

## Deep Immersion: The Lifelong Endeavor of Barry Lopez

In reading *Conversations with Barry Lopez*, a compilation of interviews the writer did with William Tydeman, one particular remark Lopez made stuck in my head. Lopez was talking about the time he spent on the research icebreaker, the *Nathaniel B. Palmer*, on his way to Antarctica when he said:

Every day for sixty-eight days I was actively involved in something, and I trusted something good would come of it. You know, if you look at a period of research and then look at the article that came out of it, you might be able to determine that on forty-nine of the sixty-eight days nothing occurred that later came up, explicitly, in the article, but that's not the point. The point is immersion and momentum and dedication (89).

I kept thinking about those last few words: *immersion, momentum, dedication*. I kept finding myself coming back to them at odd moments, as I was sitting in class, as I was walking down the street. There was something about them that made sense to me, something about them that felt important, but I couldn't quite pin down what.

Was it some mix of admiration and envy for Lopez's ability to live his life on such terms—throwing himself into a subject or pursuit with single-minded energy, and then doing the same with each new thing that really captured his interest? I think highly of Lopez's drive, of his dedication to sticking with his mission until it is complete. He is the kind of person I like, someone who follows through with what he decides to do. His is the kind of life that I want for myself.

In *Outside*, a new collection of early Lopez stories, many of the narrators possess that same intense focus, that same, often single-minded interest and need to understand. In "The Search for the Heron" the narrator becomes obsessed with understanding the heron, even

becoming the heron. The drive consumes him; he was, he says, “beating on the trunks with [his] fists,” imploring the trees to answer his questions, to tell him what they knew of the bird that slept in their branches (42). Later, he is ashamed of his outburst, but in the moment all he could think of was the possibility of attaining some new knowledge, the chance to immerse himself more deeply in that which so captivates him.

But it is the narrator of “Empira’s Tapestry” who most strongly reflects Lopez’s process of immersion, momentum, and dedication. In describing her storytelling the narrator says, “I felt [the stories] physically, ... When I spoke of these things, it was as if I were guiding a canoe through rapids and stretches of calm water, conveying my passengers on a momentous journey down a marked but unknown path” (80). As I read, I saw Lopez himself in those lines, saw him present in the story alongside the reader, saw him so fully immersed that he could look around with the narrator’s eyes, feel with the narrator’s hands. That immersion is why Lopez’s stories feel so true—not true in that they actually happened, not true for the nonfiction shelf—but true in that they could have happened, perhaps not to him, but certainly to someone. That complete dedication to the world of the story is also why even as Lopez describes the unlikely, the impossible, it still feels like someone’s reality. In my reality a man cannot become a salmon, but in the narrator’s reality of “The Falls,” he can.

So how does Lopez create that convincing reality? In trying to figure that out, I turned to Lopez’s papers in the Sowell Collection at the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library at Texas Tech University. The papers contain drafts and research, correspondence, and a rather baffling assortment of odds and ends, many of them sent to him by fans. (I can say with certainty

that it would never occur to me to mail rocks to an author I liked, but I now know that some people do!)

I spent most of my time in the collection examining Lopez's drafts, particularly those for the story "Drought" in his book *River Notes*. They are neat and carefully organized, and glancing at other drafts in the same box shows this to be an established pattern. There is a clear progression. First, is a longhand draft, covered with lines struck through and reworded. Lopez works out most of his phrasing in longhand, moving from "No rain fell that winter but" to "Less rain than" to "Little rain fell that winter, less than anyone can remember" (Lopez, manuscript, Box 28, Folder 13). Even littered with edits, the pages are orderly; the lines spaced to allow room for revisions. After the manuscript comes a typewritten draft, where most of the edits concern typos or replace a word or two because they didn't quite fit.

Lopez's drafts show a deliberate movement toward precision. The general "boat" becomes the more specific "dory" in a series of small changes that serve to crystallize the image the reader sees, to sharpen the tiny details that Lopez himself, so deeply immersed in the story, sees as he writes. And those little details that he hones in on are a big part of what makes his stories feel so real. They lend a clarity, a solidity to his descriptions. They are simple and exact, and they carry a weight and texture. The development of details in Lopez's progression of drafts echoes that immersion, momentum and dedication-- immersion in the idea, momentum carrying him uninterrupted through the first longhand draft, and dedication to conveying what he sees to the reader as clearly as it appears to himself.

So how does *my* boat become a dory? In middle school and high school, I sailed with a group of Girl Scouts near Galveston, Texas. Our unofficial motto was "Work until the work is

done.” Immersion, momentum, dedication—it was always easy for me there. My work as a mariner made sense, it absorbed me. Often, in the evenings I would go back to the sail house to re-coil messy lines or patch sails. I never liked leaving things incomplete.

How I wish I could write as easily as I can coil rope—just pick up the story and lay it down smoothly from start to finish, as Lopez’s drafts suggest he often does. But with writing I get hung up on a single word that isn’t quite right and lose my momentum. Maybe I stare at the page for half an hour trying to figure out where I was again. Maybe I abandon it entirely. Maybe I throw in something subpar just to try to keep going and spend the next paragraph stewing over how bad it sounds until it derails me again. Why is it so hard to just write something out and then fix it later? Why do my ideas so often knot up, opposing all efforts to turn them into words?

In view of my own struggles, Lopez’s apparent ability to simply see and write down a fully formed story seems magical. Yes, his words and phrases do change, and small ideas are added or tweaked, but all the major parts, all the main images and ideas of the final story are clearly visible in the first draft. Somewhat envious, I found myself wondering several times while reading through those drafts if there were even earlier drafts that Lopez didn’t include in the Sowell Collection—more jumbled ones where I could clearly see stops and starts and evolving ideas. It would be reassuring to know that even Barry Lopez starts from a place as disjointed and uncertain as I do.

At this point, I can’t manage that deep immersion in an idea that Lopez does. Reading his drafts, I imagine how clearly he must see the worlds he creates, even from the very beginning, and I am awed. But maybe I shouldn’t despair quite yet; a person’s writing grows and evolves

over their entire life, and Lopez, at seventy, has had a few more years to develop his craft than I have. Deep immersion is a lifelong endeavor, and I am obviously still not done.

## Works Cited

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