the working out of this image into visible form. The *Power* is the connective force that binds artist to art and both to audience (Sayers, 1987). The nuances of this triad are discussed in greater length in the literature review.

In this study Sayers’s three-fold model of creativity are compared to the story-making processes of O’Callahan. Qualitative methods are used to explore a recorded performance, a personal interview, and newsletters published from 1996-present for resonance with Sayers’s model. Then, an expansion of the *Idea/Energy/Power* model is created to align with elements found in O’Callahan’s work. Throughout the course of this

study, there is an intentional effort to note discoveries likely to benefit other tellers as well as terminology able to enhance the growing critical vocabulary on story analysis.

### Limitations

Meshing a comprehensive aesthetic theory from the 1940s with a singular living storyteller involves limitations as well as benefits. One benefit is that when unlike ideas cross, there often results a connectivity that breathes new insight into both realms. This phenomenon has been brought into the mainstream conversation by a business called The Medici Group, which coined the term, “The Medici Effect” (The Medici Group, 2012). This company collects insights that emerge when fields intersect, exploring one world through the lens of a second. Such an intersection is the basic dynamic of this paper. It meshes a generalized aesthetic theory with the particular life work of a storyteller and listens for resonances.

Yet, there is inevitable bias in such work, for the same sort of sensitive human perception that allows new insights to be discovered may also be tainted by preconceptions. This is why in a study of this nature the particular leanings and prejudices of the author should be considered. Although I have approached this research desiring objectivity and have established step-by-step procedures that can be replicated by others, the tool for processing data is still primarily my own thinking. Therefore, I attempt to declare any preferences that might affect my conclusions.

I feel an emotional connection to Sayers. I admire her blazing intellect, her adept and meticulous nature, and the manner in which she faces mystery without fear. I also believe it must have taken great courage for a woman in 1941, with a personal history

that defied social mores, to engage some of the most influential theological minds of her time. Sayers also claimed Christianity, and there are a number of connections she makes between art and faith in her work. The scope of this research does not allow me to address those connections in depth, and so I focus almost solely on the aesthetics of her theory. The study of the connectivity between art and theology is a fascinating realm, and one that draws me to Sayers's thinking--however,. I simply cannot adequately encompass such matters in this work. Sayers's model is considered in its essential elements of Idea, Energy, and Power, then the focus is broadened to incorporate ideas found in a variety of sources on creative theory and storytelling studies. This means that a wide range of theological, philosophical, and literary ramifications of Sayers's theory are not considered in this paper. In addition, I am not attempting a comprehensive critical study of O'Callahan's entire *oeuvre*, but a limited study of his working methods with a illustrative focus on one particular work, *Pouring the Sun*.

### Methodology

This is a critical study of an established contemporary storyteller, viewed through the lens of creative process, and using a three-fold model of creativity to illuminate his work. The manner of analysis I used in this study follows five hermeneutical steps. First, the three-part model of Sayers was pared down to the essence of Idea, Energy, and Power. By this I mean the vast out-workings of Idea, Energy, and Power that Sayers unpacks in her book were reduced to the basic definitions provided in the introduction of this paper. (*Idea* is the invisible, inner image which provides vision and unity throughout a project. *Energy* is the working out of the Idea into an artistic medium. *Power* is the

connective force that binds artist to art and both to audience (Sayers, 1987).

Secondly, many months of reading were invested in O’Callahan’s newsletters (1996-present), looking for common themes to emerge. Recurring ideas were noted, and similarities were channeled into categories. Adjustments of those categories were made until each item aligned with the other items in its group without being distorted from its original context. (For example, an early category was “the benefit of professional storytelling community.” Instances of influential childhood community were excluded from this category, because O’Callahan was not a professional storyteller at that stage of his life.) O’Callahan was also interviewed directly on the subject of his creative process, and those responses were categorized likewise.

Thirdly, all of this information was hermeneutically rescanned for resonance with Sayers's model. Adjustments of subcategories within Idea, Energy, and Power were developed based on those findings. Surprisingly, this was not a difficult endeavor, for many of the themes that had developed naturally during the scanning of O’Callahan’s material slipped neatly into my adjusted template of Sayers’s model.

Fourthly, additional readings in the fields of storytelling and creative theory were analyzed throughout this process. These provided assistance in the development of subcategories, terminology fitting for the discussion, as well as context for the larger field to which this research speaks. And finally, elements of creative power exhibited during O’Callahan’s 2000 performance of “Pouring the Sun” were noted and hermeneutically analyzed. Terminology for this discussion is sourced largely in Doug Lipman’s *Improving Your Storytelling*. Specific categories are noted in the “Power” section of this research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature for this research project provides background in four primary areas. Those areas are: (1) the history of creativity in Western culture (2) formal models of creativity, (3) the particular theory espoused in this work, and (4) current issues in the field of storytelling.

#### Creativity in the West

The formal concept of *creativity* as we know it has not been existence very long. Tatarkiewicz traces the history of the term creativity in western thought in his opus, *A History of Six Ideas: An essay in aesthetics*. A number of his findings are summarized here. The Greeks had no word for ‘to create’ or ‘creator’. This is because the concept was not an acknowledged part of their culture. They had only need for the word ‘to make,’ for making is the duty Greeks placed upon the artist. The artist was considered a replicator. In *The Republic* Plato wrote that the painter’s job was not creation but imitation (Plato, 2003). The Romans relaxed a bit, granting painters as well as poets freedom to explore their art form. However, by the Medieval era painting and poetry were once again influenced by rules instead of innovation. Although the Christian era had introduced the term “*creatio ex nihilo*,” the idea something could be made from nothing was limited to God alone. It was believed the mortal could not create something new any more than he or she could form a human from dust. As Cassiodorus (6th century) wrote, “‘things made and created differ, for we can make, who cannot create.’”

Not until the Renaissance did a concept of creativity akin to ours emerge. Tatarkiewicz wrote that during the Enlightenment, humanity embraced an independent, strong, and confident self-concept. The power of the human mind was believed to be nearly limitless. Still, the term “creativity” was not yet in common parlance. Many thinkers hovered around the concept of creativity, though none used the expression ‘creator.’ The first to do so was a Pole from the 17th century, Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski. Still, poetry was the only art form to which the concept of creativity was assigned. Tatarkiewicz writes, “By the 18th century, the concept of creativity was appearing more frequently in art theory. It was linked with the concept of imagination, which in that period was on all lips”. However, there was still significant debate about the limits of this imagination.

That a concept like creativity, which even a young modern child embraces without question, would take hundreds of years to develop seems odd to the modern mind. Innovation is simply a given in our society. Yet, Tartarkiewicz explains that several early barriers were at play. The first was linguistic. The common use of the term “*ex nihilo*” was reserved for deity . A second barrier was philosophical. Creation was seen as mysterious, and the “Enlightenment psychology did not admit of mysteries” (Tartarkiewicz, 1980, p.249). A third barrier was artistic. The creators of the time were bound “to their rules, and creativity seemed to be irreconcilable with rules” (Tartarkiewicz, 1980, p.249).

In the Romantic era many thinkers revolted against the supremacy of reason promoted during the Enlightenment; and other means of attaining truth such as intuition and emotion began to be recognized (Anderson, Buckler, & Veeder, 1979). Creative

geniuses like Beethoven and Goethe emerged, and the source of their inspiration was believed to be a spiritual impulse arising from within. A concept of creative genius emerged, and this was perceived as a key factor in creation. Imagination took on a directive role that supplanted the reason and knowledge of the Classical era. Exactly how this played out differed from thinker to thinker. Wordsworth was committed to poetic form, though he found inspiration for his work in common sources. Coleridge wrote human imagination was patterned after the imagination of the Divine. Shelley saw the supremacy of imagination through the eyes of an atheist. He wrote that reason served imagination as the instrument serves a musician. Keats was an agnostic who acknowledged few things with certainty but the validity of Imagination. Blake, likewise, wrote that imagination is the core of human existence. Once these ideas began rolling, they gained momentum within the culture with astonishing speed. Less than a century later, “virtually every major twentieth-century psychologist (e.g., Freud, Piaget, Rogers, Skinner) has taken creativity seriously and explored what it means to be creative, and at present the field can be described only as explosive” (Runco & Albert, 2010, p.5).

Throughout this long and winding process three primary categories of creativity have been determined over the years: (1) divine creativity (2) general human creativity (3) specific artistic creativity (Tatarkiewicz, 1980). Views on those have fluctuated drastically according to era and geography. In this paper creativity is viewed in terms of the third category: *artistic creativity*.

### Formal Models of Creativity

As the general concept of human creativity grew into a more comfortable usage, distinct traditions began to develop involving formal analysis of creative process.

Lubart's article "Models of the Creative Process, Past, Present and Future" summarized the broad strokes of creativity theory in the post-Enlightenment West. Poincare was a mathematician who lived between 1908 and 1985. On at least four separate occasions when he was trying to break through quandries in his field answers came to him during a period of rest or distraction. (Lubart, 2000-2001). His conclusion was that seasons of unconscious reflection following conscious study often yield moments of "sudden illumination" (Lubart, 2000-2001).

In 1926 Wallas developed the well-known "four-stage model of the creative process" (Lubart, 2000-2001). According to Wallas, *preparation*, involves preliminary introduction to the nuances of a topic. *Incubation* is a time of rest away from conscious reflection during which the mind works unconsciously on the problem. *Illumination* is the third stage, a spark of idea similar to Poincare's "sudden illumination" (Lubart, 2000-2001). *Verification* is Wallas's final stage, and it involves returning to the problem and discovery, consciously working through what has been learned (Lubart, 2000-2001).

Eindoven and Vinacke challenged Wallas in 1952 (Lubart, 2000-2001). Their study, "found no evidence supporting four discrete stages in the creative process; they described the creative process as a dynamic blend of processes which co-occur, in a recursive way throughout the work" (Lubart, 2000-2001, p. 298). Likewise Ghiselin dismissed "stage-based descriptions of the creative process, favoring an integrated



approach” (as cited in Lubart, 2000-2001, p.298). Many researchers have since concluded creativity cannot be reduced to a formula but instead involves a flowing mix of energies that overlap and shift simultaneously. As noted by Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, “In a creative process, stages of problem definition and problem solution need not be compartmentalized” (as cited in Lubart, 2000-2001). Understandably, many modern models of creativity have shifted instead toward a focus on subprocesses (Lubart, 2000-2001).

One of the most helpful pieces of research on creativity theory was written by Kozbelt, Beghetto, and Runco in 2010. In a work called “Theories of Creativity” they classified and compared 10 different types of creativity theory: Developmental, Psychometric, Economic, Stage & Componential Process, Cognitive, Problem Solving and Expertise-Based, Problem Finding, Evolutionary (Darwinian), Typological, and Systems (Kozbelt et al., 2010). This broad schema allows for different research projects to select a theory that applies most specifically to their work, and it provides a coherent language of communication in an infinitely diverse field (Kozbelt et al., 2010).

#### The Primary Creative Theory Used in this Paper

As I have explored creativity theory from historical, philosophical, psychological contexts, a proposition by author, philosopher, and playwright Dorothy Sayers has particularly engaged me. Sayers’s view (according to the Kozbelt diagram) would be a considered a *Stage & Componential Process* (Kozbelt et al., 2010). This is because Sayers’s view traces the creative process through “a series of stages or components” (Kozbelt et al., 2010). However, Sayers’s work is unique among theories, for its

simplicity and philosophical underpinnings allow for transference to many genres and media of art.

Sayers's proposed model of creation boils down to three elements: Idea, Energy, and Power (Sayers, 1987). Although this paper only uses a loose, restructured outline of her model, it would be wise to summarize Sayers's view first. Sayers wrote that a trinitarian structure of activity permeates the creative process. Figure 1 demonstrates this dynamic. The *Idea* comes first, a subconscious conception of a work that provides vision and unity throughout a project. *Energy* is the process of working out the creative idea within an artistic medium. The *Power* is the connective force binding artist to art and both to audience (Sayers, 1987).

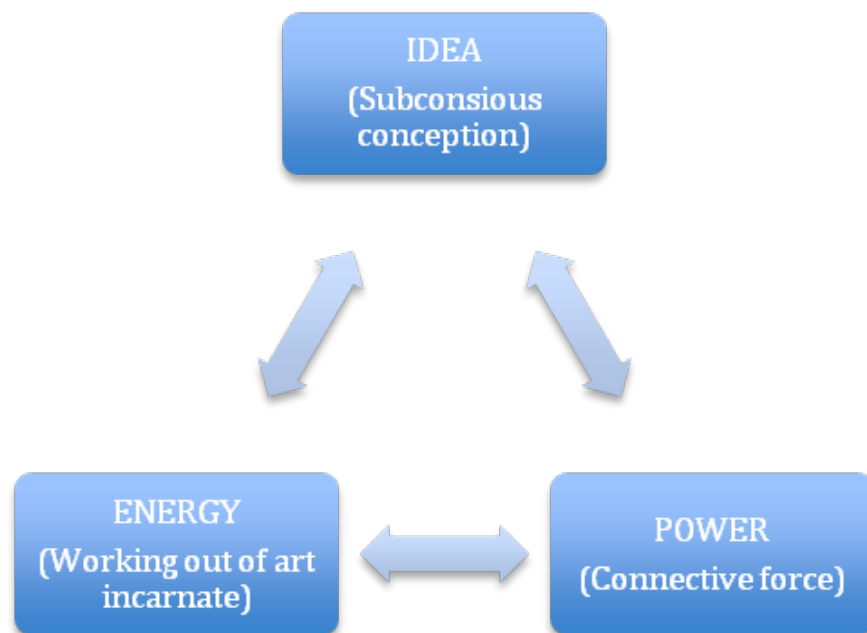


Figure 1. Explanation of Sayers's three-part model of creativity.

Note: Headings by Dorothy Sayers. Definitions and table design by R. Reynolds.

As a point of reference, Sayers mentions Augustine of Hippo's argument: a trinitarian structure exists in sight, "for example: the form seen, the act of vision, and the mental attention which correlates the two. These three, though separable in theory, are inseparably present whenever you use your sight. Again, every thought is an inseparable trinity of memory, understanding, and will" (Sayers, 1987, p.36).

Sayers and Augustine are not the only thinkers to suggest trinitarian structures. Karl Marx wrote that land, labor, and capital comprised the trinity of political economy (Marx, 1962). Niemi and Ellis suggested a narrative trinity that includes teller, story, and listener (Niemi & Ellis, 2001). Lipman also shared the narrative trinity, using the names "story, story teller, and audience" (Lipman, 1999). However, Sayers's thoughts on trinity are helpful in the manner in which they explore attributes of the invisible, the visible, and connectivity.

How Idea, Energy, and Power transfer to the creative process might go something like this: a painter has collected impressions regarding a particular form. They contribute to his or her **Idea**. He or she would then set up a canvas, make a palette, consider composition, sketch, apply paint, tweak his or her work. All working out of the Idea is considered a function of **Energy**. In moments when he or she feels directionless or lost in his or her creation, he or she reverts to the Idea for inspiration and direction. At last, his or her piece would go on display and connect with viewers, evoking a response. This is the **Power** of the piece.

In the creation of a story this theory might play out in the following manner. Suppose experiences and dispositions in the life of a storyteller develop sensitivity toward endangered species. Perhaps he or she spent his or her childhood years near an

inlet, and he or she grew up watching a certain species of egret dive gracefully into the waves. The sound of the egret's cry and the shape of its movements embed themselves in the boy's or girl's aesthetic landscape. In addition to this, the young storyteller engages regularly with people who value narrative. For instance, he or she spends weekends sitting before a fire at his or her grandparents home listening to their memories. Sitting in such community, he or she is absorbing elements of plot, diction, and story presentation. He or she develops an inner sense of the power of story. He or she develops an inner sense of love for the natural world. Every day he or she is collecting images, details, turns of phrase, and compassion. Fifteen years later he or she learns that the habitat for the white fishing bird is threatened by big business plans to industrialize the inlet. He or she feels a desire to engage. All of these factors converge to create an **Idea** for a new story.

The teller then uses his or her **Energy** to develop this Idea. His or her Energy includes the development of plot, characters, hours spent working through problem areas, travel to collect interviews, gathering input from a creative community, and every seen aspect of making. When he or she feels confused about direction, he or she returns to the Idea and compares his or her growing story against it to find clarity.

At last, the story is complete. The storyteller travels about the country, sharing the images he or she has collected with audiences. Listeners connect intellectually and emotionally with the tale. Through his or her words, they catch a vision for the beauty of the inlet, the delicate balance of the natural environment, and the irreparable loss of such a habitat. Performance of the story pushes Energy into **Power** for the artist is now engaging with the emotions and reactions of his audience. There is an energetic transfer between them, a communal comprehension.

Sayers suggests that these three elements of creativity should function like an equilateral triangle (Sayers, 1987). No one aspect of the creative triad should overpower the others. By looking at examples of creative imbalance, this part of her theory is made more clear. For example, a piece of theater lacking in the realm of Idea might manifest lovely, powerful snippets of beauty. Yet there would be no overall coherence. She writes:

It is a scrap-heap of discarded beginnings, cancelled endings, episodes without connection, connecting passages that link nothing, actions without motive, scenes that lead up to situations which never occur, speeches that contradict the character or the speakers, characters whose aspect is only a looming bulk of form without feature. There is no unity...” “...there is no direction of the Energy, and no wholeness of conception. (Sayers, 1987, pp.158-159)

A piece art lacking in Energy would be full of technical issues that inhibit communication. The creator prone to this error would have an Idea and feel its potential Power, but he or she would be unable to give “expression to it in creation” (Sayers, 1987, 162). For example, imagine a storyteller who feels great passion for the Trail of Tears. He or she has a vivid image in his or her mind, and he or she has researched historical sources well enough to understand some details about the plight of the Cherokee. His or her Idea is secure. However, he or she doesn’t develop the story well. In her tale, he or she includes sounds, terms, and allusions that are cliché, even derogatory. The plot has no clear progression and no protagonist. To end the performance, he or she simply stands on stage, cries, and wails, “How could we do this? How could we do this?” There is only raw grief. This teller exhibits the Power of emotion in his or her story, and her or she possesses a clear Idea for story. Yet, his or her Energy is misdirected; therefore, the story

is poorly constructed. Sayers claims: “Every failure in form and expression is a failure in the [Energy], from clichés to bad grammar to an ill-constructed plot” (Sayers, 1987, p. 164). For example, in a play lacking in Energy, “the playwright has not moved with his characters on the stage, and has, perhaps, actually forgotten the stage and the actors when working out his idea” (Sayers, 1987, p.165).

Finally, a story that mishandles Power would demonstrate weakness in the realm of audience connectivity. From the perspective of an audience member, a failure in Power will look very similar to a failure in Energy; for Power depends upon Energy. After delivery the two are nearly inextricable, for as a story is spoken, errors in private construction become failures in public connectivity as well. Sayers notes this overlap. Yet a distinction between Power and Energy becomes valuable in light of two diagnostic questions. Energy asks, “How is this story made?” Power asks, “What does this story evoke?” By asking each, a storyteller can find different sorts of errors in his work.

And so a storyteller weak in Power might leave his or her audience stirred emotionally, yet directionless. Hearers could leave the room full of empathy or angst yet without any sense of order or purpose for this discomfort. They would simply be stirred and left wanting. Or perhaps the audience will not have connected with the story at all. Perhaps they are bored, angry their money was wasted, or feel insulted. This first manifestation of a failure in Power resides in the response of the audience. A second aspect to failure in Power (discussed in more detail in the Power section of this paper) is negativity evoked in a teller by his or her own story. Perhaps he or she feels so overcome by the grief of the tale, he or she turns inward emotionally and cannot speak. Perhaps he or she tells a story that evokes anger in him, and he or she becomes so lost in that feeling

the presentation becomes a rant. The teller leaves the stage confused, distracted, dissatisfied. This is also the result of a failure in Power.

Sayers wrote that a failure in the Idea is a failure in Thought, a failure in Energy a failure of Action, and a failure of Power a failure of Wisdom – “not the wisdom of the brain, but the more intimate and instinctive wisdom of the heart and bowels” (Sayers, 1987, p.176). However, Sayers also writes that asking a writer to separate Idea, Energy, and Power can leave him confused.

Each of them is the complete book separately; yet in the complete book all of them exist together. He can, by an act of the intellect, ‘distinguish the persons’ but he cannot by any means ‘divide the substance.’ How could he? He cannot know the Idea, except by the Power interpreting his own Activity to him; he knows the Activity only as it reveals the Idea in Power; he knows the Power only as the revelation of the Idea in the Activity. All he can say is that these three are equally and eternally present in his own act of creation, and at every moment of it, whether or not the act ever becomes manifest in the form of a written and printed book. (Sayers, 1987, p.41)

Sayers uses the Christian Trinity as a reference for her view. Because this metaphor is limited, she clarifies. Sayers writes that the human creator was made *imago Dei*, and she infers that Idea, Energy, and Power are as deeply embedded into human nature as the rules of physics (Sayers, 1987). She posits that the Idea is connected to God the Father, an invisible being who directs and guides. The Son is the incarnation of creativity, the fleshed-out doing of the Father’s will. The Spirit is the substance of the work that connects it to self and others (Sayers, 1987).

The spirituality of art making is not a foreign concept to the storytelling world.

O'Callahan writes:

Brother Blue, one of the great storytellers, would smile and say, "Storytelling is God talking to you." He was criticized for mentioning religion because people are so uptight about that, but Blue was beyond that. He had a sense of the divine. And as I say anything creative and anything beautiful to me is touched by the divine.

(J. O'Callahan, personal communication, September 7, 2011)

Regardless of theological underpinnings, Sayers's theory deserves particular attention in the realm of creativity study. This is because, even reduced to a secular theory of innovation, it allows for greater variation in individual methodology than the four-step model while connecting the conscious with the subconscious. It encompasses the private rumination as well as the physical working out of the creative concept. Also, it involves the input of the viewer or audience, a key element for this particular art form.

### Current Issues in the Field of Storytelling

At least three issues being discussed in the realm of storytelling studies are relevant to this research: (1) the current need for a critical vocabulary in the field, (2) appropriate and helpful methods of input, and (3) key elements of story dynamics. Each of those topics are addressed briefly below.

#### Need for Critical Vocabulary

In the article "Visions for Storytelling Studies: Why, How, and for Whom?" the issue of the lack of a sufficient critical vocabulary for the storytelling field was discussed



(Radner et al., 2004). This lack of critical or scholarly discourse has corrosive effects including a public perception that storytelling lacks seriousness as an artform. Yet, there is also a possible barrier to change. There are storytellers who fear that formalizing the field through critical analysis will hinder freedom. Radner et al. (2004) address this concern, showing how the history of critical methods within various art forms promotes creativity instead of hindering it. She suggests that formal study promotes artistic diversity and risk-taking, and helps to create more educated and receptive audiences as well (Radner et al., 2004). It is clear from Radner et al.'s discussion that storytelling is still an emerging art form, and there is much room for many levels of critical dialogue. It is hoped that this paper will add some fruitful elements to the conversation.

### Appropriate and Helpful Input

Finding helpful critique has been a challenge in a number of storytelling environments. In the article "On the Threshold of Power" Radner addressed the standard storytelling atmosphere where pleasant stories are presented in exchange for pleasant responses (Radner, 2008). This expectation is limiting in several ways. First, Radner argued there is a certain artistic limitation to this sort of dynamic, for many tellers do not feel free to push into difficult emotional realms. Radner saw a need for the storytelling world to break out of such bounds. Niemi and Ellis agreed. Their book *Inviting the Wolf In* described the cathartic power of entering uncomfortable tales (Niemi & Ellis, 2001). Niemi and Ellis walked readers through 13 painful stories, explaining how each story might relate to an audience. They also gave advice to help storytellers make telling choices wisely (Niemi & Ellis, 2001). Essays collected by Birch and Heckler in their

book *Who Says?* also addressed connection between teller and listener. This book probed the morality of raising difficult emotional issues then leaving the stage. Kvetching and navel gazing were addressed as well as differing theories on the appropriate role of the narrator. It closed acknowledging a society aching for connection and the role storytelling might play in bridging this gap (Birch & Heckler, 1996).

Secondly, the exchange of pleasant story for pleasant response reduces honest feedback (Radner, 2008). Positive community has traditionally been a core element to the storytelling revival; yet, Radner questions if indiscriminate affirmation is beneficial, particularly when a performance environment never grants permission to question or critique. In such a dynamic Radner suggests the story cannot grow properly (Radner, 2008). This issue is addressed within this paper under the Energy section as we explore O'Callahan's use of critical community during the story revision process. O'Callahan's work demonstrates a number of habits helpful in honing a story's effectiveness.

Improvements in the area of critique are likely to enrich storytelling as an art form. In the current storytelling dynamic the teller often commandeers all roles, "Author, Director, Narrator, and Actors" (Radner, 2008, p.43). Radner argues, "[t]he all-in-one nature of storytelling encourages us to work in isolation; it makes us less likely to ask for critique and coaching" (Radner, 2008, p 43). She wrote that the camaraderie of formal programs of study would reduce this problem and tap into the resources of a wider creative flow.

Rodari's voice is another landmark in the conversation on the creative narrative. He relates to this paper due to his desire to provide creative stimulus in the development of story. Rodari was an author of children's stories as well as a journalist, and his work

*The Grammar of Fantasy* breaks down story creation into exercises appropriate for the classroom as well as the adult creator (Rodari, 1996). Of particular interest to this paper are creativity techniques that serve as triggers. He joins unlike nouns, asks “what if,” and explores common objects through an uncommon lens (Rodari, 1996). Such stimuli connect the Energy of composition to invisible roots of Particular and General Inspiration, which lead to a Story Launch (Rodari, 1996). Each of these terms is discussed at greater length in the *Idea* and *Energy* sections of this paper.

### Elements of Story Dynamics

A final source pertinent to this paper is Lipman’s, *Improving Your Storytelling*. This book provides a model of story dynamics that is widely accepted in the storytelling world. His concept of “The Storytelling Triangle” particularly relates to this research. In Lipman’s triad, there are three elements, *the storyteller*, *the story*, and *the audience* (Lipman, 1999). The storyteller has a relationship with both the story and the audience. In a successful story, a third relationship also exists between the audience and the story, and this is a connection to which a teller is not often privy. It is a bond that cannot be forced, but a teller can attempt to influence it through his or her delivery. Lipman writes that humility is therefore necessary, for all a teller may offer is wooing through a nurturing, conscious offering of an ideal story environment (Lipman, 1999).

There are some potential connections between Lipman’s story, storyteller, audience model and Sayers’s Idea, Energy, and Power, though the correlation is not a direct one-to-one. First, this paper notes the similarity between *story* and *Idea*. Sayers’s “Idea” always remains unseen (and this is an important distinction for her), while

Lipman's "story" exists both in the realms of the unspoken idea as well as story made manifest. However, stepping back from these details, there is a certain resonance between the core story concept and Sayers's Idea. Lipman's emphasis on imagining fully is one of the most clear connections here. Lipman urged tellers to go back to the core image of the story and explore it on multiple layers of sensory experience. He called tellers to visualize the scene, hear it, and explore the muscular connections related to it. He also suggested other kinesthetic techniques to connect the Energy of creating or telling to the foundational Idea of the story. (Lipman, 1999). In relation to Sayers's theory, these concepts are all Idea-based, for though wrought through the Energy of activity, they return to an unseen core of inspiration.

Secondly, there is a connection between Lipman's teller and Sayers's *Energy*. The teller's role (according to Sayers), transcends the Energy of telling (the present), tapping back into Idea and forward into Power. So, for Sayers, there is a necessary nursing of unseen Idea in the present moment. Also, Sayers's human creator is not a separate distinction within her triad but a being who incorporates both Idea and Power. Yet, Lipman's teller does embody the story "incarnate," a concept that Sayers's theory promotes. The teller manifests narrative in the flesh, and that is the essence of Sayers's theory on Energy.

Thirdly, the bond of audience and power connects the theories of Lipman and Sayers, if the teller can be included as a member of his own audience. This is because Sayers writes that both the creator as well as the external audience have dynamic responses to the work that combine to generate Power. Lipman's work does allow for this, exploring the teller's need to choose an intentional beneficiary of the story, self ,or

others (Lipman, 1999). Although this project does not plumb the depths of O'Callahan's emotional connection with his own stories, I postulate that the Power of a story within a teller is a vital element of its power. Lipman discussed possible issues such as emotional overload, fear, and vulnerability that come to the surface when a teller's story triggers deep personal issues. (Lipman, 1999). This is a topic for further exploration.

Finally, Lipman offers several categories of performance analysis that are helpful for discussing the impact of a story (Lipman, 1999). Some of these terms are used in the Power section of this research; therefore, I will explain them before proceeding. Lipman notes that some people perceive orality only in light of words spoken. However, at least six factors beyond word choice influence what is heard during a narrative: *tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, posture, eye behavior, and orientation in space*. Five of these terms are in common usage. *Orientation in space* refers to the distance and position of a storyteller in relation to his or her audience. For instance, if his or her body is distant on the stage and turned to the side, he or she would communicate a more aloof feeling than if he or she is standing on the front stage edge facing listeners. Each of these six factors impacts what is heard and felt by an audience.

*Multidimensionality* is another element of telling described by Lipman. Multidimensionality combines two or more of the six factors mentioned above to achieve a magnified effect. For example, meaningful eye behavior might be combined with posture to achieve a dejected look. This would be an example of *characterization through clusters*. *Humor through contrasts* is a second aspect of multidimensionality. To employ this a storyteller would combine opposites to create a sense of irony. For example, the teller might grin at his or her audience while saying, "I'm in huge trouble!" and smacking

his or her palm to his forehead in regret. The contrast of misfit gestures creates a laughable situation. *Transitions* are a third aspect of multidimensionality. This is achieved by progressing some of the factors mentioned above through a plot faster than others. For example, the teller might continue to hum a chorus from a home scene of the story while his or her body language pantomimes walking down a path.

Lipman states that *time-based language* is a third element to oral narrative. Because storytelling happens within the progression of real time, it offers a very different set of communication challenges than does narrative writing. Storytellers and their listeners do not have the luxury of easily jumping back and forth in time to refresh or clarify. This is why Lipman introduces the concept of *nonreversible time*. A teller must be aware of the limitations of his or her audience in plot progression, and not yank them recklessly back and forth. *Pauses, rhythm and tempo*, and *repetition* are devices used in music and poetry as well as storytelling. They serve similar functions of space, movement, and emphasis in this discipline. The concept of *the uncrowded stage* is perhaps unique to a performance art. This is the acknowledgement that there is a limit to how many characters can be present simultaneously in storytelling discourse without confusion. Simplicity often lends itself to a higher level of communication.

Finally, this research refers to Lipman's four tasks of the storyteller in opening a story: *uniting, inviting, offering, and acknowledging*. *Uniting* the audience involves a gesture that welcomes the gathering of listeners from their distracted chatter into a communal focus on the story. *Inviting* can be direct or implied, but it is the means by which a storyteller asks the audience if they are willing to go on the journey with him or her. *Offering* is the point at which a performer's attention shifts from the audience to the

story itself. *Acknowledging* the audience is the final step in which the audience is shown that the performance is over, gratitude is exchanged, and listeners are released. Some of these concepts are used by O’Callahan, and I return to them in the analysis of his *Pouring the Sun* performance at the end of this research. Because O’Callahan and Lipman have worked in close relationship for years, it is likely these ideas have impacted O’Callahan’s delivery as well.

### An Introduction to Sayers

Scholars have found it difficult to summarize Dorothy Sayers’s accomplishments because of their diversity. She was a playwright, author, philosopher, and essayist who lived from 1893 to 1957. Mystery lovers know Sayers as the author of a great number of Lord Peter Wimsey mystery novels, though she also spent her gifts in pursuit of high literary, aesthetic, and philosophical expression. According to Kenney, Sayers’s studied approach to detective fiction had a widespread impact on that genre (Kenney, 1990). Feminists still cite her essay, “Are Women Human.” Her essay “The Lost Tools of Learning,” which explores the Trivium, is in active use by Classical schools around the country as a curriculum guide. Her robust translation of *The Divine Comedy* remains a favorite among Dante scholars for it reflects the vivid imagery of its source (Brabazon, 1981). During WWII the English public came to know the strength of her radio broadcasts. She wrote 21 plays including *The Man Born to be King*, which is still performed today. These were presented in a number of respected live venues as well as the radio. Sayers also wrote two complete books of poetry and a scene for the film *The Silent Passenger*. Her rigorous essays covered a wide berth of topics, many of them

controversial.

Dorothy was an only child, and in her youth she was dramatic and precocious. Her appetite for literature was ravenous, and she was involved in critical analysis by her teens (Reynolds, 1993). Sayers began her formal education during a period in history when women were not allowed degrees, yet she studied with vigor (Tischler, 1980).

Though suitors addressed her, she was not as interested in being doted upon as in finding an intellectual equal with whom she could banter. As a young adult she found that. She fell deeply in love with John Cournos, a fellow author. Their relationship was tumultuous, as he did not want the commitment of marriage, and she was unwilling to use contraceptives during intimacy. Most of her biographers agree that the breaking of this relationship affected the course of Sayers's life and scholarship; for in the wake of its loss, she took up intimacy with a man she did not love, conceived, and bore a son out of wedlock. The birth was a secret she faced with courage, yet it haunted her. Living with such a great private burden added depth and an understanding of human nature to her work for the rest of her life. Perhaps this also explains Sayers's strange relationship with academia, an environment she would enter then leave for various pursuits. Several writers have suggested that she feared a life solidly planted in Oxford could be destroyed if her secret were discovered, so she spread herself among more forgiving endeavors. The culture in which Sayers lived could be harsh, and she was wise enough to manage it shrewdly.

Sayers lived in Bloomsbury during the same era as the famous Bloomsbury crowd, though her companions were more bohemian. She rode a motorcycle about London (Reynolds, 1993), frequented Fleet Street pubs, and played the saxophone for dances



(Tangelder, 2006). Though she disliked socialism (Sayers, 1987), she also rejected the wastefulness of capitalism and potentially destructive tendency of mass production (Sayers, 2004). She rejected domestic mores of her time, and she ran as an equal with thinkers such as C.S. Lewis, Tolkein, and T.S. Elliot (Brabazon, 1981). Charles Williams also had a profound impact on her work.

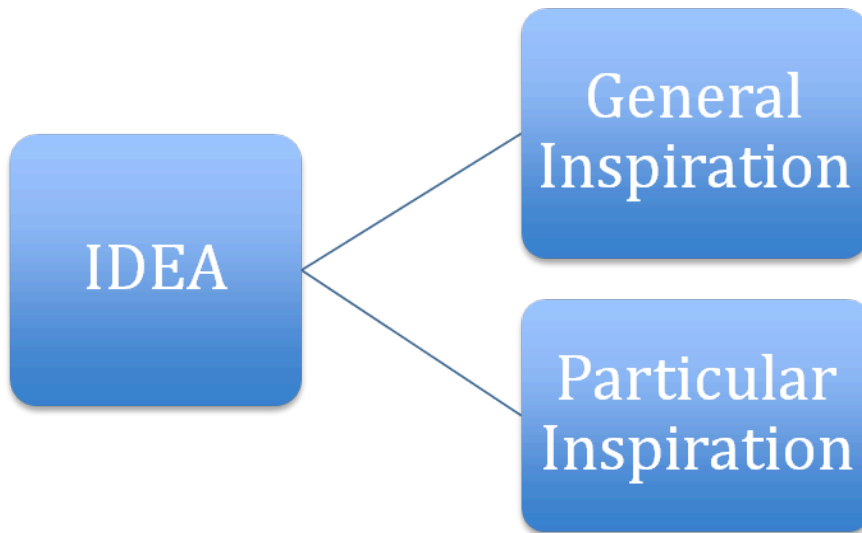
Sayers was not a feminist though she lived expecting equality. In many regards Sayers simply did not consider gender an issue. When asked about what unique angle a woman could offer the genre of crime fiction, she answered pertly, "Go away and don't be silly. You might as well ask what is the female angle on the equilateral triangle" (Sayers, 2005, p.41)

Through the end of her life she found new challenges to pursue. At the age of 52 she taught herself medieval Italian and translated *The Divine Comedy* in *terza rima*. She approached this translation with more vigor and life than her predecessors (Brabazon, 1981), and its liveliness is part of the reason it is still considered one of the premiere translations of that work. She also translated *The Song of Roland* from Old French (Reynolds, 1993). Once women were allowed degrees, Sayers became one of the first women to obtain a degree from Oxford (Reynolds, 1993). The Church of England offered her a doctorate in divinity (Tangelder, 2006). She declined this then accepted a honorary doctorate in 1950 from University of Durham (Brabazon, 1981). Sayers died suddenly in December of 1957 while translating Dante's *Paradiso*. Reynolds completed this work for her. To the end Sayers drove herself hard. She lived out the philosophy she expressed in these words: "The only Christian work is good work, well done." (as cited in Brabazon, 1981, p.272)

## CHAPTER 3

### IDEA

According to Dorothy Sayers the Idea is a guide for a creation. However, the Idea is also the most difficult of the three concepts to grasp because there is no active “doing” involved (Sayers, 1987). From the moment a story moves into observable or measurable activity, it has moved to the Energy stage. Therefore, Idea is made manifest only in what draws from it. The Idea is still crucial, however, for without it the Energy is directionless. While composing a storyteller continually refers to Idea to provide focus and unity for the narrative. This paper expands upon Sayers’s original theory by positing that inspiration provided by an Idea can be either general or specific in form. *Figure 2* refers to these forms as General Inspiration and Particular Inspiration.



*Figure 2.* Two manifestations of Idea.

Note: The term “Idea” is from Sayers. “General Inspiration” and “Particular Inspiration” are terms by R. Reynolds.

### General Inspiration

**General inspiration** involves *biographical*, *aesthetic*, and *natural* input that has influenced the teller philosophically, artistically, intellectually, and emotionally. Perhaps a storyteller's father loved words, so his or her early home life was full of narrative wealth. Perhaps a storyteller encountered a mid-life muse in a sage-like, tale-loving wanderer and saw his or her own reflection therein. Perhaps time spent in nature has created a sense of direction. Perhaps a child's listening inspired him or her to tell stories. Perhaps exposure to Asian art, baroque music, or Fibonacci numbers has awakened a certain inner sense of aesthetic balance. Each of these examples would constitute an aspect of general inspiration, forming a subconscious toolbox from which a teller draws while making stories. General inspiration directs form, style, and a sense of overall "rightness" in a piece; yet, it is considered part of Idea (instead of Energy) for it guides influence instead of action taken. Three specific aspects of General Inspiration are shown in *Figure 3: Biographical Factors, Aesthetic Exposure, and Nature*.

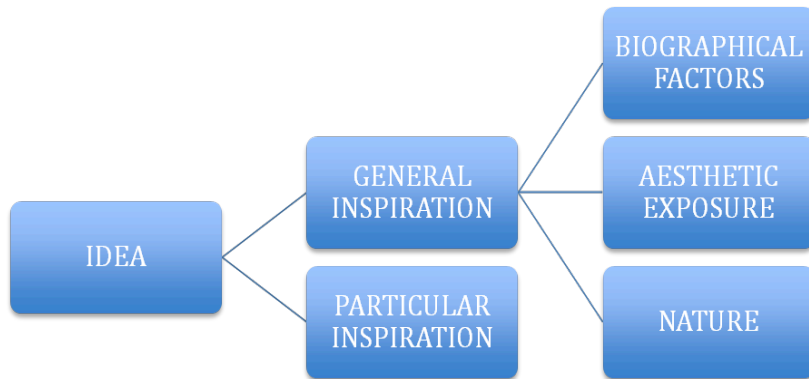


Figure 3. Elements of Idea.

Note: “Idea” is a term from Sayers. Remaining terms by R. Reynolds

Though “general inspiration” is a term created for this paper, past research supports the idea that influence is formative in the life of a creator:

Runco and Chand, for example, presented a two-tiered componential model of the creative process. This differs from the model of Wallas primarily in including a second tier that recognizes the influence of knowledge and information, both procedural and factual, and the influence of motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic. (Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010, p.31)

### Biographical Factors

A fascinating study was completed by Machotka in 2006 that demonstrated the influence of biographical factors upon the creative process. The medium used was visual

art, yet the core principles transfer to all art forms. This study found that participants who experienced childhoods influenced “by inconsistency and loss or illness” often created art that was “up-beat” (as cited in Locher, 2010, p.140). However, this art was not organized or composed carefully, and there was little emphasis on texture. The researchers concluded this art was fantastical in an attempt to “create a better past than the one they had,” and that the primary impetus of those lives had become healing and satisfying longings in others (as cited in Locher, 2010, p.140). This was such a strong desire that they could not imagine their images in more formal terms (as cited in Locher, 2010, p.140). Participants who had controlling personalities made art that was tight and full of collage, and participants who demonstrated an intense need for integration produced art that was formed and composed with thoughtfulness and beauty (as cited in Locher, 2010). Locher states that this research demonstrated, “that the style of the artworks, such as their abstractness, formality, or fluid boldness, reliably reflected what he called the map of each participant’s interpersonal world” (Locher, 2010, p.140).

O’Callahan writes openly about the influence of his past on his narrative. He began to compose stories for his little brother and sister (ages 3 and 4) when he was 13 (O’Callahan, 1999c). During road trips to Cape Cod, he would hold his sister’s little hand, trace the lines in her palm, and talk about how it looked like a river. This is where the story began, “Mickey, look at the line in your hand. It looks like a river. Once upon a time, there was a river of milk that flowed into the cave of the thousand eyes. One day Mickey and Chris were sitting on a great green leaf which was floating down the milk river” (O’Callahan, 1999c, para. 1). Watching his sister’s face, he could tell where her interest waxed and waned. These were cues that propelled the narrative (O’Callahan,

1999c).

Other family members made contributions as well. O’Callahan writes that he was “surrounded by stories,” though he wasn’t aware of this at the time (O’Callahan, 1999c, para. 3). His Uncle Jackie would stop by the house and narrate funny tales about politicians he knew. To the delight of the children, this uncle would confuse his words and make statements like, “I got a lot of ankles in the fire.” Likewise, his mother would talk of her students, new acquaintances in Boston, and workers from the city. O’Callahan says, “Her eye was as sharp as Dickens’,” for she would give them offerings like, “There’s a man on Marlborough Street who shines only one of his shoes” (O’Callahan, 1999c, para. 3). His father, likewise, urged the elementary-aged children to participate with him in the Footlight Theatre in Jamaica Plain. They adored acting before an audience, and they were enriched by the unusual folks who inhabited the theatre. O’Callahan wrote: “It was as if the theatre basement gave birth to wonderful strange people” (O’Callahan, 1999c, para. 3). Another level of inspiration was the grandmother who lived on the third floor of their home. She evoked the sense of a different era for she had lived in the same years as Jesse James. This odd fact led to the birth of new stories: before long, Gram and Jesse James ended up in the same tale (O’Callahan, 1999c).

A number of other early influences marked O’Callahan as well. Bible stories surrounded him. He heard of the Red Sea being parted, Moses’s burning bush, Christ’s birth, Mary and Joseph. (O’Callahan, 1999c). There were also radio stories like the Lone Ranger, sponsored by Cheerios. Young O’Callahan found this character particularly fascinating, for he held the mystique of a mask never removed. O’Callahan wondered whether, in the safe company of Tonto, was he bare-faced, telling tales by the fire? The

village also supplied narrative influences. There was a rough old fruit man named Barbour who cared for the town drunks. Mr. Paine, the stationery man, “had a water mark stamped on his soul” (O’Callahan, 1999c, para. 7). O’Callahan writes, “I was telling hand stories but was unaware that I was swimming in a sea of stories” (O’Callahan, 1999c, para. 8).

Therefore, O’Callahan creates in a state of awareness that many biographical factors may have impacted the stories he tells. Additional factors that might have contributed somehow to his work could be education (formal or self-driven), geographic location, gender, religion (or lack thereof), or ethnicity. Each of these elements, and others like them, create a general Idea base from which stories eventually emerge. O’Callahan has made multiple references to such influences in his storytelling, and some are noted in this paper. However, I do not exhaust the diversity of inspiration that he has cited over the course of his life’s work.

### Aesthetic Exposure

As we have just seen, biographical factors are the first influence upon general inspiration. A second influence is aesthetic exposure. What each person declares “beautiful” is determined by a great number of internal factors. Children who are exposed to nature, culture, or travel will have an aesthetic sense affected by each of those encounters. Artists who journey overseas and encounter paintings of a different genre often return with a style saturated with what they have seen. We are constantly (subconsciously even) collecting proportions, colors, contrasts, and balance. This

aesthetic awareness is not simply a cerebral matter of applied technique, it flows through the bones of our inspiration and guides the core of our art.

Henri, the iconic artist and teacher, showed where all of this input lands. He described an invisible dimension beyond length, width, and depth that guides the artist. He taught that this unseen sense of aesthetic rightness directed every maker. Henri wrote:

I am certain that we do deal in an unconscious way with another dimension than the well-known three. It does not matter much to me now if it is the fourth dimension or what its number is, but I know that deep in us there is always a grasp of proportions which exist over and through the obvious three, and it is by this power of super-proportioning that we reach the inner meaning of things.

(Henri, 1930, pp. 45-46)

When I was in undergraduate school, I became friends with two sisters who were raised in the heart of a forest. Their home had no electricity. Their parents were environmentally-minded, and the girls had grown up in daily communion with the aesthetics of the natural world. Such a childhood made them strong and full of vibrant perception. We took a painting class together one semester, and I was often distracted from my own work for watching theirs. They painted fields, trees, sunlight, and water differently from anyone I had ever seen. They did not think in terms of the traditional threes or fives in the arrangement of their compositions. They did not follow rules of color theory or proportion. They painted simply as those who knew the forest as they knew themselves, and those canvases reverberated with life. The result was not a painting containing the appearance of trees -- they captured the living, intimate essence of trees. The aesthetic of their lives impacted the aesthetic of their art.



Aesthetic diversity makes the analysis of art more complicated. What seems resonant in one aesthetic culture may seem haphazard or even offensive to another. Yet, in general, “composition is said to be balanced when its elements and their qualities (e.g., size, shape, color, directionality) are poised about a balancing center so that their visual forces or tensions compensate one another and appear anchored and stable” (Locher, 2010, p. 142). When I do the work of listening, I can see this core balance in the art of nearly every culture. I see it in the trees painted by sisters raised in the forest. I see it in African tribal masks. I hear it in Irish folktales and African folktales. I can tell that each maker is listening to a different inner aesthetic formed by many years of exposure. They are listening to a voice that directs and guides.

O’Callahan references his own aesthetic dimensionality in this in his Fall 2003 Newsletter: “As a boy I revolted against anything that smacked of school or learning, but unbeknownst to me, I was absorbing the rhythm, mystery and beauty of language” (O’Callahan, 2003a, p.3). He goes on to show that the way his mother used language had a powerful affect on his inner voice. He then writes, “Words were as real as grapefruit or doorknobs to mother. Every word had its own shape, smell, touch and size (O’Callahan, 2003b, para. 4). In these statements, O’Callahan reveals a bit of the aesthetic pulse that ran through the undercurrents of his early life. Such experiences impacted a lifelong sense of creation.

### Nature

In addition to biographical factors and aesthetic exposure, a third source of general inspiration is found in O’Callahan’s writing. That source is nature. He writes:

This past fall, I tried an experiment. I decided to take three minutes every day to look at a natural object.

I would often pick up an oak or a maple leaf, just after it had fallen, and pay attention. I enjoyed holding the stem and rolling it in my fingers. I noticed the smell changed as the leaf began to dry. I discovered that sometimes that three minutes spent with the leaf was the most powerful time of the day. It was a time of ease and exuberance. (O'Callahan, 1998, para. 2)

This example is not a singular occurrence. Over and again in his writings, O'Callahan mentions intentionality about taking the time to absorb the influence of his natural world.

I have spent most of my life in rural settings, so living 3 weeks in some of China's most crowded cities was a significant shock. Pollution there was so intense, I could see only rust-colored smog where sky should have been. Buildings were so densely packed, walls of concrete, metal, and glass took the place of mountains. The earth below was also concrete and asphalt. Under that earth ran a complex, rumbling system of subways. More concrete. More metal. There was a strange chemical scent to the air. After about 10 days, a deep sadness began to settle inside me. I felt lost without nature's compass. When I found something as commonplace as a tree, a plant, or an insect, my heart was stirred. The veins of a leaf took on new meaning. A bird's feather seemed a token from another world. It wasn't until this trip that I realized how great of an impact nature has on my emotional and creative natures.

In 1996, O'Callahan wrote: "Walt Whitman not only gave pleasure to a great many people with his poetry, but he made his readers see that the smallest things in life are filled with beauty and mystery so deep that we know we can never fully touch it." ...

“We are beings in a universe that is alive with creativity, with wonder. Rocks are wonders, trees are wonders, and so are we. Wanna dance?” (O’Callahan, 1996b, para. 3). Wandering in nature, lingering with a leaf, these activities are not pursued because they are related directly to a particular story. They are pursued because they connect the storyteller with the rhythms of the earth. As Thoreau said: “Nature is full of genius, full of the divinity; so that not a snowflake escapes its fashioning hand” (Thoreau, 1962, p.88). Journalist and writing teacher Brenda Ueland confirms this need to feed general inspiration with time spent wandering the wild. In her book, *If You Want to Write* she repeatedly emphasizes the need for creators to spend hours walking to be filled in nature. Then she states: “what you write today is the result of some span of idling yesterday, some fairly long period of protection from talking and busyness” (Ueland, 1987, p.37). Likewise, the poet and author Wendell Berry refers to the restorative abilities of nature in his beautiful poem “The Peace of Wild Things.” After describing the turmoil created by the noise of humanity, he describes stepping into nature this way: “I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free” (Berry, 1998, p.36).

These are the sorts of influences we see in O’Callahan’s writing. Factors such as early biographical influences, aesthetic exposure, and nature contribute to a larger, invisible Idea from which he makes stories. They guide and enrich each narrative he makes on a subconscious (and sometimes conscious) level.

### Particular Inspiration

Apart from the influences of **aesthetic exposure** and **general inspiration**, O'Callahan has also been impacted by **particular inspiration**. Particular inspiration differs from general inspiration in that it involves specific life encounters which serve as a direct reference point for a developing story. For example O'Callahan writes:

I've known for a long time that when I'm creating a story, an image in the story leads me where I need to go. Now I want to be more conscious of images in daily life. Images are like whispers; we hear them only if we pay attention.

(O'Callahan, 1998, para. 3)

O'Callahan uses the development of his *Orange Cheeks* story as an illustration of this principle. This was his first story of personal subject matter. As he told this tale to his son, a powerful image came to mind. It was a picture of "a little boy with paper orange cheeks. At the end of the story he mails paper orange cheeks to his grandmother because he knows she's a warm and wonderful woman." (J. O'Callahan, personal communication, September 7, 2011). The appearance of this image led O'Callahan into the development of a story that he added to his repertoire. This invisible picture, this Idea, directed the Energy of his activity.

In the Fall of 2007, O'Callahan wrote:

In the process of creating "Glasses," I discovered that images both guide me and touch on the mystery of life.

A painting is a painting inspired by something. I think of my Pill Hill Stories as paintings-they are their own world. (O'Callahan, 2007, p. 1)

O’Callahan is not alone in his belief that paintings are idea-driven. A study was done by Weisberg in 2004 that examined the process behind Picasso’s *Guernica*, and some interesting discoveries were made regarding particular inspiration:

“Picasso had the ‘skeleton’ of *Guernica* in mind when he began the work and that the process of creation of the composition can best be characterized as an elaboration of a kernel idea, rather than the generation of numerous different ideas (i.e., ‘false starts and wild experiments,’ see Simonton, 1999) from which the final creative product emerged.” (as cited in Locher, 2010)

In other words, Picasso reverted to a kernel Idea for guidance while making *Guernica*. In finding corrections and direction, he turned to this Idea to guide him. A visual artist and friend of O’Callahan described a similar experience in regard to his art. He pointed to a painting on the wall, explaining how he sometimes felt unsure of the direction the work should take. O’Callahan replied: "I often feel like I'm wandering in the dark and the image is like a candle that leads me where I need to go. I've learned to trust the image" (O’Callahan, 2003d, para. 4).

O’Callahan illustrates this process of idea-driven honing particularly well by describing a story that fell flat and how life was restored to it. While delivering his new Pill Hill story at Muddy River Playhouse, the audience was unresponsive. They did not laugh at the Aunt Hilda character, and O’Callahan could not understand why. He wrote that perhaps they were tired that particular night, but upon a second delivery of the story, there was also no laughter. For two consecutive nights, the Gloucester Stage at the Muddy River Playhouse evoked a silent audience. O’Callahan did not know why there was such a disconnect.

Searching for answers, O’Callahan went back to his guiding Idea. He wrote that the Aunt Virginia figure that had inspired the tale was not a reserved woman. She lived robustly. In looking at this Idea, something became clear to O’Callahan: he was too detached with the Aunt Hilda character. He needed to launch more fully into her personality and narrative. The resulting change was significant. O’Callahan wrote:

So after the show I paced about, being Aunt Hilda. Chest out, shoulders back, I imagined Hilda’s red cape swirling as she directs, shouting, “Passion! We need passion in this play!” I felt bigger and bigger bellowing to the walls. In the morning I took a walk calling out “Passion!” to the Gloucester seagulls.

That Sunday at Gloucester Stage, the Aunt Hilda character came alive and the audience laughed and applauded. Hilda was back. (O’Callahan, 2006, p.1)

Here we see that when the story fell flat, O’Callahan returned to his particular inspiration – the passion of Aunt Hilda – to revive it. In revisiting this Idea, the Energy of the story was rekindled, and it reverberated anew with Power.

Henri, painter and beloved art mentor, provides an example of this sort of Idea-Energy disconnect in terms of the visual arts. He wrote that sometimes while drawing an outline the artist cannot remember what a line denotes, for the artist becomes focused only on the activity of forming a good line. Yet, when the action of forming a good line becomes the primary focus, the image that inspired the line gets lost. Henri writes: “You must think more of what created the line in nature; of the movement and the form that created it. The line is nothing in itself” (Henri, 1930, p.106). Henri warns that if a solitary idea does not fuel a piece of work, if it simply becomes a conglomeration of various pieces, the core of the creation is lost. “The picture must not become a patchwork of parts

of various moods,” he writes, “The original mood must be held to” (Henri, 1930, p.15).

The nucleus of a creation - be that a story, a score of music, or a canvas - is an Idea, a source image from which all activity flows.

## CHAPTER 4

### ENERGY

According to Sayers Energy is the incarnation of Idea (Sayers, 1987). It is the working out of Idea's image in every possible manner. The Energy phase encompasses all of "doing," for example: routines of the creator, techniques, interaction with the artistic community (mentors, critics, peers), conformity and resistance to convention, playfulness, and milieus such as nature, urbanity, solitude, etc. Because it is the work of construction, Energy is the broadest stage of the creative process. It is the activity by which an invisible concept begins to take shape in a tactile format that can be witnessed by an observer. This study explores six elements of Energy found in the work of O'Callahan. This list is not comprehensive. It is only a selection of several particular sorts of doing that go into the construction of a story.

As shown in *Figure 4*, the Energy cycle often begins with a dreamy, reflective state named here as moodling. It then passes through a launch and moves into the other three elements presented. However, the Energy sequence has no required chronology, as the creation cycle regularly interweaves, touching and retouching various manifestations as need, inclination, and desire rise.



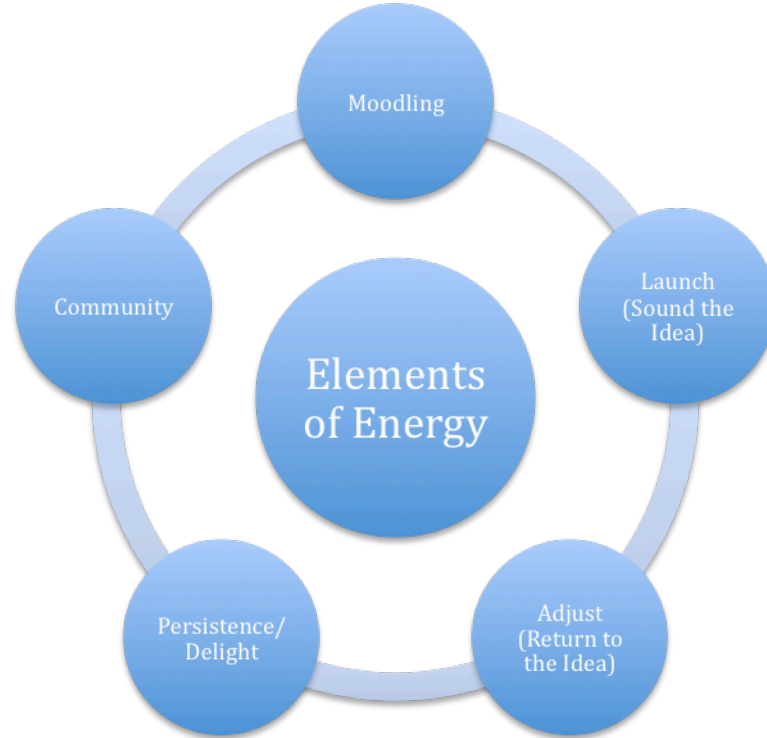


Figure 4. Elements of Energy

Note: The term “Energy” is from Dorothy Sayers. Remainder of terms and chart design by R. Reynolds.

### Moodling

It might seem odd that the first step of creative activity is often a conscious step toward inactivity, yet many creators believe it is so. Ueland’s *If You Want to Write* states:

So you see the imagination needs moodling--long, inefficient, happy idling, dawdling and puttering. These people who are always briskly doing something and as busy as waltzing mice, they have little, sharp, staccato ideas, such as: "I see where I can make an annual cut of \$3.47 in my meat budget." But they have no slow, big ideas. (Ueland, 1987, p.32)

According to Ueland a time of rest precedes the time of making, and this is not a new thought. In the Judeo-Christian tradition we see this same idea taught as early as

Genesis 1:3 (New International Version): “And there was evening, and there was morning – the first day.” The night, not the dawn, marks the onset of a new day. Perhaps even the ancients were somehow tuned to this creative rhythm.

Ueland continues:

If you would continue to be alone for a long time, amblingly swinging your legs for many miles and living in the present, then you will be rewarded: thoughts, good ideas, plots for novels, longings, decisions, revelations will come to you. I can absolutely prove that. (Ueland, 1987, p. 44)

There is perhaps some crossover between Energy’s moodling and the Idea’s influence of nature. However, moodling is included here as a particular facet of the Energy stage because for many artists it is not simply a facet of the past that happened to fall into a creator’s life but a conscious, precreation wooing and warming of the soul into making.

Though O’Callahan doesn’t refer directly to a moodling step, reading through a decade’s worth of his newsletters and blog posts reveals that moments of centering, wandering, and rest are regularly an integral part of his creative life that yield story. He writes:

A breeze that frees us as we ride in an open-air van through the Kruger National Park in Africa. I sit feeling the warm breeze and have no responsibilities other than to feel the breeze and I must repeat this to myself over and over and over, since it is my tendency to carry invisible worries. I often carry the past as if it were great rocks in a sack on my back. But in the breeze I let go of the sack. (O’Callahan, 2011, para. 1)

And from his Fall 1997 Newsletter:

I write this newsletter in July. Yesterday I swam in the saltwater marsh. It is the place I am happiest in the whole world. I leap into the creek and the water's chilly. It tastes salty. The ocean tides come in twice a day filling the creeks. Above me is the blue sky, the sun a great yellow presence--a mighty friend. All around the banks of the creeks is tall green marsh grass. There are ripples in the water, birds fly near my head. When I am floating on a planet there are no worries, no cares, just color and wonder. (O'Callahan, 1997, para. 1)

This resignation to listening to the world, reveling in its wonders, before launching into the effort of making is a sort of moodling. He lingers in his surroundings, then moves into creation, writing from what he has experienced. The imprint left on O'Callahan's stories and reflections from such a time investment is unmistakable.

### Launch (Sound the Idea)

The sounding of an idea is perhaps most easily understood via a term of the visual arts. The word "sketch" evokes permission, boldness, and freedom, for a sketch is (by definition) a work made without expectation of perfection. It is a *working from* that is *working toward*. It is a construction resigned to *process*, still white hot from the invisible fire of Idea, virginal with the first lines of the seen.

Locher writes:

The first phase of the design process – the concept-development phase – is characterized by the generation of concept sketches that provide an initial pictorial representation of a design. Sketches serve as external memories of design

ideas for later inspection, and they provide visual cues ‘on the fly’ for the association of structural and functional issues associated with the artifact being developed. Sketching, if effective, is a cyclical, dialectic process that results in the continuous emergence of new knowledge and reinterpretations of a potential design. (Locher, 2010, p.138-139)

Tracing the development of pieces such as "*Pouring the Sun*," one can clearly see the Launch phase of O’Callahan’s creative process. In his newsletter from Spring of 2000, O’Callahan discusses the extensive and peculiar process of evolution through which this story was born. Preliminary offerings of the tale were imperfect. To an early sketch of this piece, director McElvain responded critically to O’Callahan’s work. McElvain said to him, “I stopped taking notes. You haven't got one story. You have several. So it is nothing” (as cited in O’Callahan, 2000c, para. 6). Though McElvain was direct, his response to the story sketch was vital. Like a painter wrestling with a misplaced graphite line, O’Callahan was able to see the compositional flaws in his preliminary work and correct accordingly.

Another example of a Launch corrected would be Aunt Hilda mentioned in the “Particular Inspiration” section of this paper. O’Callahan’s initial delivery of this character left the audience unresponsive (O’Callahan, 2006). This result revealed areas that needed improvement, and corrections were duly made. This is the essential nature and the benefit of the Launch. It is a thing made to be remade, which leads us to our next aspect of Energy: Adjustment.

### Adjust (Return to the Idea)

While sketching out the initial shape of a story, the creator adjusts his or her creation by returning to the Idea for guidance and inspiration. The Idea is like a fountain, and when an artist forgets to go back and drink from that source, a work can become dry and lifeless. Perhaps an interval isn't quite "right" in the melody of a song. Perhaps a shadow in a painting is a shade too warm. Perhaps a story climaxes too early or too late. How is a creator to know what direction to move when such problems arise? The answer is often so simple we overlook it: when we return to the Idea, needed adjustments can flow naturally. If an artist fails to return to the Idea and adjust accordingly, the creation grows distorted, and so does the creator. Henri writes: "IF IN YOUR DRAWINGS you habitually disregard proportions you become accustomed to the sight of distortion and lose critical ability. A person living in squalor eventually gets used to it" (Henri, 1930, p.83).

O'Callahan seems to return regularly to the Idea as a basis for adjustment. While confounded over a NASA story, he dove back into a childlike awe of the heavens for guidance. He wrote: "I began by looking at the stars to recover my sense of wonder" (O'Callahan, 2010, p.1). Likewise, he turned back to people and environments heavy-laden with Idea. He spent time with people like JC High Eagle, a Cherokee from Oklahoma who had worked as NASA engineer for 40 years. O'Callahan listened to High Eagle describe the vision he had at 5 years old, a vision that he would, "help people get to the moon" (O'Callahan, 2010, p.1). O'Callahan also spoke with Edgar Mitchell, the astronaut who was the 14th human to walk on the moon. O'Callahan listened to

Mitchell's dream that someday we will be able to travel with greater speed than light. Then, O'Callahan spent time with Christa McAuliffe's mother (O'Callahan, 2010).

O'Callahan also enrolled in an astronomy class, and, "the planets became wonderful jewels. I imagined I could put them in my pocket" (O'Callahan, 2010, p.1). In addition to all of this, O'Callahan visited the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California. While there he spoke with a great number of experts, scientists, astronauts. O'Callahan writes, "As the interviews went on a number of threads appeared: risk, commitment, mathematics, physics, courage, vision, humor and the ability to communicate" (O'Callahan, 2010, p.1). In each of these doings, O'Callahan is adjusting his emerging creation to the sustaining Idea. He is saturating himself in Idea and using that core as a guide.

An important thing to note is that returning to Idea for adjustment is distinct from making adjustments based on audience. While working on *Forged in the Stars*, O'Callahan states that he intentionally did not focus on the space centers where he would be telling the story because this would have been intimidating. Instead, he focused on the Idea behind those space centers, a program that was sending space ships past our solar system and launching the Hubble Telescope (O'Callahan, 2010). What guides him at this point is a focus on the Idea – not on the performance.

Another benefit to Idea-based adjustment is its ability to bring discernment when creative options are diverse. O'Callahan discusses this in his narration of the Bethlehem Steel story. The initial gathering of information for this tale was so broad that O'Callahan struggled with direction (O'Callahan, 1999d). He had spent 3 years interviewing around 75 steelworkers as well as their families. He had spoken with college teachers and history

experts. He had conversations with plant management as well as labor. He spoke with women who worked the steel in the second World War. He writes that he “interviewed so many people that I became overwhelmed, because the story could be about every one of them” (O’Callahan, 1999d, para. 3).

Finally, O’Callahan was connected with a man named John and his sister Mary. He learned about their mother, who left rural Poland at 18 years old and traveled alone to America. Her life, “seemed to capture the story of thousands of people who came to this country and whose lives became intertwined with both the steel industry and the labor movement” (O’Callahan, 1999d, para. 6). In this case, returning to a core Idea helps O’Callahan narrow down to the core of the story. It provides a strong, single thread on which to hang the rest of the narrative.

### Persistence-Delight

A creator is required to live two opposing realities simultaneously: at once he or she must be childlike and he or she must be mature. He or she must play freely and he or she must commit to a grueling discipline. Creative persistence and creative delight are two sides of a strange coin. At one moment, an artist must be free to wander, and the next he or she must dig in and fight dragons. It seems a contradictory mix; yet many of those who have walked this road understand how both can be true. Therefore, this third manifestation of Energy, here named “Persistence/Delight,” will bounce between seeming opposites.

Henri wrote that he had spent many years watching gifted students who lacked the ability to persist through challenges (1930). Though they had a unique eye for seeing, and

though they had the hand for beautiful sketches, though they formed “near masterpieces,” they would not push through the final work of drawing disparate elements into an aesthetic whole. Henri writes: “That final bringing of things together, tying up, accentuation of the necessary, and elimination of the unnecessary, requires a force of concentration that few are capable of attaining. It's the last, final spurt of energy-the climax of all that has gone before. The majority fail at this point. Those who become masters do not” (Henri, 1930, p.97).

Stephen King expresses a similar sentiment in his book, *On Writing*, he writes:

“...stopping a piece of work just because it's hard, either emotionally or imaginatively, is a bad idea. Sometimes you have to go on when you don't feel like it, and sometimes you're doing good work when it feels like all you're managing is to shovel shit from a sitting position. (King, 2000, p.29)

O'Callahan encountered the need for persistence during his composition of the NASA story. He describes it as the hardest story he's ever done (O'Callahan, 2010). In fact, it grew so difficult, O'Callahan wrote: “I felt I was carrying those planets on my back and it hurt. The pain became so great I couldn't sit or lay down. I had to keep walking. I said to my wife, Linda, one day, ‘I'm going on a two mile walk. What if I can't walk back?’ She laughed and said, ‘Crawl’” (O'Callahan, 2010, p.1). Sometimes the creative process is brutal. Sometimes there is no other way but a dogged commitment to persisting through that.

While constructing the Bethlehem Steel story, O'Callahan had a similar experience. “As with most stories, the process has been very much like riding a wild horse. One moment I'm in the saddle, then suddenly I'm thrown to the ground. Sitting on



the ground feeling sore and hurt, I know I have to get up and get back on the horse” (O’Callahan, 1999d, para. 7). After working hard for almost a year, O’Callahan could finally write, “I think I have a sense of what the story is about” (O’Callahan, 1999d, para. 7). It is little wonder that a man who has persisted through many such challenges would cite discipline as a key factor in creativity. In personal correspondence from September 7, 2001, O’Callahan wrote:

“[D]iscipline is crucial. Writers often sit and stare at a page and I often go out in the back yard and pace. I’ll go through a scene and if that doesn’t work I might use my notebook to ask questions about the story I’m working on. A long story can take three years. *Pouring the Sun* took three years. For that story I interviewed steelworks in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and in time the interviews led me to one family, the Waldony family at 721 Ridge Street. Even that was just the beginning. The task was daunting. How do you tell the story of thousands upon thousands of immigrants coming to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and helping to build the bridges and buildings of this country? (J. O’Callahan, personal communication, September 7, 2011).

O’Callahan shows us that persistence is a key element to the Energy of creation of story. Yet, persistence runs hand-in-hand alongside delight. O’Callahan captures this communion of opposites beautifully in this quote from a 1999 newsletter:

I’ve mulled a great deal on two images of horses in the last two years; a dray and a roan. The dray, a workhorse, feels life is to be plodded through. The roan, slender, and full of life, feels life is to be delighted in. The roan gallops with the

ease of the wind. At Connie Regan-Blake's suggestion, I'm imagining the two horses at ease with each other. (O'Callahan, 1999b, para. 2)

O'Callahan is not alone in this understanding that creative persistence and creative delight function as a team. Henri speaks of an artist who "paints like a man going over the top of a hill, singing" (Henri, 1930, p.104). Ueland writes: "... the more you use this joyful creative power – like the little girls producing the plays – the more you have" (Ueland, 1987, p.12). Sternberg reiterates:

Creativity is as much a decision about and an attitude toward life as it is a matter of ability. Creativity is often obvious in young children, but it may be harder to find in older children and adults because their creative potential has been suppressed by a society that encourages intellectual conformity. It is neither domain general nor domain specific it has elements of each. We can increase its domain-generality by carrying with us the attitudes that support it across a variety of domains. (Sternberg, 2009, p.36)

One of the most helpful things about O'Callahan is that he demonstrates this childlike freedom repeatedly in his newsletters. Not only does he tell us that delight is a value, but he models it. For example, in a post from Fall of 2002, he describes a storm that hit during a Tuesday evening writing group. Mid-story, one of the participants dashed outside to experience the wild fury of the weather. Her childlike spontaneity was a boon to the creativity of the group.

Likewise, in a newsletter post entitled "Kiss the Joy as it Flies," O'Callahan describes the childlike delight of a creativity workshop in Provence, France. He writes:

Doug Lipman and I spent a week in Provence, France leading a creativity workshop with people who have become dear friends. We sketched, painted, and created stories. We struggled with the creative process and grew closer. We also ate gloriously, and took long walks and bike rides past poppy fields and laden cherry trees. There were two wondrous moments that week. One, a picnic just outside Maison de Sante de Saint-Remy, the asylum, where Van Gogh spent a year of his life. There was a peacefulness about that picnic which was as perfect as a child's smile. The second was standing in a circle under a starry sky singing and talking of the week we'd had. A picnic, a circle. In those moments we touched eternity. (O'Callahan, 2000a, para. 1)

This imagery shows O'Callahan's commitment to enjoying the creative process as well as persisting through difficulties. He finds places of joy and wonder, to fuel his fires as well as the discipline to push through hardship.

Energy therefore manifests beautifully through the tension created by the opposition of persistence and delight. If only driving, brute force is used, the work will likely miss the spark of life delight provides. Yet without persistence, it is likely to lack the depth form . In many cases, both extremes are required for the production of a powerful story.

### Community

Mentors, critics, and peers often leave deep impressions on the development of a creative endeavor. This influence can be positive or negative. The opinions of those close to a creator can break a wing, or they can heal it. They can encourage a timid soul to

great heights, or they can cast him or her to earth whimpering. Because community leaves permanent fingerprints on the activity of construction, it is included here as an element of Energy. Meusbarger states: "...creative persons are very sensitive and responsive to the attitudes and behavior prevailing within an organization or at their place of work," (Meusbarger, 2009). Ueland concurs. She writes that it is so important for a creator to find a safe audience in which to develop new ideas, he or she must go so far as to visualize a supportive community if a real one is not available (Ueland, 1987).

O'Callahan has participated in the Blue Mountain Group (a storyteller's retreat gathering) for over 25 years. Before this he participated for a decade in workshops and retreats with storytellers from his home region of New England (Sobol, 1999). As I have studied over a decade's worth of newsletters from O'Callahan, the high value he places on community has become clear. There are numerous references to his love for others, their love for him, and the enormous impact this hearth of safety has had on his making.

One benefit O'Callahan has found in community is encouragement in times of fatigue. There was a Saturday night during the National Storytelling Festival when the weather was growing cool and participants were weary. The tent was at half capacity, and O'Callahan was admittedly "grumpy." Syd Lieberman took the stage, and in O'Callahan's words, "Syd took the stage with such spirit the tent came alive. Invisible sparks come from every part of his body. Syd reminded me of Brother Blue's saying that if a tent is half full, the rest of the seats are filled with angels. Blue always plays to a full house." Syd's enthusiasm was catching. "Syd filled the tent with light," writes O'Callahan, and the tellers who followed Syd were lifted via in his momentum into their

performances. O'Callahan writes, "By the time we'd finished, the tent was floating. Them angels got carried away" (O'Callahan, 2003c, para.7).

A second benefit to community is refinement, iron-sharpening-iron. O'Callahan had spent many years building a friendship with John Langstaff before doing a performance with him. Yet working together, and their process of editing the CD from that show, was enlightening to O'Callahan. He wrote:

I delighted in John's editing style. "No, I'm talking too much there. We'll have to cut that. The whole CD should end with 'The Herring Shed.'" "No," I said. "It's all about the sea. And we want to hear the audience singing with you after 'The Herring Shed.' We want everyone singing as they listen to this CD." John listened to every note. It had to be just right. What fun we had in the studio that day.

(O'Callahan, 2004, p.1)

O'Callahan relaxed into the safety of the relationship that had been established between himself and Langstaff, and he allowed the trust of that community to do its natural work. The result was not only an improved product but also shared joy in watching the creation develop.

This refinement also manifests through communal problem solving. In speaking of a week he spent with Carl Zinn, a friend and retired university professor, O'Callahan compared their teamwork to that of Jim and Huck Finn traveling on the Mississippi River (O'Callahan, 2003d, para. 6). They experimented with the space of performance and discussed taping issues for the workshops O'Callahan would be offering. "We ran into problems and solved them together," O'Callahan wrote (2003d, para. 6). There is a gentle sense of play and trust evident here. Because excellence in story is a common goal,

kinship develops. Problems and difficulties are a team issue, and creators join forces to overcome them.

O’Callahan has experienced a similar camaraderie with Doug Lipman. For over 20 years, the two have been telling stories together, organizing workshops, offering advice to one another, and sharing in a symbiotic artistic fellowship. O’Callahan describes their process like this:

We’d each take one hour to work. Doug is both a great listener and a great coach, so I got the better of it. The friendship allowed both of us to take risks, to grow and create work we never would have done alone. (O’Callahan, 2005a, p.1)

Again, trust is evident. Having a safe place to land relationally opens up the creative process to explore freely and grow in new ways.

A third benefit to community is the strength it provides. In the throes of the creative process, it is easy to grow discouraged. Yet the simple act of walking with another can restore perspective and allow one to refocus on the beauty at hand. O’Callahan discusses this dynamic in his post, “Magic Tent Pegs.” He describes a night when he was interrupted from sleep unsettled because he had not leaped into the telling of a story on which he had spent great effort (O’Callahan, 2000b). He was angry with himself for letting fear stop him. Yet, he finally realized, that this failure was insignificant in light of the fact that he would soon be on stage telling a story with his daughter, Laura. “A gift! This work, these people. It’s all a gift,” he wrote. He was then able to go onstage with Laura, a trained sign-language interpreter, at his side,. This was a poignant moment for O’Callahan, for (he wrote), “[I]t was my children who ‘listened me into being a storyteller’ and now Laura and I were telling "Auk" together “ (O’Callahan,

2000b, para. 3). This story demonstrates the fortification community can provide during times of discouragement. Through teamwork with his daughter O'Callahan gained perspective and strength to return to performance despite a sense of failure.

Fourthly, community provides courage to face difficult story themes. Creators like O'Callahan often need to deal with deep issues like death, abuse, injustice, and loss. Presenting such stories tends to transfer the emotional weight of a suffering character into the teller himself, and this can be frightening and painful. Companionship through this sort of development process gives the teller courage to face fears and sadness evoked during this process. O'Callahan provides an example related to a struggle he faced while creating *Pouring the Sun*. His friend, Connie Dodge, listened to a preliminary version of the tale (O'Callahan, 2000c). She told O'Callahan that she had the sense he was sidestepping the most excruciating element of the story, and O'Callahan knew she was right. It was terrifying to face the emotional weight of losing a child. He did not want to explore that aspect of the narrative. Finally, he called two friends who had lost their daughter in an automobile accident. Through talking to this couple, O'Callahan was able, at last, to process the reality of the story's pain. This happened 3 days before the story's debut, and the result was powerful. He wrote, "Mary Soltysiak sent a letter afterwards saying I was like a member of the family" (O'Callahan, 2000c, para.9).

A fifth benefit to community is its ability to enhance freedom and delight during creation. O'Callahan tells the story of a workshop he led with Doug Lipman in Hebron, Connecticut. They were tempted to cancel the program because there were only 12 people registered, but they did not, and they were grateful. For this group met twice each year for at least 6 years after, for 4 days at a time. O'Callahan says this has been one of

his “richest experiences” (O’Callahan, 1999a, para. 1). In the mornings they wrote, and in the evenings, they read their creations. They also, “played with voice, character, sound and movement” (O’Callahan, 1999a, para. 2). They “created mini musicals, satires and skits” (O’Callahan, 1999a, para. 3). They made detective stories. They delighted in the process of making. O’Callahan writes that such short bursts of intensive creation with a handful of people resulting in an immediate production is, “a thrilling experience” (O’Callahan, 1999a, para. 4). He continues, “You’re using language and figuring how to use your body and the space while developing a structure. It’s all done so quickly that there’s no time for much nervousness” (O’Callahan, 1999a, para. 4). One group member says she returns to this atmosphere over and over again because the group confirms who she is at heart. O’Callahan concludes his description of the gathering by encouraging others to form groups of their own. He writes, “Creativity flows when we are at ease and present in the moment. What a gift to have times in life when we can truly be ourselves and be accepted for who we are” (O’Callahan, 1999a, para.6). Therefore, O’Callahan proposes that positive community helps provide an environment of delight that unlocks the doors of the creative spirit. There is a multiplication of productivity in the presence of liberty and laughter.

Looking back over of the many benefits O’Callahan has found within community, it is evident that his energetic development of Idea would be stunted to a significant degree without the rich partnership of the Storytelling community. In times of fatigue, fear, loneliness, and disorientation interaction with others has given him solace and guidance. Their opinions have honed and shaped his work. They have helped him remember play. They have named him. They have held him aloft



## CHAPTER 5

### POWER

According to Sayers, Power, “is the thing which flows back to the writer from his own activity and makes him, as it were, the reader of his own book. It is also, of course, the means by which the Activity is communicated to other readers and which produces a corresponding response in them” (Sayers, 1987, p.41). In other words Power is the evocative aspect of art.

Sayers describes two ways in which Power manifests in a story. First, there is the emotional response of the audience. This response may or may not align with the intent of the author, and disparities here can be somewhat diagnostic. It includes empathy, morality, and aesthetic pleasures. A second and more subtle way Power manifests in story is through the emotions of the teller. Because a teller is a listener as well as a maker, a performance can surprise him or her as he or she is speaking. The act of telling can also be cathartic, inspirational, or provide an emotional escape.

#### Emotion of Audience

One of the beautiful things about a work of performance art is the emotional connection between maker and receiver. O’Callahan has written that, “...storytellers toss images to listeners who recreate those images and send back laughter or lively silence. There is a whirl of energy between listener and the storyteller” (O’Callahan, 2012b, p.5).

Musicians, actors, and storytellers have all noted the difference a responsive audience makes. There is a communal exchange of understanding, and the emotional reaction of an audience helps complete the art cycle. The hearing somehow makes the saying full. This sort of intimate emotional connection is sought by O’Callahan. He wrote of his first Pill Hill story, “Aunt Ann must have felt when she was spat at. That’s my job, to let the listener experience both my emotions and the emotions of the characters” (O’Callahan, 2007, p.1).

Yet, despite the goal of audience intimacy, there is also something of a mystery to when it does and doesn’t manifest. When it does, the connection can be intoxicating.

O’Callahan describes this experience with folk musician John Langstaff:

The lights went low then John Langstaff stood alone on the stage and began to sing and somehow he had all twelve hundred of us singing. John stood on tiptoes and encouraged us all and we were one. After the first act, John was doing a Morris Dance and he began to sing Lord of the Dance. Moments later he and the Morris men led hundreds and hundreds of us into the great hall in a dance. I had never seen the like. We were not just watching; we were singing and dancing!

At intermission we all danced out onto Washington Street doing the Lord of the Dance. One gentleman who was passing by had evidently had a martini lunch. He stared at us, then threw up his hands, tore off his tie and joined in the dance.

(O’Callahan, 2004, p.1)

Obviously, a potent connection was formed during this telling. This connection is an example of what we will call Power.

Power has the ability to affect the audience in a variety of ways. There can be laughter and the lifting of spirits. There can be catharsis when a sad story is told. The images within story can even kiss the sleeping princess of a dull consciousness and awaken her to reality once more -- be those pleasant realities or painful. O'Callahan describes this last aspect of Power in his "Master Minds" essay from *Storytelling Magazine*: "The images we storytellers use can help us pierce through the numbness that comes from exposure to painful realities" (O'Callahan, 2012b, p.5). O'Callahan then provides examples of images that have rattled him from a sleepy acceptance of horrors to the alertness of recognition. He describes a story he heard about a young girl named Rachel who is killed by a grenade in Iraq. This tale reawakened O'Callahan to the reality of a war that had faded into an emotional distance. He also described how his sensitivity to the oppression of the Kurds was jolted to life by a kneeling storyteller singing a song in Kurdish (O'Callahan, 2012b). Through these illustrations, O'Callahan demonstrates the potential of a story's Power.

I watched O'Callahan's *Pouring the Sun* story twice, and I experienced many aspects of the story's Power (O'Callahan, 2005). During my first viewing, I simply relaxed into the plot and let it take me where it would go. However, during my second observation, I took notes based on elements of connectivity described by Doug Lipman in his text, *Improving your Storytelling* (Lipman, 1999). Specifically, I looked for aspects of oral performance mentioned in the literature review of this paper: variety of expression (tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, posture, eye behavior, orientation in space), multidimensionality (characterization through clusters, humor through contrasts, transitions), time-based language (nonreversible time, pauses, rhythm, and tempo,

repetition, and the uncrowded state), and the four tasks (uniting, inviting, offering, and acknowledging.) I noted the occurrence of these elements within the performance and collected reflections on how these techniques engaged me emotionally as a listener (Lipman, 1999). A summary of those reactions provides a sample of the Power a story can produce in one viewer. A limitation of this technique is that the analysis involves only one person's reaction. This section should, therefore, be read as an indication of the effects of Power rather than as a comprehensive survey.

*Pouring the Sun* opens with piano music and O'Callahan standing, hand on chin, center stage. There is a simple table with two simple chairs. This introduction resonated with several elements described by Lipman. For example, O'Callahan's *gesture* and *posture* indicated a setting that felt thoughtful and a little melancholy. Combining those provided the intensified emotional effect of *multidimensionality*. The use of music stirred my aural imagination, and even before the first word was spoken I was anticipating a serious story that was poignant, old, and deep. The music was a *transition* that moved me into the mood of the story before the plot began to unfold.

O'Callahan begins to speak by opening his arms wide and saying, "This is Ludviga's kitchen. The potatoes are ready to be peeled. Big doings tonight! Look at all the chairs squeezed in..." His *orientation in space* is personable and inviting. I am welcomed in so warmly, I cannot resist. Within 10 seconds, I am engaged. According to Lipman's model, by this point in the story, O'Callahan has already accomplished three of the "four tasks" of a storyteller. He has *united* his audience (via piano music), *invited* his audience (via arm gesture), and launched into his *offering*. Yet these necessities have been accomplished so seamlessly, I notice story instead of method. I am simply with him.

I am engaged.

O’Callahan’s use of second person seals the connection between audience and storyteller: “When Bridgett George smiles, you feel you can do anything,” he says. Those are powerful pronouns. We have been united in the commonality of the effect of Bridgett George’s smile, and I am now a part of his telling. This engagement is extended in his commands for me to “Look!” at this or that. He uses *tone of voice*, *eye behavior*, and his hand *gestures* to point and show as if we are beholding the same scene together, and my mind follows his to perceive what my eyes do not see. As he describes height, width, and depth, I can see them as well.

*Pauses* function in O’Callahan’s story like music. He breathes. He waits. I grow still and hungry. Then he drops a perfect simile, “Here is a building as big as a myth!” I feel what he is doing here before I know it. He is using spaces of sound and selective imagery to create the sense of an epic journey. And yet, O’Callahan’s selection of a single character (Ludviga) also allows me a personal connection to the story. She was only 18 when she left her home in Poland to enter a land where she knew neither the language or the people. She was as new to the steel industry as I am at the story’s outset. I will learn it through her eyes. It is a safe way to enter. We will be immigrants together.

“Wooooooooooooo! It’s freezing.” O’Callahan employs *tone of voice* to make the sound of a train. He does it with such abandon, I can visualize the iron gears pumping in the distance. When he uses *gesture* to rub his hands together at the cold, I can feel the chill. O’Callahan uses *orientation in space* to pantomime opening the door to Ludviga’s house, and we enter together. Then O’Callahan becomes her. We see a frantic, 65 year-old woman peeling potatoes, making soup. She is afraid her company will not arrive.

O'Callahan assumes her through a *multidimensional* approach of *posture, tone of voice, and gestures*, so that I can see her before me. I can feel the tension in this woman. She is nervous about what is about to happen, but she also aches for it. She is trying not to care too much. I feel that with her. I sense the tender humanity of Ludviga and empathize with her.

She sings a bit of a Polish song the women sing at funerals. It means, "life is short." She says, "It means after a year, after a day, after a moment we'll not be together again. Isn't it true? Sometimes you don't even have the moment." It feels like foreshadowing. Even though I don't know (at this point) that the song will become a chorus (literally and figuratively), a vehicle of *repetition* for the rest of the story, I can feel the significance and poignance of it. Life is transient, ever-shifting. Also, I feel a deepening in the culture of the story, as a bond is made to Ludviga's Polish heritage.

Ludviga takes me to Poland. I see her as a little girl falling off a wild horse and remounting it over and over. This is another instance of *repetition*. Only this time, I get a sense of foreshadowing. She will need this persistence, I can tell. Already I admire her.

One of the emotions I feel often during this story is a tie to the international community that was part of the steel business during this time. Ludviga talks about having lunch with the world. She notes that thrice a day the workers walk through the streets speaking all the languages. As she mentions the many nationalities that were working at the time, and as she mentions the American landmarks undergirded by the steel industry, I remember that young America was made by the people of the world. This is a conceptual mode of imagery that sets my response within a global context and enhances the mythic nature of this story.

As Ludviga grows, gets married, starts to bear children, I see the same feisty spirit that continued to get back on the wild horse. She finds a way to own a house. She finds a way to grow a garden. She believes in her children, though they have not the advantages of the rich and influential. She endures the stormy temperament of her pianist husband who loses three fingers in a factory accident.

O'Callahan adopts Fritz's voice to describe the dust and grime that fill the factory. He uses the *tone of voice* of a man growing older and fatigued with intense physical labor. Adopting the *facial expressions* of a weary worker, he describes the loud clanking machines and the sulfur smell. O'Callahan's body bends with fatigue while describing the workers' exit after a long day, and his eyes light up when he describes how they drink to clear their throats after a hellacious day in the filth. Fritz also explains the factory foreman's prejudice, "Easier to train a dog than a Pollock," he says. Through descriptive words, dialogue, and *posture*, O'Callahan makes the oppression of the voiceless visible in the microcosm of Ludviga's family.

The death of Ludviga's son is so painful, I can barely write about it now. That his life was lost over a 25 cent bet makes it worse. There is such a sense of irreparable futility. Ludviga loses her ability to cook. The sustainer of life cannot sustain any longer. After 4 years she is finally restored to a new purpose when it becomes clear that her second son's life is in danger. He is a crusader for the union, a cause that is illegal, though it promises to help the community of workers. One of the most powerful tools employed at this point in the story is the conversation between Ludviga and her younger son. O'Callahan uses the simplicity of this *uncrowded stage* to demonstrate a powerful conversation between mother and son. This pared-down, intimate setting demonstrates

that life continues after tremendous loss.

Then, there is a beautiful scene in which Ludviga arrives with a pot of hot potato soup before a line of angry officers who have been abusing the vulnerable. Other women join Ludviga, and the strength of the women behind the steel industry proves a barrier to death. Ludviga uses the horse skills she learned as a little girl to calm the rearing police horse. Inside me, I feel admiration for female courage rising against larger-than-life male aggression. At this point, O'Callahan has turned the limitations of *non-reversible time* into a benefit. The story has progressed in a linear fashion, so that I am not confused about what happens when. Yet a subtle *repetition* of themes (a wild horse, potato soup) connects past and present beautifully.

It is fitting, therefore, that the story ends with potato soup and piano music. At this point in the story I see in them rich symbols of persistence and beauty in the midst of suffering. Ludviga says, "Because for this moment, we are all together." This *repetition* of theme ties back into the chorus of the story that focuses on the transience of life. The conclusion is we might not have steadiness all of life, but we can embrace the now of being together.

The Power of this story was strong for me, because I saw, I heard, I felt along with O'Callahan. I forgot that I was listening to a "story" and simply experienced the narrative unfolding. Lipman writes that, "Every highly successful storytelling event, like any successful artistic performance, changes the listeners and the storyteller. It changes them each internally, it changes their relationship, and it changes their relationship to the story. In short, it causes transformation" (Lipman, 1999, p.207).



My transition as a listener is a sign of a good performance, for as suggested earlier, a disparity between audience emotion and intended emotion on the part of the maker can be diagnostic. O'Callahan describes this miss in an early performance of his story, *Pouring the Sun*. He writes:

The journey was long. I performed *Pouring The Sun* to small audiences in homes as I toured the country performing other stories. One night in Washington state a man said, "It's like hearing a Beethoven symphony" Hooray! I called Linda and said, "It's on the way." I performed it for friends in Houston. The audience was glad . . . when it was over! I hadn't worked through some of the deeper emotions so the audience was left feeling they'd been to a funeral. (O'Callahan, 2000c, para. 5)

We see in this early failure that the emotional reaction of the audience was indicative of a core structural problem. Their response led O'Callahan to reexamine a second issue involved in *Power*, the emotion of the creator.

### Emotion of Creator

There is something inherently intimate about offering art to the world. In Oscar Wilde's haunting tale, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Basil Hallward hesitates to display a work publicly for fear of revealing too much of his own soul. He says,

"...every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals

himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul." (Wilde, 2006, p.8)

Expanding upon the idea that art captures the essence of a person, Henri writes: He who has contemplated has met with himself, is in a state to see into the realities beyond the surfaces of his subject. Nature reveals to him, and, seeing and feeling intensely, he paints, and whether he wills it or not each brush stroke is an exact record of such as he was at the exact moment the stroke was made. (Henri, 1930, p.3)

Are Wilde and Henri correct? Does the expression of art somehow contain the fingerprints of the soul of the creator? Perhaps. O'Callahan has written, "I invent scenes, change names and create dialogue in order to tell my emotional truth." (O'Callahan, 2007, p.1)

In the Power of a story we see truth as the author sees it. The story is a reflection of his interpretation of the world. O'Callahan has written: "Imagine Picasso having a cousin who says, "Pablo, paint a painting of me." Picasso paints a man with five ears and six noses; the cousin says, "That's not me." Pablo replies, "That's the way I experience you." My Pill Hill stories have six noses and five ears. And yet they are close to the bone (O'Callahan, 2007, p.1).

There is an element of mystery in this connection between the teller and his inner self. In a sense the maker must yield to the "now" of his making. He or she must also become the listener. O'Callahan writes about this in his newsletter from Fall, 2001:

One Friday night I sat with workshop participants at "Alice's House," a retreat house on the Atlantic. I wanted us to be open to the mystery of being together. I

made a commitment to be open to that mystery myself.

I read aloud some of Lao tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, or *Book of The Way*, which talks of being open to the flow of life. ...

... Acting the scene out was alive. We paid attention to the flow. We jumped into the mystery of the present, of trying something unexpected. We all took a risk. ...

... Life is condensed in a weekend workshop. Trust blossoms. Creativity bubbles if we're open to the mystery. ...

... It's harder to find mystery in daily life. (O'Callahan, 2001, para. 1-6)

Though this paper does not explore the power of O'Callahan's stories within himself in great detail, it would be a fascinating topic for a further study. A string of interviews could draw out connections between teller and told, exploring personal growth and change. Particularly in a life-long teller such as O'Callahan, the results of such work would be illuminating.

### Reputational Context

A further dimension of Power is the reputational context in which a performer engages with his or her audience. O'Callahan's work has reached a high level of recognition, and it is now framed by notable venues that "offer him official sanction as an Important Artist, and compel us to pay attention" (Sobol, personal communication, March 15, 2012). These venues become an aspect of Power because they powerfully shape and influence the energetic exchange between teller and audience. Sobol described O'Callahan thus: "He is a pillar of contemporary storytelling. But without the organized

matrix/framework of events, venues, audiences, and individual reputations that make up that contemporary storytelling world, it would be a pillar without a temple, an arch without a roof (Sobol, personal communication, March 15, 2012).

We can see the significant impact reputational context and venue have on energetic exchange by looking at examples. A narrative shared between strangers at the grocery has a different sort of energetic impact than a story told under one of the prominent tents at the National Storytelling Festival. The formality and exclusivity of a notable venue commands respect. To a large degree, “context IS the work” (Sobol, personal communication, March 15, 2012).

It is particularly important to note the Power of venue in an art form like storytelling because performance art is impacted more directly by surroundings than a private art like writing. Persons attending a performance enter a room with expectations based on the reputation of the teller as well as the reputation of the venue. Level of audience focus, respect, and engagement are often impacted by a predetermined consumer value of product credibility. These are factors that feed back into the performance, stoking or diminishing the field of communal receptivity. According to Sobol, this element of Power is particularly important in a creative culture that revolves around, “marketing, branding, and the steady accumulation of reputational credit--also known in the dominant culture industry as Fame” (Sobol, personal communication, March 15, 2012).

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion this study found a great deal of resonance between Sayers's Idea, Energy, Power model and the work of O'Callahan. Unseen yet supportive manifestations of Idea (General Inspiration, Particular Inspiration, and Nature) often drive O'Callahan's work. This work is brought into visibility through methods of Energy such as: Moodling, Launch, Adjustments, Persistence/Delight, and Community. The resulting Power of O'Callahan's work for audiences around America is evident by the breadth and depth of his reception in various settings over decades of telling.

As I have shared my findings with friends who were struggling with creativity, I have seen several instances of renewed artistic direction and strength. These have been unscientific, uncontrolled settings; and yet, I have seen techniques as simple as a returning focus to a core idea or taking a day to muddle make a difference. After watching such responses, I think it would be valuable to develop a formal study that invited struggling storytellers (or other artists) to engage with Idea, Energy, and Power on a diagnostic, practical level.

It would likewise be interesting to develop more in-depth critical studies exploring individual elements of Idea, Energy, and Power in the life and work of O'Callahan and other tellers. For instance, a study might zoom in on the effects of the advertising culture on a particular teller's Power. Or perhaps an audience reaction could be collected and analyzed, then compared to a teller's emotion postperformance

Regardless, it is hoped that this study offers terms or concepts that might be of some benefit to critical discussion in the field of storytelling.

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APPENDIX:

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

<b>TERM</b>	<b>DEFINITION</b>	<b>SOURCE</b>
<b>Adjustment</b>	An element of creative Energy in which a creator returns to the Idea for direction on changes needed.	(Reynolds, 2012)
<b>Community</b>	An element of creative Energy in which a creator participates in the support, advice, and response of others.	(Reynolds, 2012)
<b>Energy</b>	Manifestations of activity by which an invisible Idea is brought into visible form.	(Sayers, 1987)
<b>General Inspiration</b>	Biographical, aesthetic, and natural input that has influenced the teller philosophically, artistically, intellectually, and emotionally. Facet of Idea.	(Reynolds, 2012)
<b>Idea</b>	Invisible inner person of the creator which provides vision and unity throughout a project. The Idea is influenced by Particular Inspiration, General Inspiration, and Nature.	(Sayers, 1987) (Reynolds, 2012)
<b>Particular Inspiration</b>	Specific life encounters which serve as a direct reference point for a developing story. Facet of Idea.	(Reynolds, 2012)
<b>Moodling</b>	An element of creative Energy in which the creator intentionally wanders, building a favorable atmosphere in which to work.	(Ueland, 1987) (Reynolds, 2012)
<b>Launch</b>	A sketch-like element of creative Energy in which the Idea is “sounded.”	(Reynolds, 2012)
<b>Persistence/Delight</b>	An element of creative Energy which involves the co-existence of seeming opposites: persistence through difficulty and childlike-joy.	(Reynolds, 2012)
<b>Power</b>	The connective force that binds artist to art and both to audience.	(Sayers, 1987)

## VITA

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