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Joseph Santini: Divided I Stand

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This short story chronicles a professional jazz musician, Joseph Santini, in conflict about whether he should accept a full-time teaching position as a high school music educator. This story focuses, interprets, clarifies, and communicates Joseph's conflict. It also demonstrates the use of stories for culturally relevant research. Joseph's experience transcends impressions of musicians and teachers prevalent in the dominant cultural milieu. The story offers a deeper insight into Joseph's life as he explores teacher education and is guided by his artistic and performative experience. The coda at the end briefly discusses the use of creative nonfiction in research and how it can be a powerful tool to help musicians resolve their conflicts.

Keywords: musician; identity; story writing; music education; teaching

Carrying his sax, Joseph shakes his head and glances at his watch. "Damn drummers."

"I heard that," says Al, sauntering around the corner with a cigarette in his hand.

"Got your drumsticks?"

"Everything's in the van," says Al.

"I'm tired."

"Yeah, can't believe I made it."

"I turned forty-eight this year, Al."

"You look it, with that GQ-businessman jacket, Joseph."

"Thanks, man. Thought you'd dig the tweed. You knew how to dress years ago."

"But there was more style in the seventies."

"Tomorrow, I can sprawl in bed. I love to sleep when 'real' people go to work," yawns Joseph.

"Yeah."

"Remember then? Liquor licenses required strip joints to have live music. Nobody cared what music we played. Just wanted tempos and fifteen minutes per dance. Five minutes of funk, then Latin, then rock. If the three-piece band was boring, they'd play 'Lambada' or 'Black Magic Woman.' But when

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the dancers peeled down to the G-string, the musicians really honked their horns," smirks Joseph. "Back then, I earned \$125 to \$150 a week. Rent was 40 bucks a month."

"Those women were all over you," laughs Al.

"That was thirty years ago."

"Couldn't believe you phoned for a gig at The Smiling Buddha."

"Old time's sake. Needed an excuse to see you, Al. It's been a long time."

"You used to have long hair and torn jeans."

"Remember that place we hung out? Bino's?"

"Yeah, Joseph. Great place. They served half-decent food."

"Those days, that was a big drug spot, full of junkies at three in the morning. Now it's a family restaurant. Boy, it hurt to see it change. And they have this whole thing, man. Balloons, prizes, fancy signs. There were a bunch of joints like Bino's, a couple on Hastings, near Main. I remember the Chick 'N Bull at Davie and Granville. It would be recognizable to old-school hipsters, schmeckheads, and rounders from the sixties or seventies scene."

A breeze blows some leaves onto the sidewalk. A man on crutches hobbles down the street. The aroma of garbage wafts around them as Joseph points to the all-night grocery store across the street.

"Wanna coffee from Harry's?"

"Sure," nods Al, as they cross the street. He puffs his cigarette and crushes it on the pavement.

"Geez, Al, you gotta quit those damn fags," Joseph says while he opens the door.

"Hey, come in, come in, long time no see." Harry lowers the volume on his TV.

"Whatcha watching?"

"A war movie. You musicians only work nights. I have to keep this store open twenty-four hours a day."

"You need to learn the sax, Harry," scoffs Joseph. "Meet Al."

"Any friend of Joseph's is a friend of mine." Harry shakes his hand.

"How about a lottery ticket, Joseph? Twelve million tomorrow."

"Jesus Murphy, that's what I need. I'll take one but should get a potload. How about one ticket and coffee, Harry, and make it black. Real strong."

"I'll take a coffee too, with extra caffeine," echoes Al.

Joseph searches his pocket.

"Let me pay. It's the least I can do since you got me the gig."

"Thanks, Al. Make it a quick pick, Harry."

"Don't you want to choose your own numbers?" asks Harry.

"Nah, I ain't got no luck, no luck at all."

"One lucky quick pick for you," Harry laughs while he punches the machine.

"And I'll take one quick pick and a pack of Benson and Hedges king size."

Al places a twenty-dollar bill on the counter.

"Thanks," says Harry, while he hands Al some change. "If you get another gig, drop by again. Next time, coffee is on the house!"

"Sweet deal," Joseph laughs, as they wave good-bye.

* * *

Joseph points to the bench by the ocean. "Let's sit, take a load off."

"Aren't you expected home?"

"By 5 a.m., to drive Dana to work. Her car pool got screwed and I can't be late, especially after last night, I mean, I really need to smooth the waters."

"In deep shit?" asks Al.

"Well, we had a slight . . .," Joseph pauses, "a slight disagreement."

A squeal forces them to turn their heads. There is a burgundy van racing through a red light.

As they face the water again, Joseph lifts his coffee lid and a cloud of steam rises. Al looks at the ground. Garbage and cigarettes. "What a gig. Not many customers like the old days. Things have changed in the new millennium."

"Yeah," says Joseph. "Now the sideman gets 145 bucks for a four-hour stint. He gets ten percent pension but subtracts two and a half percent for union dues. And my rent is 1,200 bucks a month."

"Thirty years, Joseph. I had more hair then," laughs Al.

"And I'm tired," says Joseph. "Really tired, man. Never used to be tired at 3 a.m. I used to leave a gig and be wired for the night. I would drink a quart of vodka a day and shoot myself with smack. Not good for a normal human being. Back then, I thought I was a special person, you know, Nietzsche or Superman, someone who needed substances to calm my overactive genius-style brain. I went from that extreme, when I thought I was the master of space-time infinity, to bad days, when the pendulum swung the other way and I was lower than whale shit at the bottom of the ocean. So I needed to get high again to prop up this bullshit image I built inside my head. And I lied about it to everyone. I even lied about it to myself. One of the biggest things that happened when I went into psychoanalysis was I realized I had no idea of how I really felt."

"Man. I knew you used but that deep?" asks Al.

"Yeah. Always had a great curiosity about drugs. All the cool older guys were into them. I was fascinated by junkies, thought they were into something magical."

"Magical?"

"I really got messed up because I thought if I did as much heroin as Charlie Parker, I'd play like him. I thought drugs were a shortcut around hard work and practice, a way to gain status in my teenaged community. Some kids were pretty impressed. I was unmistakably a heavy figure, a guy who wasn't afraid to REALLY screw himself up."

"They sure got you in trouble," says Al.

"Yeah, should have listened to your good influence those days."

"I tried."

"But you've stuck by me over the years, Al."

"That's what good friends do. I prayed you'd get better. You were there for me when I felt alone."

"But never again will I get messed up," vows Joseph.

"What made you go straight?"

"Well, I tried lots of times. Most of them stupid and doomed to failure. I even switched to drugstore Percocets. I went through a dark period around 1989-90."

"I lost contact with you then."

"Yeah, I had many low moments. I even used water from a toilet bowl in the men's washroom of the Yale Hotel to cook up a fix."

"God."

"But another moment springs to mind. When I moved back to B.C., I got a lingering bronchial pneumonia, plus the flu on top. I lay there for a week, so sick I couldn't cook or get high. Someone gave me a book, *Witness to the Fire: Creativity in the Veil of Addiction* by Linda Leonard. A Jungian analyst. So I started to read the fehrkockta thing but had to stop. It was so hard to read."

"Oh."

"So here I sat, on the toilet. My hands literally shook. This was the big moment I admitted I was an addict and alcoholic. Then, you have two choices, either you get better or embrace the dark side, get high and die."

"Geez."

"By then, I had been clean for ten days. And figured it was getting too dark. So, it became increasingly clear I could not carry on. 'The status quo is not maintainable' ran through my mind. But you know, when I quit for good, it didn't feel like 'I did anything.'"

"Really?"

"It was like a great and terrible burden was suddenly lifted from my being which I've never been troubled by since. There are those who say sobriety is a gift from God, and who's to say they are wrong." Joseph turns and lifts his shoulders. "I lost it all then, but got myself together now. I'm on nothing. Absolutely nothing. I'm trying to be respectable."

"Respectable?" asks Al.

"I love Dana and I'm not gonna freakin' wreck that again. I lost her once and worked like hell to get her back."

Joseph turns toward the ocean. "I remember when Dana and I lived in this dump on Ninth Avenue in New York. It had no laundry facilities. I would lie in bed, watch her sleep, think about how beautiful she was and lucky I was. We went for walks and I enjoyed that. One time, I woke up to the sound of running water. I looked through the kitchen doorway and saw Dana sitting topless on the edge of the bathtub. She was washing a blouse and facing the other way. She was only dressed in a pair of panties and sat in the shaft of sun-

light from the window. Her blond hair shone. I hauled myself out of bed and walked up behind her. She slid off the bathtub, put her arms around my neck, and I gently bit her bicep. Next thing you know, she sank to her knees and we screwed right there and then. And in that dump, it was hard on the knees. Now, twenty-three years later, I still see that image."

"So, you need flowers," laughs Al.

"Huh?"

"Last night, I mean. Flowers fix bad nights."

"Nah, Dana doesn't fall for that crap."

"Well, what's going on? What happened last night?"

"Dana wants me to take a teaching gig for forty grand a year and I don't want to do that."

"Forty grand! How did you get an offer like that?"

Joseph sighs. "It kinda came my way. Karen phoned last week."

"Karen?"

"I haven't had a chance to tell you I went back to school and got a bachelor of music and bachelor of education degree."

"Whoa. Why'd you do that?"

"Because I wanted to learn more about music and become a better musician. I wanted a big change in my life, and a life like a pal of mine. He teaches college with time for gigs on the side."

"That would work for you."

"At first, I had absolutely no intention to enter teaching. In fact, I stated on many occasions I would rather have my flesh ripped by weasels than teach high school band. But when doing the music degree, several professional musicians who also taught high school music suggested education. So I thought it would be good. A few extra bucks during the day. With my B.Ed., I am a certified high school teacher. I'm a teacher-on-call, you know, a substitute teacher."

"Congrats."

"So Karen, my faculty advisor from the education thing, got me this job interview."

"For what?"

"For a high school teaching gig on the west side. This degree gives me permission to teach. Can you believe that? But during practicum, I wondered if the stuffy 'teacher gig' was really me. Karen pushed me through the damn thing with that god-awful witch, my sponsor. Teaching a bunch of punks was not like performing. I never made use of my background when conducting grade eight classes. Can you imagine the intellectual discourse from those shitheads?"

"Hmm."

"There was this one junior choir class, and I dreaded those classes. Karen happened to observe that day. With virtually no piano or choral skills, here I was teaching 'Breakin' Up Is Hard to Do.' Those boneheads laughed, but I

kept going. I figured things were going bad when Karen decided to sing with the altos. This really helped me and the group though. But I felt like such a fool."

"Didn't know you could sing," laughs Al.

"At first, things were good between me and my sponsor. I even drove her home after school. We had good chats over coffee and shared recipes. One time, she even dumped all over me about her son. But near the end, things suddenly changed. She cornered me and said I had this negativity she didn't like. Then, she screeched at me during a dress rehearsal for the year-end concert. 'Stop talking! Stop making excuses!' And that took the cake. She kept throwing logistical problems at me, about moving students and equipment. I think it was a test to see if I could think on my feet. She kept shouting, 'What are you going to do?' I came up with ideas, saying this way, that way. Finally, she screamed. And the students gasped."

"Geez."

"I felt bad the next few days because I couldn't explain it to them without making her look like a complete nutbar. I even thought of biting the bullet and to say it was my fault, that I'd committed a friggin' crime that drove her to lose her temper. Fact is, it was totally unacceptable behavior on her part."

"Strange."

"She was crazy as a rat in a drainpipe. Then, at our final evaluation meeting, she dropped a bomb. That fruitcake said, 'I need you to tell me that you want to be a teacher.' So I looked her straight in the eye, like a schoolboy doing rote, and said in a politically correct manner that YES I WANT TO BE A TEACHER. I felt like an idiot."

"No kidding."

"So, I talk the talk, walk the walk for the interview, and they offer me the bloody job. You know, with benefits, my own band room, and even a spot in the staff parking lot."

"What are you waiting for?"

"Don't know, man. I just don't know. I've done this teacher-on-call thing on and off for two years. I mean, yesterday, there was this kid and I seriously thought I would deck him. No bullshit. The bugger gave me lip and I didn't want to play his stupid game. I just couldn't take any more crap. You know, they phoned late, at 8 a.m., and I get to the school and there are no lesson plans. None. So I'm thinking, what the hell am I supposed to do?" Joseph gulps his coffee.

"But kids do that to subs."

"Sure they do."

"I treated subs different than my regular teachers, didn't you?"

Joseph laughs. "Yeah, a time to mess with their minds."

"If I think back on the way I treated subs, it's no wonder some quit teaching altogether."

"But some crumb-crushers are great, Al. They say, 'Can you teach us instead of the regular guy?'"

"Don't you think a regular teaching gig would be different?"

"I don't know. The whole thing gives me strange vibes."

"But for now, subbing gets you through. I mean, rent and all."

"Yeah. It does. And Dana doesn't make much."

"What is she doing these days?"

"She works in an office and writes children's books."

"Another artist's salary."

"But I could actually earn respect from this gig."

"Respect?"

"I could buy a new car, a house, raise some kids, and have the whole damn enchilada," says Joseph. "But I wish Karen didn't get me that interview 'cause it's making a god-awful mess."

"I see why Dana wants you to take it," says Al.

"We could use the bucks. Christ, I have student loan payments and owe fifty grand to credit card companies. If I'm not careful, I'll be in debt 'til I'm six feet under."

"You sure owe a ton."

"I don't know. I just don't know." Sitting up, Joseph folds his hands. "Me, teaching high school music. It's like I would have to give up my musician status. Being a musician and teacher don't work together for me. Teachers belong to a whole different culture. Jesus Murphy, am I one of those bloody suckers?"

Al interrupts, "But my high school music teacher was fantastic. He played professional gigs too. He organized a staff band and lots of teachers participated. They wore black hats and sunglasses and were really good. We loved hearing them play. My band teacher was great, and a cool musician. He said I would be a great musician if I practiced. And so I did. Just think about the kids. They need good music teachers and I think you would be a cool teacher."

"I don't know, Al. See, I hated high school. In fact, I hated it so much I took off in the ninth grade. Four walls, the smell, the whole place grated on me. As a teenager, I dreamt of being a musician. I wanted to be a famous jazz guy and die in the gutter like my idols. Remember, I became a full-time musician in my late teens. Responsibilities were easy with agencies arranging the tours, transportation, venues, and hotel bookings. Thinking back, playing gigs was only a small part of the music scene. But it's my identity, Al. I'm a musician, an artist and performer. I don't know if I can work eight to three, five days a week. Not to mention extra rehearsals, concerts, fundraising, and all that bullshit. I need gigs. Though I dread many, there is adventure, excitement and I meet new people. I love having chops of steel. You know, another rehearsal man, and I'm high. Ever heard the phrase, 'Those who can't do, teach?'"

"If I took a teaching gig," asks Al, "would you say I failed as a musician?"

"Come on, Al. We're friends. I'd respect anything you did."

"Now Joseph, being a musician has put you in some real bad places," Al says while he lights a cigarette. "Remember the late seventies? Want to go there? I mean, Jacqueline had moved out." Al throws up his arms.

"Oh," sighs Joseph, "Jacqueline."

"You shot yourself up REAL good to dull the pain."

"But," pauses Joseph, "it was all thanks to this guy. He always had a monkey on his back. I can't remember his name. I wanted to score and he wanted to turn me on. I don't know why. Maybe he thought I was a fabulous horn player or something. Shit. Stuff like that didn't happen often, but I think he needed somebody to hang out with. So we went to his place. He had terrible veins he'd roll up and down. After poking around, he finally got a hit."

"Holy."

"And when you do that, you pull the plunger back and get little eruptions of blood inside the syringe to see you've hit a vein. Otherwise, you'll really screw yourself up. He had this English accent and would say, 'It's the best junk man! It's like masturbating you know.' So he hands over the spoon and I slurp it up. It was out of this world, great shit. And then he says, 'It should be, I gave you a whole stinkin' cap, man.'

"Whole cap? I hadn't fixed in two weeks! But it was dynamite smack and I couldn't get my head off my chest. I walked around so I wouldn't lose consciousness. Then, I screamed at the goddamn idiot and slammed the door. I walked to my friend's house, where I stayed at the time. I pinched myself and wandered around the living room so I wouldn't fall asleep. I opened a can of beer, lit a cigarette and tried not to nod off. This was 5:30 a.m., too! But it got light out. Suddenly, I saw I'd set the couch on fire! I was paranoid. I didn't want the couch as a bunch of springs in ashes the next day. Fixed, you're screwed up for like forty-five minutes but after that, you get your head up and you're nice and high for a few hours. This is where you want to be at a gig. So I poured the beer on the fire and dozed off. When I woke up, I saw my burgundy bell-bottom synthetic pants had been on fire. It melted a hole the size of a fifty-cent piece in my pants. Damn fix. Amazing, I didn't feel the burn at all. But pulling my pants off was like ripping off a Velcro Band-Aid."

"God, Joseph. You could have done yourself in. For good."

"Yeah. And I actually remember all that," Joseph shakes his head. "There was other shit too, but I can't remember. The upshot is, Jacqueline couldn't take it anymore. She took a shitload of crap from me and left. Who can blame her. And I still miss her."

"She was a real nice lady," says Al, "really classy."

"And I totally messed her up. Badly. I wonder if she talks kindly about being the first Mrs. Santini. And thanks for reminding me. I gotta phone and find out how she's doing. Did you know I gave her hepatitis C?"

"Wow, Joseph. Didn't know."

"Yeah. It's a hell of a piece of guilt I drag around."

"And you," Al pauses, "you have that too?"

"Yeah."

"Holy Mary."

"In those days, I was so unfocused, running around spinning my head off. Today, I get phoned for work at 6 a.m. and leave for school by 8. I sign into a school, wear a badge, and people call me Mister. It's gotten to the point where I glance at the class and, at once, pick out the assholes. Truth is, I enjoy their sarcasm and banter."

Putting his coffee on the bench, Joseph gets up and walks toward the water. He tips his hat, bows, and raises his voice an octave using an English accent: "Mr. Santini, here is your mailbox and the keys to your classroom. Welcome to Boston Public."

Al snickers. "Come on, Joseph, you make it sound like a prison sentence. Would it be so bad?"

"I don't know what the hell I want to be when I grow up. But these kinds of decisions really force me to have self-control."

"Huh?"

"I have learned to deal with life, Al. Christ, the old me couldn't handle it."

There are more cars on the road. A male jogger runs by and waves. An orange glow lights up the horizon.

"It's 4:30, Joseph."

"Yeah, I'm beat."

"When do you have to decide about the job?"

"Five p.m. today."

"Good luck. Let me know what happens."

"I better go," Joseph says as he glances at his watch.

Al throws his cup onto the garbage beside the bench while Joseph puts his coffee lid on.

"Know any flower shops open now?" chuckles Joseph.

CODA: CREATIVE NONFICTION AS PRACTICE

My stories are situated as creative nonfiction where "you find out some facts, figure out how to arrange them in light of a larger idea, then you do something artful with the arrangement" (Gerard, 1996, p. 12). Gerard (1996) said, "Creative nonfiction is the stories you find out, captured with a clear eye and an alert imagination, filtered through a mind passionate to know and tell, told accurately and with compelling grace" (p. 12).

Writing creative nonfiction became a meaningful way to represent my research. The musicians' experiences were embedded in my research questions, assumptions, and emotions. Like Diversi, (1998) I wrote out of the desire to create more complex representations of musicians interested in becoming educators. Since 1997, I have researched musicians completing their university teacher education degree. I have written eight short stories

and an autobiographical account for my doctoral dissertation titled, *Riffs of Change: Musicians Becoming Educators* (Lee, 2004). The purpose of my research was to give voice to musicians who experienced identity issues. I collected interview transcripts, observed their musical performances, and supervised their teaching practicum. Based on their experiences, story techniques created a show, instead of tell, context of their journey.

Although I am not a jazz musician, I emotionally connected to Joseph's world. At first, it was difficult to write the standpoint of a White, male musician, but after I observed Joseph perform and teach, I gained a deeper understanding about the world of jazz musicians. As the writer and researcher, my interpretations were embellished as a character in the story. This brought me closer to Joseph's struggle.

When I constructed Joseph's story, I included details about his life as a jazz musician and teacher to support his conflict and tension. Joseph symbolizes many musicians adjusting to educational institutions, believing they need to relinquish personal artistic glory. This story was created for readers to vicariously experience the insular world of a jazz musician. I wanted to represent musicians in "ways that allowed interpretations of their realities beyond—in addition to, in contrast to—my own" (Diversi, 1998, p. 133).

Joseph's involvement in the story-writing process helped him gain a deeper understanding about the tension within himself. He soon admitted he could not become a hero in the story by overcoming the conflict. He resolved that teaching was not his passion. But portraying a character was gratifying for him, as it confirmed his life had been worthwhile. Currently, he is pursuing a graduate degree in jazz history.

According to Denzin (1995), "As new ways of capturing voice are sought, it may be necessary for qualitative researchers to suspend momentarily their preoccupation with the field interview and the carefully transcribed voice of the other" (p. 17). Frank (2000) observed, "I attempt to construct boundaries between different kinds of writing and different ideas of stories—boundaries that I realize are fragile, permeable and above all, debatable" (p. 486). The creation of this short story helped Joseph decide whether he could integrate both musician and teacher identities. The story epitomizes identity conflicts confronted by many musicians experiencing social transformation. Stories advance critical inquiry in the area of musicians exploring teacher education as they bridge the gap between learning and everyday life. As researchers, we need to emphasize how "critical knowledge grounded in pressing social problems offers individuals and groups hope in shaping the conditions that bear down on their lives (Giroux, 2001, p. xiii).

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Karen V. Lee is a faculty advisor and cofounder of the Teaching Initiative for Music Educators (TIME) cohort at the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Her research interests include issues of musician identity, teacher identity, music education, teacher education, and arts-based approaches to qualitative research. She is a musician, music educator, writer, and researcher. She completed her doctoral dissertation as a book of short stories, titled Riffs of Change: Musicians Becoming Music Educators (2004), which is about musicians becoming music educators in a classroom context.