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## Smiles, Sighs, and Nods: The Power of a Personal Narrative

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*Smiles, Sighs, and Nods*  
*The Power of a Personal Narrative*

*An Essay By:*  
*Camille Sleight-Price*

***Abstract:***

As a writing tutor and composition instructor, each time I work with a student I am meeting and getting to know a stranger through their writing. Although each student comes to sit next to me with their own background, topics of interest and insecurities, in each case I get to accompany them on the journey of meaning-making through the processes of research and composing. This paper highlights one such instance of meaning-making with a student. It suggests that this meaning-making is not just about developing students' academic skills like research, critical thinking and composition, but is an opportunity as a peer tutor and teacher to help students discover, restore and in the most profound cases, heal their identities.

***Key Words:*** Folklore, Personal Narrative, Identity, Argument, Research, Meaning-Making

## Smiles, Sighs, and Nods

The Power of a Personal Narrative

By: Camille Sleight-Price

Folklorists are intrinsically focused on the stories of individuals. We analyze texts, whether they are written, woven, spoken or sung. We seek the unique, the misunderstood, the silenced and unheard, even the unwelcome. Stories matter. People matter. Tradition matters. The narratives of ordinary people possess an often-unacknowledged influence in an evolving, complicated world, and it is the folklorist who seeks to unleash that power purposefully and productively.

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“I’m not sure if my topic will work for my argumentative essay,” she hesitates.

“What is it that you want to write about?” I ask, watching as she shifts back and forth a bit in her chair, barely making eye contact with me.

“Well, I’m Navajo, and I want to write about racist mascots...but I don’t if know my professor is interested in reading something like that.”

I look at her directly, making sure she sees me: “This is such an important topic, and I think it’s awesome that you have decided to write about it. Are you comfortable sharing with me what you’ve got so far?”

Still not entirely convinced, she pulls out her laptop and begins to read the first paragraph of her essay. The opening line reads, “For hundreds of years, white men have been stealing indigenous identities for their own gratification.” She looks up from her laptop with a hint of trepidation in her eyes.

“Please, I’d love to hear the rest,” I try to assure her.

As she continues reading, her speech increases in tone and agility. “When will our voices start to matter? When will we be taken seriously?,” she challenges her readers, while alternating glances between me and her laptop as the words cascade from the screen and into the airwaves of the tutoring room. As the recitation draws to an end, she looks up at me, again, seeming unsure of what she’ll see when our eyes meet.

“Your words matter. Your story matters. Your point-of-view matters,” I stammer inarticulately, as I often do, desperate to communicate that every word she has crafted in this essay deserves utmost attention. “This topic is so important, and if you want to write about it, then you *should* write about it,” I reiterate.

She smiles, sighs, and nods.

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Finding that we aren’t alone can be a healing realization; just knowing that somewhere, there’s an entire pocket filled with people who see, hear, taste, smell, and feel the world in the same ways as us, can restore the pieces of ourselves that over time become torn or lost altogether. Moreover, it’s encouraging to meet folks out there who are at least curious about

seeing the world in a certain way, regardless of their current lived experience. Research is one road to finding those people: *Is anyone else noticing and wondering about these same things, too?* In research, we as answer-seekers must learn the art of asking questions, and then, we must audaciously keep inquiring over and over again until the investigation has been cross-examined in every possible way with each passerby. We don't always like the answers we receive; sometimes, what we learn makes us uncomfortable, and forces us to look in the mirror and identify biases we didn't know were there. Anytime knowledge is gained, we must figure out what to do with it. These standalone reactions are the impetus for movement, and what greater purpose could be at the heart of research than to set about motion? The decision of pursuing research in the first place binds us as answer-seekers to the monumental responsibility of *listening*; then, and only then, can motion begin to transpire.

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"What resources have you used so far to craft your argument?" I ask her.

"Well, I talk about how major sports associations like the NFL and MLB have ignored petitions to get rid of mascots such as the Redskins, the Browns, and the Braves. It's about money for them, or some bullshit. It's always about money. I guess I'm not really sure what other sources to use, though. A lot of what's in here is my personal feelings on the matter."

"I love it," I respond. As a white person, I have absolutely no idea what it must be like living in a society that for centuries has disregarded the lives of my family, in one way or another. I have no idea what it feels like to have to fight for my own personhood. She's right; these mascots and the capitalism used to justify them are *total* bullshit. How can I try and imagine these things, so that I can help her articulate the things she's trying to express here?

"The most powerful aspect of this piece is your own personal narrative, and I love that you've made that the primary focus of your argument. Don't be afraid to pour your experiences into this essay because they *do* matter, and you have chosen to take on an issue that demands attention. Have you sought out any other voices that could be added to the paper to help strengthen your own narrative?"

"I thought about using examples of other schools or leagues that have changed their mascots," she responds.

"That's perfect! Have you considered including comments from tribal leaders?" We turn to the computer, and start searching for official statements. I look over at her; she sees me, sits up straight, and then she smiles, sighs, and nods.

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The places where humans travel to create meaning are highly vulnerable spaces of expression. In those spaces anger is validated, wounds fester, faith converts to doubt, passions become realized, fantasies are explored. All the things we think we cannot say aloud we throw on to some type of canvas, hoping that somehow by simply letting our hands do all of the talking, a miracle will occur and our thoughts will eventually wander to a place where our world finally makes sense. Letting a stranger accompany another through the purgatory phase of meaning-making can surely alleviate some fears of the journey, but it requires Herculean courage from both sides in order to do so. Meaning-makers either gain connection and clarity, or rejection and misunderstanding; oftentimes, the outcome is unpredictable. Accompanying-strangers are not

without their own set of insecurities, however; oftentimes, they are positioned as guides when perhaps they too are feeling stranded, which can lead to an anxiety-ridden path for both travelers if not tread carefully. However, witnessing a fellow human-being wander from lost to found from the bystanding lens of an accompanying-stranger provides purpose, and to have purpose is to live.