

FOCI 222 Narrative Writing Assignment

Dancing in the Street—Revived by Community by Kyle Holleran

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I opened the door to my room and kicked off my shoes, removed my sweat-stained socks, waded through the pool of dirty laundry and collapsed into the open, loving arms of my bed. It had been an exhausting week at work, and my body wanted nothing more than to lull off into the contented sleep of a well-earned, late Saturday afternoon nap.

My phone vibrated, twice in quick succession. A text message. How dare it interrupt my impending slumber?

“See you in half an hour. Thanks again for volunteering, love.”

A week earlier I had agreed to volunteer for the Skeleton Park Arts Festival to help out a dear friend of mine. Every single fibre of my being hated the version of myself from last week who had agreed to this.

My feet grumbled their protests as I stood up and began the familiar ritual of keeping up appearances. Clothes. Hair. Cologne. Wallet. Keys. Socks. Shoes. I grabbed a granola bar, hoping it would fend off my hunger for another five minutes, and begrudgingly opened my front door, wanting nothing to do with the outside world or the next two hours of my life.

Fast forward. My volunteer shift was downtown at The Sleepless Goat, but I decided to walk through Skeleton Park on my way there and see what was happening at the festival. My feet were still aching, and I had already started to sweat again under the hot, summer sun. As I made it to the beginnings of the park, I stopped in absolute awe of what I saw.

This small, run down green-space was brimming with energy! The smell of cigarette smoke and *other substances* blended with the damp summer air to create a strange, yet somehow inviting feel to the early evening air. Children ran around barefoot in the long, cool grass, almost definitely getting into all kinds of trouble. People of all ages grouped around the various booths and stages, sitting in lawn chairs or huddled together in boisterous conversation. I continued walking and quickly ducked off the path as a group of stilts dressed in elaborate, colour-filled bird costumes seemingly floated through the air. I felt my spirit lifting as a smile spread across my face, and continued through the park.

Fast forward. I’m standing in the middle of Princess Street behind a road barricade as about 500 people parade down the road, following the Lemon Bucket Orchestra. Every. Single. Person. Is smiling.

The entire street is a party of like-minded, music and art loving individuals that spans across age, culture, discipline—it dons on me that this is a community. A community of Kingstonians that respect, love and support the arts.

The entire atmosphere that I had taken in a few moments ago at Skeleton Park was instantly recreated on Princess Street, and the laughing and dancing began again. Another band began playing, a square dance caller stood up on a chair with a microphone, and suddenly I was swept up into a group of strangers, partnered off, and began promenading and do-si-doing up and down this small section of the downtown core. Half an hour ago, cars had been driving down the street. Now, hundreds of *strangers* were communing through music and dance. Smiling. Laughing. I had been on my feet all day, and they didn’t even hurt anymore.

In this transient moment, I felt like nothing in the world mattered. I laughed, I danced, and I loved this small community that I had been introduced to by chance. All of my material cares had melted away, and for a brief moment I truly ascended into a state of pure content. To me, this was the power of art to connect a community in perfect practice.

Analysis

I tell this story because it stands out to me as a moment where a community I had never been a part of before unknowingly got me back on my feet. This story recently happened in the summer at a time when I was physically exhausted and mentally in anguish, as a long-term relationship in my life had abruptly come to an end a few weeks before. In this story, I am not the leader, and I am not even in my theatrical comfort zone—I am surrounded by total strangers, at a strange event in the middle of downtown Kingston that I had only heard about before.

I'm immediately drawn to my attitude—I was physically and mentally tired, and allowed these concerns to cloud my judgment and morph into mild negative preconceptions about the Skeleton Park Arts Festival. I also experienced a lack of fluidity in my own personal vision—I was surprised by the transformation of the park into the festival, and in the fact that the atmosphere could remain the same so seamlessly despite the location shift.

Beyond my personal shortcomings, I truly witnessed the power of community art-making and doing to help us transcend.

Transcend what? For me, it was the washing away of my physical and mental concerns. This brief moment helped to lift my spirits and refocus me at a low point in my overall wellbeing. Art was so seamlessly able to lower inhibitions, garner trust and allow humans to interact with other humans on an intimate level. I saw this vibrant community in an entirely new light, and they accepted my sore feet and tired mind with open arms.

Implications for Teaching

Physical and mental distractions will always exist, and they always tend to follow us and seep through the cracks and into our lives. I have learned that it is best to acknowledge them, and then leave them outside the classroom. It won't always be possible, but putting self-care into practice, and relying on whatever community is around you to support you through the inevitable rough times is a must.

My negative pre-judgments were another unnecessary distraction. I did not have the information to make a solid judgement on what was to come, yet I did anyways. This is incredibly important—you cannot see the struggle that any other person is going through just by looking at them. Preconceived notions and judgements need to be kept in check, until all the information is revealed.

Remaining fluid and open will help me to see the positive change that can take place, regardless of the resources available. I was surprised by the ability of the festival to change Skeleton Park and Downtown Kingston into living, breathing, community arts spaces. Great things can and will happen if you remain open to them.

Lastly, I have experienced the instillation of a desire to create a community – in my school, in my classroom—to help students to experience that transient moment of transcendence that I latched onto. The bond a community shares is a powerful thing, and including artistic practices in the community only strengthens and deepens that bond.