

"UNAWARE TO HER EARS":
WHEN THE STORYTELLER CANNOT SPEAK
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Jared Wein, a young man who is under continual nursing care in a rehabilitation facility in Philadelphia, is diagnosed as a spastic quadriplegic. He suffered a severe head injury in an automobile accident that occurred over twenty years ago and, as a consequence, has very little motor control. The effects of his injury are continually fascinating; most of the damage was to his left brain, and consequently it is the right side of his body and those left brain-oriented activities that are most impaired. His right brain seems to function as if it were intact; he remains creative and sensitive. He can remember and recognize people from both his present and his past, and is continually constructing fantasy worlds and possibilities for himself, while he is often unable to remember simple mathematical functions or even what year it is. Though he is able to vocalize at will he cannot talk, and communicates by pointing to letters written on a board or else by typing messages on an electronic communicator. And though the only limb he has control over is his left arm, Jared is able to express his needs and desires in a way that is both articulate and inventive.

Jared's "stories" are typical of his creativity. His case is unique; he was injured when he was eleven, was in a coma for a year, and basically has "learned" very little since that time. Both his short-term memory and his attention span are very poor, and although he was twenty-one when these tales were collected (1987-88), his interests and tastes were, and are, generally those of an adolescent or eleven-year-old. He was still attending high school when these stories were recorded, and his peers were generally in their teens. Many of the disabled, particularly the mentally disabled, do in a way "lose" their adulthood—their disabilities and the attention they command makes them childlike. Because of Jared's short attention span, Jared's tales, when compared with the stories in Brian Sutton-Smith's *The Folkstories of Children*, are usually no more consistent or structured than those of a four-year-old. Yet Jared has inevitably picked up pieces of information since his accident, and inevitably matured in his own way (he graduated from high school in 1989—with a real diploma, not merely a certificate

of completion). The stories Jared told at twenty-one reflected his present condition, but were usually closely related to his past.

What is remarkable about Jared's stories is that, despite his inability to actually speak, he manages to make use of as many paralinguistic devices as are available to him. When spelling out a story to a "listener," Jared can yell wordlessly, moan, laugh or pretend to cry depending on what is called for in the context of his story (this is still true today). He also makes use of gestures, imitating actions to the best of his ability (such as drinking or sleeping), rolling his eyes, raising his eyebrows, smiling, frowning, grimacing, etc. But most interesting of all, since Jared is unable to use his words orally and cannot use modulations in his voice to shape the meaning of those words, he has developed an elaborate system of punctuation. Punctuation is the most important dramatization device that is available to him. His spelling boards are outfitted with the usual periods, commas and quotation marks that are commonly used in written language, and his various electronic communication devices are also equipped with dashes, parentheses, asterisks and dollar signs. For some unfathomable reason none of the devices Jared used in 1987 and 1988 were equipped with lower case letters, so that all Jared's written messages were communicated or printed in block capitals. Besides punctuation, Jared also manipulates spelling and the actual position of his words as they are printed out in order to make his messages more expressive.

In preparing Jared's printed stories for presentation, I have edited some obvious mistakes, such as the final letter of a line appearing on the following line of text. The spelling "errors" (which are often purposeful) I have not changed. Where the story is printed (Jared's communicator printed on a strip of paper similar to a cash register tape), I have maintained the position of the words as they appear on the tape.

I have collected stories from Jared using both his electronic communicator and his spelling board. The two experiences can be very different. When he is using his communicator, it is difficult to see what Jared is saying, because the keys are very small and because he constantly backs up and changes or corrects what he has already written. Thus, when he is using his communicator, the "listener" or "audience" finds it easiest to wait until he has printed

out the message, then read it out loud to Jared, as if repeating what Jared has said—much the same way a listener reinforces a story told by a small child. During this reiteration, Jared adds appropriate gestures, noises and facial expressions—or, as is sometimes the case, he is so overwhelmed by his own wit that he can do nothing but laugh as the message is read to him.

These are typical examples of Jared's printed stories:

- (1) "JARED WEIN, A NORMAL,
AVERAGE TEENAGER
WAS LIEING ON HIS
SOFA, LEFT TO GRANDMA
WHEN HIS SISTER
COMES HOME FROM SCHOOL
...

NOW, RIGHT THEN,
THE DOOR STARTS TO
SHUFFLE! -UNAWARE TO
HER EARS, AS IT WAS,
...

-THE TWILIGHT ZONE

- (2) "NOT TOO LONG AGO,
IN A CHARITY WITH
MANY PLANETS CIRCLING
AROUND IN IT, AND
IN THE MANY-PLANETS
WERE MANY ◇◇A' SHRUB-
BERRY◇◇ AND MANY
ANIMALS AND M-A-N-Y,
M-A-N-Y ANIMALS-OF-
LIFES WHICH CONSITTED
OF MOSTLY LIONS, TIGERS,
AND BEARS -OH-MY-

Jared often forgets to close quotations or parenthetical phrases. Careful readers will not miss the references to Monty Python or *The Wizard of Oz*. It takes Jared about fifteen minutes to produce stories of this length.

When Jared is "speaking" directly to a "listener," using an alphabet board, he can add dramatization devices as the story progresses, like any normal storyteller. However, he is more easily distracted and will often lose track of what he has already said. It especially distracts him if someone is writing down what he is saying, because he wants to be able to see the transcription and to make sure his words are being put down exactly as he "said" them. The following is an example of a story session in which Jared was using his alphabet board:

Storytaker: Can you tell me a story?

Jared: WELL, I HAVE (IN THE CLOSE FUTURE) MARRIED
[here Jared grins and pauses for a long time]

Storytaker: Married who?

Jared [grinning]: JESSICA RABBIT.

Jared's grandmother adds: Bill says she's already Roger Rabbit's wife so you can't be married to her, and I say you can't be married to her 'cause she's a 'Toon. Two very good reasons why you can't be married to her.

Jared: WE WENT INTO [he pauses, gazes into the distance, waves and vocalizes: "aannh," gently] THE TOON COUNTRY WHERE YOU CAN MARRY ANYONE, AROUND ANYBODY.

Storytaker: Is that it?

Jared: AND [dreamily raising eyebrows, smiling] WE MET [again raising eyebrows] WHO, BUT ROGER RABBIT.

This exchange took about five minutes.

Because it takes Jared so long to say anything, he is more likely to be interrupted than another person telling a story of the same length. There is constant activity in the halls of the several nursing facilities where Jared has lived since his accident; music is piped through an intercom system. The following story was printed on Jared's electronic communicator:

~DID YOU EVER HEAR
OF

(At this point a nurse came in to give Jared medication.)

WALTER HAMINGFORD?
WELL, WALTER HAMI.
WAS A SELLER-BIRTY [celebrity]
THAT LEAVED OFF

(Here Jared was distracted by operatic marching music on the intercom. He laughed and nodded his head in time to the music.)

IN THE MIDST OF THE
1300'S TOO DUE IN
THE FIVE-TEAN*S...

(Here a tenor aria began on the music system. Jared broke off the story and pretended to sing.)

HE WAS A RUSSIAN, AND
HE WAS GAY!!!

"Is there more?" I asked. Jared rolled his eyes and gestured with a wave of his hand as if to say, "forget it." He was certainly trying to perform; he started off in true form with a pert abbreviation and an awful pun. But the distractions were too great. The performance possibilities of the background music overshadowed the performance possibilities of a disconnected story that was being constantly interrupted.

Left to his own devices, given his electronic communicator and an uninterrupted block of time, Jared can produce coherent and poetic pieces of writing. One afternoon Jared and several others were sitting in the parking lot of the nursing home where they lived at the time; no one was watching Jared as he typed. The slip of paper that bore this passage was about to blow away but was rescued by another resident of the home:

"-THE WORLD IS A JIG-SAW-
PUZZLE, AND ALL OF THE

PEOPLE ARE PIECES TO IT..."

*

-THE UNIVERSE IS A
JUMBO-JIGSAW-PUZZLE
AND ALL OF THE STARS AND
PLANETS ARE THE PIECES
TO THE GAME! -

THINK
ABOUT
IT...

Poetry or philosophy or perhaps a quotation—who knows where or why he came up with that? It is truly remarkable that this comes from the same mind that made up the incoherent story of Walter Hamingford (this fragment is actually about a year older than the story of Walter Hamingford).

There is a series of messages from 1987 that clearly illustrate Jared's storytelling strategies and capabilities. All three of these were produced on his electronic communicator. Before Jared's debilitating accident, he was studying magician's tricks and had given several magic shows at children's birthday parties (recall that he was only eleven when he was injured!). "Merlin the Magician" (or "M.T.M.") is a recent creation, however. "Shipped to the facts" is a corruption of "hip to the facts."

(1)

-BY JARED
WEIN

"OH, YES, N-O-W I'V
GOT MY MAGIC DOWN TO
A QUEW! -FOR TO SEE,
I TRANSFIGURED I WAS
A LITTLE BIT RUSTY AT
MY MAGIC TO GET
SHIPPED TO MY FACTS.
OH, B-U-T I CAN'T
WAIT UNTIL MY MAGIC-
TEACHER COMES!!! OH,
HE'S N-O-T REALLY
MY M.T.! HE'S REALLY

"MERLIN THE MAGICIAN!"

(2)

+I SHOULD HAVE MY
MAGIC...IT'S A DEEP,
DARK SECRET THAT ONLY
TWO KNOW, IN A SECRET
HOUSE! HA, HA, HA,
HA, HA! Z! Z!"

MY MAGIC BY MERLIN,
THAT IS, ALL IS LOST!
LOST, LOST, LOST! Z!
I'M

SO

SAD, SAD, SAD!!!!—!!!
22'S

<THEEE
MAGIC
<THEEE
MAGIC-NUMBER!!!\$\$\$=

(3)

I CAN'T LIVE AT THIS
NURSINGHOME...
-OR, BETTER YET, GO TO
(THIS) PART OF
-WILLIAM PENN SCHOOL!!!-
*I WANT MY MAGICIAN-
SELF, BUT CAN'T!?! -
WHY???

IN OTHER WORDS I CAN'T
"LIVE" AT A NURSINGHOME,
ESPECIALLY THIS 1...
(HEATHERBANK'S THE NAME)

I'M A MAGICIAN, AND
A YOUNG MAGIC-MAN
LIVES WITH ONE-ANOTHER
MAGICIANS!! -GO ASK M.T.M.

These messages illustrate beautifully Jared's use of punctuation and word position. In the first example Jared starts off by signing himself "-BY JARED WEIN," which is a typical way for him to frame his stories. In another example (not quoted here) he finishes, "-BY JARED W." But more typically, Jared introduces a story by asking a question. The following examples were all printed stories, except for the first, which was told on the alphabet board (with frequent bursts of laughter from the storyteller):

(1) "DO YOU KNOW FUT AZMER? WELL, HE'S THE FASTEST, WELLEST BOOK-EDITOR IN WHOLE CHINA. HE CAN RUN A MILE-IN 200 FORLONGS -THAT'S 2 SECONDS ONLY, AMAZING, AIN'T IT!! AT HALF-PAST-SIX, HE BROKE (THE) RECORD* OF KIND, FIND, KIND MOTHER! WICH IS THE BEST, BEST, BEST MOST BESTEST AWARD TO WIN IN THE OLYMPICS SINCE ATOM-...

(2) "DO YOU KNOW THE SEVEN SEEKERS FOR (THE, THE, THE, THE, THE) THE CAVE OF THE DIAMOND!!! WELL, I HAVE AND (AND, AND, AND) I (YOU KNOW ME, JARED WEIN!!!) - WELL, TO GET US UP TO DATE WITH THE CAVE A-N-D THE BLACK-DIAMOND, WE TAKE US TO GLORIANNA WHO IS THE LAST PERSON TO BE REMINING IN THE SGLORIOS-PIT-OF-DOOMS

- (3) "BUT, MY MOMMY IS DEAD!
-YOU SEE? SHE DIED
FROM AN AIREO-PLANE,
OVER BOSTON, MISSOURI
BY BURNING HER FEET
ON THE AIRPORT-RAILS
AS SHE ASKED THE PILOT
IF SHE COULD
(ROLL) HER POOR, DOMESTIC
FEET OUT ON THE RUNWAY!
"YES..." OUR PILOT
REPLIED!
"BUT, DON'T YOU

Unfortunately, this completely fabricated story (Jared's mother died in an automobile accident in 1978) was interrupted by Jared's being taken to dinner. It is virtually impossible to get Jared to continue a story once he has been away from it for longer than half an hour.

- (4) "DID YOU EVER, EVER
HEAR OF AN ORANDIPUS???
- "WELL, TO KEEP
QUITE SERIOS, SUSIE
IS AN ORANDIPUS! AN
ORANDIPUS IS ANY
SORT OF CREATURE
THAT JUST STAYS IN
- ONE PLACE AND FUSS -

The "Orandipus" story contains two important keys to performance that Jared regularly uses in his stories. One is the opening quotation mark (often never closed); the other is rhyme. The final examples collected from Jared during 1987-1988 resemble poems rather than stories:

WEIN

(1)

“NOW, I S-H-I-T AND
MISHELLE PELLIS IS
GONNA’ COME SEE ME!”

WHAT’LL I DO???
- BESIDES POO...
WELL, WELL, WELL!
(SHE’S RICH) BUT,
I DON’T KNOW!?!

I
CAN
NOT
THINK
(RIGHT!)

Michelle Pellis was a friend of Jared’s when he was seven years old.

(2)

“WHEN WILL I GO
(WHERE) H-O-M-E?
BACK TO THE HEAVENLY
PLACE THAT EVERYONE
LOVES THEIR OWN!
OH ME, OH MY!!!
-NO NEED FOR ANY
QUESTIONS...

FOR QUESTIONS
AT THE LEAST!!! WHY?

*

WHY, I’M GOING HOME!

.....
“WOW, I’M FLYING UP
AND OUT OF THE FIRE-
PLACE!!!-GOSH-ER-
SNOCKLE-BLIPS!!!”

* * * * *

What is one to make of all this?

For one thing, storytelling—bizarre as Jared's stories may seem—is an important part of Jared's life. He is often left alone for long periods of time and tells stories to himself. He will also begin to tell a story to try to keep a visitor from leaving. It is easy to find psychological roots and reasons for Jared's storytelling; before his injury his creativity had many outlets, and now he is extremely limited in what he can do and in how he can express himself. These stories are an obvious outlet for Jared's creativity.

It is not so easy to analyze Jared's stories in terms of structure and content. According to Gilbert Botvin's structural analysis as cited in Sutton-Smith's *The Folkstories of Children*, the "very youngest children [tell] stories that [are] mainly beginnings and endings" (Sutton-Smith 3); Jared's stories tend to be mainly beginnings, with occasional other elements and few endings. His beginnings are usually plainly marked; he uses a set of what Botvin calls performance "keys" (after Goffman, 1974), including traditional verbal introductions ("Not too long ago . . ."; "Did you ever hear of . . ."; "Do you know . . ."; "Did you ever, ever hear of . . .") and syntactic markers that he has decided will indicate a story (opening quotation marks, the signature "by Jared Wein").

But most of Jared's stories are limited to two types of narrative elements as defined by Botvin. Jared's resolutions are almost consistently a state of "lack not liquidated" ("my magic by Merlin, that is, all is lost!"; "I want my magician-self, but can't!?!"; "What'll I do . . . I can not think (right!)"), and the rest of Jared's stories tend to be filled "non-action elements" such as delineation of character and background information (Sutton-Smith 5) ("he was a Russian, and he was gay . . ."; "He's the fastest, wellest book-editor in whole China"). In the introduction to *The Folkstories of Children*, Sutton-Smith writes: "Without a middle or development section there is very little sense of plot in the stories of the youngest children" (Sutton-Smith 6). This seems true of Jared's stories, but in looking at these "beginnings" one senses that, while a four-year-old could not tell a complete story, given the right conditions Jared could.

Another system used by Sutton-Smith for analyzing children's stories is that of Pierre Maranda and Elli Köngäs-Maranda; but because there is so little plot in Jared's stories, they are not well-

sued to this analysis. When classified in this system Jared's stories are on the lowest level; that is, there is a lack or deprivation to which no response is made. However, in Jared's stories the protagonist (often himself) is questioning his inability to make the required response: "I want my magician-self, but can't!?! Why???" This theme runs throughout Jared's stories and much of his everyday conversation. Unlike the young children who tell Maranda Level 1 stories, Jared is old enough and experienced enough to have learned that sometimes a lack cannot be liquidated; he has learned it both despite and because of his disabilities. Unlike the four-year-old, Jared is aware that not all lacks can be liquidated. But his own life is full of unresolved conflicts and unfulfilled desires, and these are reflected in his stories.

Jared's narratives are a reflection of his mind; they are fragmented, often incoherent, intricate, unfinished, tantalizing. They cannot be analyzed in terms of "normal" narrative structure and content because they are not normal. Yet, in a very normal way, like any other child—or adult, for that matter—Jared tells his stories in order to perform and to communicate. The wilder his syntax and spelling, the more forceful his hold on his audience; the audience is drawn in by his mental gymnastics. He does this on purpose, and he is constantly performing. Often Jared is not speaking directly to an audience; the "world is a jig-saw-puzzle" narrative was nearly lost because no one was watching as he produced it. But Jared does intend these epistles to be read, out loud and often, and he receives great pleasure in hearing them repeated. The performance in Jared's creation of these texts is as clearly intended for himself as for anyone else; he is often quite literally entertaining himself when he tells a story. And finally, Jared is able to exert true mastery and skill in the manipulation of his keyboard and of language. It is the only thing he *can* have mastery over. It is his single true skill, and he makes the most of it.

Epilogue

Since these stories were collected, Jared has acquired a computer. It might seem like the obvious answer to his need, but supplying Jared with the appropriate equipment, software and tutorials have

& CARING SOUL, WHO COULD THINK SMARTLY DUE TO SOME PEOPLE WHO COULD NOT THINK FOR THEMSELVES. HE HAD A MEMORY OF A GREAT MIND LIKE ALBERT EINSTEIN. HE HAD A BRAIN OF A BRILLIANT GROUNDHOG. ALTHOUGH, HE THOUGHT GREAT THOUGHTS HE WAS A SIMPLE DRAGON. HE DID GOOD DEEDS FOR THE CHILDREN OF THE TOWN IN WHICH HE LIVED, GUARDED & PROTECTED. HE WOULD HELP THEM WITH THEIR HOMEWORK, AFTER SCHOOL AND SOMETIMES IN THE MORNING.

OFTEN HE LIKED TO PLAY GAMES WITH THEM TO MAKE THE TIME PASS AWAY FAST ENOUGH SO THAT THEY WOULD BE ON TIME READY FOR SCHOOL.

THE CHILDREN, THEY CATCH AND THROUGH THE BALL WHILE THE DRAGON THREW THE BASES. WHAT A TEAM, WHAT A SIGHT 1 ONE COULD IMAGINE!!

1999

THE GALAXY WAS EMPTY SO ALL THE GODS HAD TO FILL IN EXTRA COMPARTMENTS AND COLORS INTO THE HEAVENS OF PEACE. IT WAS THE HEAVENS OF PEACE BECAUSE THE GOOD LORD OF ANGELS IN THE GALAXY MADE THE GYPIES DANCE AND SING THEIR SONGS AND PLAY THEIR HARPS. THEIR HARPS BROUGHT BEAUTIFUL MELODIES THROUGHOUT THE HEAVENS AND THAT WAS ALL THERE WAS TO LISTEN TO. THE GYPSIES DANCE MADE THE

SKIES SPARKLE WITH MANY
DIFERENT COLORS. THE MÚSIC
CALMED THE HEAVENS AND A RAIN-
BOW APPEARED ACROSS THE AIR
LIKE BUGS-BUNNY HAD ALWAYS SAID
IN HIS CARTOONS “THAT’S ALL
FOLKS.”

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