

# FINDING MARYA: THE BEGINNINGS OF A DOUBLED *CURRERE* NARRATIVE

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## BEGINNINGS

On a balmy July night during the summer of 1983, a friend and I were walking near the John Hay Library of Brown University College Hill. After crossing Waterman Street, we paused to read the centuries-old, bronze signs on stately, ivy-clad buildings. We passed Faunce House, a beautiful structure decorated with wrought iron that had been part of the women's college of Brown. From there, sidewalks meandered through a beautiful promenade called the Main Green, also known as the College Green. The moonlight provided an enchanting presence. It was midsummer, and the Linden trees were still in bloom. The blossoms are generally small and inconspicuous, compensating well by exuding one of nature's most powerful perfumes, a mix of honey and lemon peel. Known also as Basswood, or *Tilia Tomentosa*, the tree has a lifespan-potential covering a millennium, and the few examples growing on College Hill are at least 100 years old. The same American Basswoods provided the fragrance throughout the Twentieth Century, beguiling the most scholarly of academics.



College Green, Brown University  
(Photo courtesy of F. Philip Skok)

In the midst of this beautiful, sensory assault rose an imposing structure. It practically *leapt* into vision, reaching skyward, impossibly distant. A magnificent tower erected in 1904 at the corner of Prospect and Waterman Streets, it is a tribute to Caroline Mathilda Brown, granddaughter of the founder of Brown University. The tower of red brick is 95 feet high and is elaborately adorned with stonework, done under the direction of John L. Thorpe of Boston. There are carved festoons of fruit near the base, and at the top, above four clock faces on the sides of the tower and flanked by eight panels of fruit, are, in rising succession, 32 carved urns, eight capitals, four shields, and at the very top, four urns with flame. On the foundation is inscribed, “Love is Strong as Death” (Mitchell, 1993, p. 77). I promised my friend that I would write a book incorporating the Carrie Tower at some point in my life. It was *my* awakening, and this writing is inspired, in part, by that moment.



(Photo courtesy of F. Philip Skok)

### THE NARRATIVE – AN INTRODUCTION

Not so many years ago—perhaps ten—my Father and I were downstairs in his office in Weekapaug, Rhode Island. We were on our laptops, enjoying some time together before going out for a seafood dinner that evening. Out of the blue, he reached over, placed his hand on my shoulder, and said, “You know I loved your Mother, but there was someone before her that I loved with my heart and soul. We were in love and planned to marry...”

The story continued. They met at Pembroke College, the sister school of Brown University. He was a Navy midshipman, stationed temporarily in Providence, she a Latin and Greek scholar. They met, dated, fell in love on College Hill, and planned

for a future together. They often walked past the Carrie Tower with the accompanying inscription *Love is Strong as Death*. It was to be the representation of their everlasting love, an intimate symbol of their devotion, their commitment to one another. If that seems antiquarian, outlandish, and hopelessly passé, it was the way people actually *thought* in 1942. There were very real possibilities that an individual might not survive the war, and the future would cease to exist.

When he told me her name, I did a search on Google—Marya Barlowski—and discovered that she had passed away at age 49, in 1974.



**MARYA BARLOWSKI**

(*Brown Herald-Record*, Vol. 1, No. 9, 1944, Brown University Archives)

My father was desolate, shaken, and I had to support him in his chair. We only spoke of her once more, at a coffee shop adjacent to the coast, surrounded by a group of seagulls on a sunny Sunday morning.

My father talked of shared picnic lunches with Marya near the Carrie Tower, reading and reflecting upon the epic poems of Homer, Virgil, and more obscure writers of ancient Greece that remained a mystery to him. It was at this time, during World War II, that he became separated from her. One day, his ship deployed unexpectedly and immediately. It was close to graduation, and his letters never reached her. When he returned at war's end, she was gone. While searching for her at a servicemen's dance, he met my Mother, who was a stunning woman in her own right. They married, and I was born in 1951.



Carol Florence (Patterson) Martin [Author's Mother], circa 1938  
(Photo courtesy of the author)

My father died in 2010, and I had filed the narrative away as a lost segment of the past. While doing some dishes in February, four years ago, looking out the window for signs of spring, I remembered Marya's name. I walked over to my laptop, used a Google search again, and discovered a photo from the Brown University newspaper archives.

That awakening began an inquiry that recalled me to the city of my birth, Providence, Rhode Island, and to Olneyville, Marya's Polish immigrant neighborhood and also home to Classical High School. My maternal grandmother graduated from Classical in 1918, Marya in 1941. I had many conversations with Father Marek of Saint Adalbert's Roman Catholic Church, attending mass at the site of Marya's baptism, confirmation, and funeral. Retracing her educational experiences, I pursued my own educational experiences of learning about her life, which took me to Brown University, Smith College, the former site of the Greystone Park Asylum, the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Archives, northern Maine, The New York Philharmonic, and The Ohio State University. Along the way, hundreds of theorists, librarians, archivists, genealogists, and colleagues have become engaged and invested in helping me to piece together Marya's narrative.

Marya's formative educational experiences began around 1930, at an elementary school in Olneyville, Rhode Island. A school in a poor neighborhood of Polish immigrants, it wasn't afforded the luxuries given schools in neighborhoods of more affluence. The junior high in Olneyville was named Oliver Hazard Perry, after the Naval commander born in Rhode Island.



Classical High School, in Providence, Rhode Island, was established in downtown Providence in 1843. It is arguably the most rigorous secondary school in the United States, and Marya graduated as valedictorian in 1941. The school has a recipe for success that has made it a venerable institution. It wasn't named "Classical" in a superficial way. The motto of the school since its inception has been the final line in Latin from Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Ulysses: Certare Petere Reperire Neque Cedere* (To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield)—a maxim that has also become mine. Marya became a universal woman, with erudition that was practically unlimited. She knew all the languages that her academic subjects required her to know, as comfortable in ancient Athens and Rome as in Poland and Providence.



*Marya Ann Barlowski*

A.B. in Greek and Latin

Providence, R. I.

Marya Barlowski Senior Graduation Photograph  
(*Brun Mael*, 1945-46, p. 10, Brown University Archives)

Marya graduated from Pembroke College, the Brown University women's college, in 1947, and her subsequent graduate work at Smith informed her vocational calling in psychiatric social work. Her dissertation focused on a pastoral, clinical study of psychotic patients and their contacts with theological students at the Greystone Park Asylum in New Jersey. Marya's educational excellence led her to become a lead professional in her field of psychiatric social work, also developing and teaching the curriculum and practice of social work. Marya worked at Putnam Children's Center as a social worker from 1951 to 1952, doing pioneering work with children labeled "atypical," who we now know would be diagnosed as on the autism spectrum. After a brief career at Putnam, where she interned alongside Sophie Freud, Marya worked as a psychiatric social worker at the VA hospital in Brockton, MA, and, beginning in 1966, for the Rhode Island State Division of Alcoholism in Providence.

Marya was a gifted woman who struggled with adult-onset psychopathology after her formal education was completed. Her life exists in the shadow of depression and psychosis, a reminder of the delicacy and fragility of human endeavors. It's very likely that she was able to control her cognitive processes through engagement with critical thinking for a long time. You might liken her to the Nobel Prize-winning John Forbes Nash, the subject of the unauthorized biography, *A Beautiful Mind*, by Sylvia Nasar. Her surviving relatives have said as much but have had little to share. She was a brilliant, paranoid schizophrenic with a near-160 IQ, who was left adrift to deal with her confusion and pain in a time before the advent of pharmaceuticals that could have offered her some stability, which would not be developed until the late 1970's.

#### DOUBLED CURRERE NARRATIVE – A METHOD OF CURRICULAR EXPLORATION

The concept of a doubled *currere* narrative is the telling of a story of life experience that connects tangentially to the author but more directly to an historical personage and back around to the author in an intimate way. It is accomplished by weaving a description of *currere* and narrative work with the actual storytelling of the subjects. I believe that the double narrative of my exploration of Marya's life, a small piece of which is found above, is a compelling story that could help create an understanding of new avenues of *currere* thought. This biographical, narrative piece might be elucidated by these questions: If Marya were to undertake the process of *currere* in the present-day, what would she say (have said) and what would she write (have written)? What practical wisdom might she have shared? After reflecting on her own education and experiences, how would the heroine of my "doubled" narrative have retold her story? Had her life been longer, what future possibilities might she have imagined? What possibilities might be imagined from her lived experiences?



Left to right: Barlowski, Rainone, Kennison, Horowitz, Wooster, Langworthy, Gallup, and Nababedian

Marya Barlowski, Phi Beta Kappa  
(*Brun Mael*, 1944, p. 31, Brown University Archives)

Since Marya, who serves as my “purposeful sample,” died in July of 1974, I’m compelled to do the *currere* work for her. We lack good, narrative data as to what a doubled *currere* narrative looks like in practice. Analysis of Marya’s life story can illuminate how larger themes come alive in her lived experiences, writing, and work. Narrative work can be engaging, especially when readers come to a place where they really care about a character. The humanity inherent in us all emerges through empathy and compassion. My heartfelt commitment delves into the life, motivations, and implications of Marya’s lived experiences, scholarship, and vocational service. My focus is on a biographical examination of motivational indicators for the study and practice of the *curriculum leadership* process. Explorations as to how one becomes a “lead professional” and a recursive problem-solving process are being forwarded. It is hoped that elements of Marya’s story illuminate curriculum leadership capacity-building through biographical narrative, pointing towards her scholarship and vocational calling. This *currere*-based inquiry will provide insights as to why educators would be motivated to engage in James G. Henderson’s process of curriculum leadership and collaborative lead-learning.

Remembrance of history is not self-serving, is often disquieting, and uncovers or creates knowledge that points toward new histories. This journey, for me, involves personal risk, as it involves the pain of empathy surrounding an unfinished life that was long forgotten—now disinterred—and reactivated for reflection and reconstruction. A biographical narrative inquiry is appropriate as a means to tell Marya’s story, faithful to the importance of my subject, integrated/woven with threads of *currere*. My story intersects occasionally, both as a part of the narrative—my journey through it—and also how *I’m* being affected by this regression/examination. My positionality, asserted by authorship, relates to how I’m attending to *me* in this writing. Essentially, I’m writing the *currere* for her. A personal approach, using *currere* as an autobiographical examination that she *might* have written, then, is a seminal element of this journey. My heroine was not solely a social worker, but also a lifelong learner. She was a scholar of ancient languages and literature who employed a pragmatic approach to problem-solving in her professional life. Marya demonstrated compassion and empathy, while providing mental health services to others with extreme needs. My role begins with identifying, analyzing, and reconstructing her experiences as curriculum.

While unearthing and co-constructing insights as a basis for human understanding, narrative inquiries have something to say about the human condition—what it means to be human. Ordinary conversations and interviews about my heroine from others in her family, church, community, and academic settings have provided me with histories, and I have amassed a wealth of assembled stories. In the process, others also want their stories told, and their stories intertwine with mine. Polkinghorne (2007) contends that personal descriptions of life experiences “can serve to issue knowledge about neglected, but significant areas, of the human realm” (p. 472). The unfolding of events as storied may well have a basis in fact, but the personal meanings represent the material that tells her story. There are some theorists who believe that even the category of “nonfiction” is fictitious. “If nonfiction were true, there would be one biography for one life, and it would be updated as new facts came to light” (Boxer, 2000, p. E3). The concept that nonfiction is “true” may, in fact, be obsolete. My goal is to write in a manner that reads like a novel, hopefully rising to the level of good fiction, yet as factually accurate as is possible. This will allow for revision and change as new facts, tools, and data surface.

Examining what is there “on the page” begins with the immediacy and depth of artifacts and interviews. My History of Photography professor from the early 1980’s, Ralph Harley, looked upon old photographs reverently. He made us study, *really study*, portraits and still-life black and white photos. He suggested that a photograph was the closest one could be to those departed persons, a chemical image of the light reflected from an individual’s face. “The artist, even in photography, must go beyond discovery and the knowledge of facts. He must create and invent truths, and produce new developments of facts” (Newhall, 1980, p. 41). Stated another way, we can distill knowledge from photographs and related artifacts.

This process may be followed by psychoanalytic free-association of new meanings and messages. The writing is an imagining of a *currere* for someone whose lived experiences invite being explored, tying them to a larger story. Spending so much time in another person’s life is somewhat like a one-sided love affair. Leon Edel describes a biography as “begun out of enchantment or affection; you read a poem and want to find the poet, you hear a statesman and are filled with admiration...” (McCulloch, 1985, n.p.). This is how Marya came to me, or I to her, with an opportunity to analyze and reconstruct a unique story through the reactivation of history. The study of some of her lived experiences anticipated the imagining of a *currere* written for her. This is not to be undertaken with superficial aims or motives. It is not “about” monetary gain, rather a spiritual calling leading to a deepening of the soul. History needs to be described, ordered in a temporal manner, and analyzed. This will help uncover and reveal the evolution of the current curriculum of loss, the tangibly experienced consequences of standardization and testing. For example, Noddings (2013) suggests that creativity is put at risk “when the curriculum is narrowly prescribed and teachers are held tightly to a specific learning objective for every lesson” (p. 213).

This revelation will be accomplished allegorically, through the lived experiences and phenomena surrounding a brilliant woman. This is as an allegorical narrative, a complete story where elements such as characters, events, and plot have both literal and symbolic meanings. Conveying a deeper symbolic narrative partnered with the surface narrative, this allegory will take the form of biography. By integrating the narrative research with *currere*, the two stories (also mine, as the autobiographical piece is “feathered in”) have more power, more relevance, and are more accessible—and engaging—to the reader. The possibilities point to a dialogical middle ground, a place that brings out the humanity of the protagonist, informing a larger story, a “doubled” narrative.

By moving in the past, I can tell stories about my experiences in concert with those that have been told by others, defining and understanding our commonalities. In generalizing to the “significance” of academic studies and their significance to our lives, Pinar (1975) writes that we can use these stories as evidence for understanding “our present in the way that allows us to move on, more learned, more evolved than before” (p. 15). Since *currere* is useful not only for teachers, but for all learners and disciplines, there is value in Marya’s individual life history as history and culture, and also for the allegorical public world.

The broader implications of *currere* move through allegory, at least as far as the curricular definition is concerned:

When we speak allegorically, we do not do so for the sake of a future in which such information will, we imagine, become usable. Rather, we self-reflexively

articulate what is at hand, reactivating the past so as to render the present, including ourselves, intelligible. As an ethical, political, always intellectual undertaking, the complicated conversation that is the curriculum enables educational experience. (Pinar, 2012, p. 50)

I believe we can build bridges and positive meaning through allegory, through inquiry that honors a beautiful life and re-energized field. Curriculum understanding allegorically incorporates the past into the present: “Historical facts are primary, but it is their capacity to invoke our imagination that marks them as allegorical. Their meanings are not confined to the past; they leak into our experience of the present” (Pinar, 2015, p. 28). This inquiry will conclude in what the reader and I make of the knowledge, and the history presented becomes accessible through the heroine’s experiences as allegory. Pinar (2012) recognizes that life history and intellectual history are two sides of the same coin, dialogic *and* temporal. The allegorical foregrounding of Marya’s lived experiences may be positioned in history and culture, but not to the detriment of a more universal *public* world perspective. Incorporating the public world requires the use of allegory.



Marya Acceptance Photograph  
(Pembroke College at Brown University, 1941, Brown University Archives)

A biographical narrative as imagined *currere* should become part of the dialogue about what constitutes *currere*. *Currere* is, after all, a way of letting us view curriculum not as a static document or material, but rather as a process of working from within through reading, writing, and processing our subjectivities in relationship to the world alongside our pasts, presents, and futures (Fowler, 2006; Pinar, 1994).

Narrative is a tool of the researcher for gathering the stories and for the subsequent representation of the stories to the reader. The transcriptions, or narrative texts, of these told stories may be interpreted as evidentiary documents of real life experiences. The text is checked against the reality of each reader and

acquires meaning beyond the sharing of remembrances of the past.  
(Wilson, 2007, p. 27)

A *currere* narrative, however, incorporates more than simple storytelling. Not easily pigeonholed, the process facilitates bringing the past into the present. The challenge is to slow down, to reenter the past, and imagine the future.

*Currere*, then, would be the means by which I form an understanding that educational experiences have made not only to my heroine's life, but also my own. *Currere* was introduced as a method that allows us to "bracket" the educational aspects of a "taken-for-granted" world. Bracketing was utilized by my heroine in her research and social work practice, as her work involved mediating private lives of individuals in the public sphere. Her own research, in fact, addressed the need for non-interference with the voices of the participants during the interview process. "A researcher's ability to hear previously silenced voices and shifting centers of oppression relies on the ability to silence, for a time, his or her own voice and give precedence to the voice of the participant" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 93). Her social work was somewhat, therefore, like qualitative inquiry. "Narrative is a fertile ground for listening and witnessing all lives in a world where all beings matter" (Fowler, 2006, p. vii).

In "reactivating" history, I'm attempting to restore a life to its original complexity. There is an investment here, and it actively constructs and reshapes my story. It has been valuable and enlightening to clear away the dust of the past and restore/resurrect the sepia-toned to a living, breathing inquiry with a life of its own. I have a responsibility as the storyteller to venture beyond what is safe. History is a powerful place, and with this power comes responsibility. The gift of a narrative has been given to me. What seems remarkable is that a project, research or writing, will often choose *you*. Initially—and profoundly—influenced by my ongoing coursework, I've continually been working through the process of *currere*. Primarily autobiographical, biographical elements keep encroaching, informing the ongoing narrative.



Marya Barlowski Tombstone, Saint Ann's Cemetery, Cranston, Rhode Island  
(Photo courtesy of the author)

Marya's narrative has many implications and conclusions and deserves complex analysis and conversation. Her story is one that needs to be told. I am her voice, the only advocate in her corner. It is a platform upon which I base ongoing inquiries in curriculum theorizing, including this one. Narrative research doesn't only describe a life; it is a means to providing a *method* for storytelling, "giving voice to those traditionally marginalized, and providing a less exploitative research method than other modes" (Hendry, 2007, p. 489). Hendry (2007) describes narrative research involvement as "heroic," providing a more complex picture of social life. "Furthermore, it highlights the ways in which culture and society shape and are shaped by individual lives. It also provides what seems like a more egalitarian research relationship that honors the intersubjective modes of knowledge production" (p. 489). Duly noted and cognizant of the promises, responsibilities, and contextual nature of telling stories, the narrative—the remembrance—may begin.

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