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Reality Radio, Second Edition

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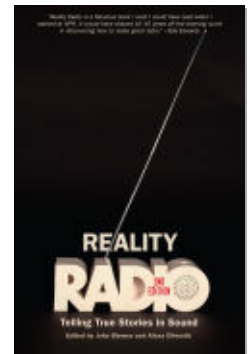
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Finding the Poetry

Dmae Roberts

Voices have a poetry that is

Unlike

Just

Meaning

The way people speak

With pauses,

Stutters, stumbles, abrupt—

Eruptions and

. . . pauses . . .

And Undertones that underlie the words, raised and

Low volumes

High and Bass pitch

When people are excited or tired or perhaps

. . . lying or telling the truth . . .

This all makes a difference in the context

The meaning

Old/young/rural/urban/male/female/quiet/loud

All the variances and nuances give depth and texture to the
words they speak.

The flow, the rhythms.

The way we over—

—lap in conversation and fill in each other's sentences.

I love listening to people speak.

WHEN I STARTED PRODUCING radio in college, I had no idea I loved sound. I knew I loved writing my own words or being onstage and speaking incredible words written by classical playwrights. But sound? At the time I was a theater major and wanted to find a way to support my acting habit. So I changed my major to journalism and learned how to write for print. I volunteered at my local community radio station and learned the most important an surprising thing in my career.

I loved sound.

Recording sound.

Editing sound.

Interviewing people I'd never have the guts to talk to without a tape deck and mic. Putting together elaborate radio theater pieces by doing live mixes on turntables, cart machines, and reel-to-reels. And using the same techniques to create personal and sound-rich documentaries. At the heart of some wild productions were the sounds of words and of voices structured as in a Shakespearean play, with soliloquies and a variety of scenes with characters speaking their lines, sometimes in rhyme and oft-times in improvised free verse.

For the Peabody Award-winning *Crossing East* series on Asian American history, I had an opportunity to interview people of all ages and ethnic backgrounds.

In Hawaii, I interviewed a lot of older people about the language developed by plantation workers immigrating from Asia and Europe to Hawaii. The Hawaiians call it "pidgin" and delighted in describing it for me. But nothing could describe it better than the way they converse with each other.

In "Pidgin English" from the *Crossing East* series, Domingo and Espy, a Filipino couple in their seventies discuss what they had for breakfast. There is a rhythm to the words, it's musical:

DOMINGO: This morning I had egg and bah-cone [bacon].

ESPY: Egg and bah-cone?

I had finafle [pineapple] juice.

And then I went stirring with the stirrer,
you know that look kind of like the whipping kind.

Yeah, I whip 'em.

DOMINGO: You whip 'em good.

ESPY: I whip 'em good. [They laugh.]

This poetic dialogue is priceless. I listen for gems like these when I'm interviewing and find a way to use them in my pieces—moments when a bland interview breaks out into poetry.

ESPY: *Yeah, I whip em.*

DOMINGO: *You whip 'em good.*

You can hear the poetry in even something as potentially dry as a museum tour. I took a tour with Carolyn Micnihimer, the curator of a tiny turn-of-the-century Chinese herbalist's shop turned museum in eastern Oregon. She was showing me a massive metal door.

Our front door, as you can see, was well-locked.
as well as a wooden bolt that went across to open it from the inside.
And the lock . . . [she bolts the lock] . . . also was lined with
metal. . . .
And basically they did have fears of the outside,
Whether it was American or not.
We do have one bullethole in the door.
They say the Americans would shoot up Chinatown once in a
while on Saturday night
and have not a malicious time
but a scaring time
for the Chinese.

“They did have fears of the outside. . . .” Who speaks like that anymore? I knew Micnihimer, the curator, was a gold mine because (1) she was in her eighties and had the wonderful textured voice of older people, (2) the way she spoke was reminiscent of a far-off time, (3) she almost rhymed at times. While editing and mixing this cut, I always joined in with the last three lines because they were so musical and quite thematic to the story about an herbalist living on the American frontier.

... not a malicious time
 but a scaring time
 for the Chinese.

Strange as it may sound, Shakespeare's iambic pentameter is the closest rhythm to everyday English speech. People *speak* in poetic rhythm. You just have to listen for it and try to keep their form when you produce a piece.

One young woman I interviewed, Miracle Draven, talked so fast it made my head swim. But as soon as I heard her I knew she was a natural for radio. It didn't hurt that she had a compelling story.

"Miracle on the Streets" is a documentary about a homeless girl who was kicked out of her family house for being gay. Miracle lived four years on the streets and became a crystal meth addict. She turned to dealing and prostitution to pay for her habit. She talked in run-on sentences, with repetitions and swift shifts of thought. To intensify the feeling I got from talking with Miracle, I overlapped some of her monologue, repeating only a few of her phrases, and underscored it with a hip-hop beat to heighten the poetry. (The asterisk indicates the phrase that overlaps here.)

You don't eat when you're on crystal . . .*

... Your appetite is suppressed.

That's why you get so skinny . . .

... Cuz you're really—you're really—you're really just not
 hungry . . .

You don't even notice that you're not hungry—you're just not
 hungry . . .

... I think my number one thing that I always ate was Pepsi,
 always Pepsi . . .

... Star Crunch, which is a Little Debbie snack, costs 25 cents . . .

... Cuz I can't spend my dealer's money, so I have to spange
 my own money . . .

That was like all I ate.

That was like all I ate.

That was like all I ate . . .

With the musical beat underneath, this little speech became a song. There are beats and rhythms to how people "speak the speech, I pray you trip-

pingly on the tongue . . .” (as Hamlet says). When you spend a lot of time editing recordings of people, you begin to hear the beats of their speech.

That was like all I ate.

That was like all I ate.

That was like all I ate . . .

I found that if I was holding a microphone, strangers would tell me the most intimate things—the most amazing stories. The best interviews are those that could easily be turned into a play or a film. When I asked Miracle what it was like to be a prostitute selling herself so she could buy drugs, what she told me could easily be turned into a soliloquy for the stage.

It’s not like you’re getting off. It’s not.

Dude, I was not even there.

You know, I’m thinking where am I going to go to find
that dope?

Is this drug dealer home?

Ooh, wait, do I have that one drug dealer’s number?

It’s not like I was attracted to him or anything.

He didn’t have to be cute.

He didn’t have to be skinny or whatever, and be big and buff.

I wasn’t looking at that.

I’m only looking at your wallet,
and that’s a really horrible woman to turn into.

Dialogue can further intensify a scene. When Miracle met up with her friend, Teacup, a butch teen girl, they took me into a bathroom at the public library to show me how they prepared crystal meth in the stalls. They both were fighting the urge to sell drugs again.

MIRACLE: My biggest thing right now is I keep wanting to sell it to make more money. I don’t want to use it. I just want to sell it.

TEACUP: It’s easy money. I know a hell of a lot of people that use.

MIRACLE: Get your hands on 120 dollars and have 500 dollars before the day is done. Boom!

TEACUP: 500, 2,000 bucks when the day is done. I’ve sold 600 dollars worth of dope within two hours a day.

DMAE: What does that do to the people who take it?

TEACUP: I make sure I test it before I sell it.

DMAE: That's not what I mean—

MIRACLE: I know . . . we're hurting other people the way they used to hurt us. It isn't any quicker money, it really isn't. It just gets me closer to the stuff and makes me lose my life just a little bit more, you know. I know that.

Often you can find the poetry in what people say just by editing the extraneous verbiage. In "Angels and Demons," a docu-play about domestic violence in relationships, people were often hesitant and scared to reveal themselves. Often they tried to over-explain their feelings and actions. This is an excerpt from a woman's interview describing her thought process in dealing with her boyfriend's abuse. The strike-throughs indicate edits.

WOMAN:

I felt like maybe I asked for it.

Maybe I did something ~~to him~~.

Even though I know nothing I did, ~~at this point I know that~~
~~nothing I did~~

warranted being beaten up.

~~Nothing I did~~ Warranted being physically beaten,

~~or even~~ warranted being touched ~~in any way~~, in that kind of way.

MAN:

When everything would get too much and I would get mad and
let loose, ~~what would end~~

~~up happening~~ is for four or five seconds I wouldn't feel
anything.

It was just like a white out. ~~And usually during those three or~~
~~four seconds~~

I would be breaking something,
slamming something against the wall,
pushing somebody if it was my wife.

~~If it ended up happening like that.~~

On three of those occasions I slapped her or pushed her
And then something broke and it was all gone.

For a year, I worked on a documentary/outreach project in which I worked with more than thirty women to talk about their experiences with breast cancer. We worked on outreach activities like painting, writing, and interviewing, and they told their stories. Some were recorded and some were written pieces performed by actors. In this short clip from “The Breast Cancer Monologues,” three women are telling one story. This is a technique I like to use to create a sense of dialogue by overlapping monologues in which people finish each other’s sentences to create a narrative.

ELAINE: You’re going to what?

OLGA: They told me to crawl on the table, lay flat, and stick my breast through a hole.

CAREN: They had to be kidding.

OLGA: The surgeons wanted to do a biopsy to see if I had breast cancer.

ELAINE: It was cold in the hospital gown, and my body tensed at the idea of dropping anything as vulnerable as my breast through a hole to be poked, prodded, sliced by doctors below me whom I’d never met and couldn’t see.

CAREN: They numbed my breast, and on the other side of the table I felt the tugging, the pressure, something like cutting.

OLGA: I wanted to cry but I pressed my cheek hard against the board.

ELAINE: I didn’t dare move.

“The Breast Cancer Monologues” was performed with three actors, but it’s a production technique I like to use with interviews as well, especially if you can get people to tell their viewpoints of the same story and then inter-cut their comments into a montage. The following is from “Sisters,” which traces three generations of sisters. This pair of sisters were in their seventies and were interviewed together. They often overlapped their speech, but I used editing to strengthen that sense of connectedness.

WOMAN 1:

From the time we knew anything about playing
we played together, built houses,
fell down steps. Everything like that.

WOMAN 2:

Our mother dressed us alike,
And they thought we were twins really . . .

WOMAN 1:

Our tastes are the same. . . .
Course I like music better than Ruthie does.
She goes to artist shows.
I don't enjoy those very much.

WOMAN 2:

We like to walk.
We like to be out.
We love nature and we love animals.

WOMAN 1:

We just respect each other's wants, and Ruthie tries to do what
pleases me and I try to please her.

WOMAN 2:

That's all you can do.
Right now is all you have anyway . . .
particularly when you get our age.

They're telling the same story, their story, but because there are two of them speaking, their voices interlacing, there's movement and theatricality to the story.

DIALOGUE IS ALWAYS a fun and surprising way to begin a radio piece or to transition to another monologue. It breaks up the pace and indicates a refreshing movement to another section, much like a coda in a piece of music. It's even more intriguing if the dialogue incorporates a non-mainstream style of speaking.

Because I'm a mixed-race Asian American, I grew up with a couple of different languages. I came to the United States when I was eight years old, and I spoke Japanese and Taiwanese and not much English. My dad made our household speak only English so I would forget my first two

languages, and it worked. When my mother and her friends would speak in Taiwanese, I could almost follow their conversations just by listening to the sounds and tones of what they were saying. That's probably why the way words sound is almost as important to me as the content of the words. I've never quite believed the actual meanings of words as much as their undertone and subtext.

Radio allowed me to explore the sound of words and language in a way I had never experienced before by melding poetry and sound. And I soon came to weave my experience with my documentary work. I found that I loved using actors to read historical narratives or flashbacks and to play characters that you couldn't possibly interview. Somehow that brought me closer to the truth than just relying on the memories and perspectives of interviewees. Most of the time, interviewees don't tell you all of the truth. They hold some things back. This is even more true when interviewing family members, or when doing a personal piece and pondering just how much you might tell.

Throughout my childhood, I heard bits and pieces of my mother's story, usually when she was depressed or angry. She grew up during World War II, and her parents sold her to work as a servant/adopted daughter to some abusive parents. When my mother and I took a trip to Taiwan together—during the making of “Mei Mei, A Daughter's Song”—our already tempestuous relationship got even more difficult.

For a month I recorded any sound I encountered in Taiwan. Firecrackers, Chinese opera, puppet shows, vendors shouting in a marketplace, people singing at temples, street noise, children's choirs, funerals, TV shows. I ended up with thirty or so ninety-minute cassettes rich with stereo sound. I didn't know what I would use, but I knew I would use small bits from most of the sounds because I wanted to create lots of scenes and transitions. I don't generally plot out my scenes ahead of time, but especially when I'm traveling I try to fill my time with experiences and sound possibilities as well as interviews. Then I go back and listen and dub and figure out my best bits. Then I'll write a script and start shaping it. Always it's the sound and intriguing interviews first, and then comes any written essay or narration.

The most difficult thing about recording in Taiwan was interviewing my mother, who angrily resented my questions. It was like pulling teeth

to get her to say anything, and even then she cut off the interview after twenty minutes and wouldn't let me do it again.

MOM: I was thirteen and fourteen. I tried suicide three times.

DMAE: How?

MOM: Tried to hang.

DMAE: You tried to hang yourself?

MOM: Yeah.

DMAE: Three times?

MOM: Yeah. And Buddha come and stop me. Buddha gave me power.

DMAE: How did she stop you?

MOM: I don't know how to explain it! She come down here.

DMAE: Did you actually tie a rope up?

MOM: Yeah, and Buddha come down and turned me loose.

DMAE: You were hanging?

MOM: Yeah.

DMAE: And she turned you loose?

MOM: Buddha come down and stop me.

DMAE: Did she say anything, do anything?

MOM: Yeah.

DMAE: What did she say?

MOM: She told me that I have a long way to go.

So I took that torturous interview and wrote a monologue telling the story from the perspective of Mei Mei as a young girl. Because my mother didn't really want to tell me the story, she sounded angry throughout the interview. I felt I could get closer to the truth of her past experiences and how she survived them by having an actor portray her when she was younger. Someone who would tell her story more objectively—in the way she might tell it to a stranger, not a daughter she resented.

MOM [as a young woman]:

I was hanging and Buddha stopped me.

Buddha gave me power. She said, it's not your time yet. . . .

The first time I tried to kill myself, I was thirteen years old.

I tied a sheet to the ceiling in a circle.

I put my head in the circle.
I was hanging and Buddha stopped me.
I was hanging and Buddha stopped me.
Buddha gave me power.

I chose to write my mother's narrative as a young girl as a poem. Because in real life she spoke English in phrases rather than complete sentences, using a poetic style for her narrative made sense to me. I wanted to keep the cultural character of her words and the feelings of difficulty in telling her personal story.

MOM [as a young woman]:
My real parents sold me.
They were poor.
I was two years old in Chinese age,
One year old in American time.
I was sold twice. Twice I was sold.
The first parents were not unkind.
Were not loving.
Were not unkind.
Again, I was sold.
Sim-bua—
in Taiwanese. Sim-bua—
Adopted daughter-in-law.
Sold to marry the son in the family.
I was twelve.
Sim-bua.

There were certain phrases I used as repetitious for transitions, thematic tag lines, and codas.

MOM:
We talk the Chinese, you don't understand.
We talk the Taiwanese, you don't understand. . . .

A good documentary, a good radio piece, prompts understanding on a deeper level than the written word. Because we delve into human experience—and the human voice—we convey something that's more than

facts and stats. To listen to someone telling a story is to make an emotional connection. For me, radio storytelling is about sounds and words, the moments when words spoken spontaneously have a music of their own.

The rhythm and flow—
the textures and tones—
our overlapping conversations—
interruptions as we fill in each other's sentences—

And the meanings behind our words.

Good radio, like good theater, is a collection of scenes that interweave voices and sounds through monologues and dialogues and soundscapes. And beneath it all is the poetry that gets us closer to that elusive heartbeat we call truth.