The Non-Reflecting Reflection

Harold’s mini-lesson has me thinking, “What is the right way to reflect?” What process, what perspective, what mirror is the correct one for proper reflection? The sort of reflection you perform would seem to depend heavily on the mirror you gaze into as each type of mirror produces its own unique angle on what is being reflected upon.

You might choose a convex mirror. Those mirrors on the side of your car with the warning: objects may be closer than they appear. The surface curving away from you so that you see a larger picture than would otherwise be possible. This sort of reflection would mean broadening your scope, scanning beyond the immediate to objects far removed. If you were an English teacher in south-central Kentucky, this might include pondering things like world hunger, peace in the Middle East, the existence of God. Topics that seem removed from everyday life in the bluegrass; topics that you would think your actions have very little impact upon. There are advantages to this angle. Things fall into perspective, but they can also sneak up on you if you get too lost in that perspective, and as your driver side mirrors admonish, these subjects can be a lot closer to home than you might think. The reality of world hunger can be as close as the kid in your third block who immediately goes to sit with friends because his parents won’t take charity and there just wasn’t enough this morning for all the kids to have lunch money. Conversely, it may be the kid who is loading up his plate because it’s going to be a long time until lunch on Monday and it’s the end of the month. It is easy to be fooled by the illusion of distance.

You might choose a concave mirror. Structured like the inside of a spoon, these mirrors focus inward. They magnify small issues until they fill your perspective. Like the convex mirror, there is a caveat. Your subject may appear upside down until you reach the point of focus. It really is possible to make more out of things than they really are, focusing only on minutia to the exclusion of reality. Sure, you stuck your foot in your mouth, maybe even up to the knee, but it really isn’t the end of the world. Spending hours trying to decipher the expression on your principal’s face when you made your proposal for a new class could be wasted time. It may have nothing to do with you at all. Cafeteria food and budget concerns can have delayed effect that only reach facial expressions in time. And consider, while the comments you made on a student’s paper are important, spending hours wondering what the most uplifting shade of ink would be to write them in rather than making them and getting the work back to the student may be bordering on obsession. Freud was right about one thing; sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. Self-analysis *can* go too far.

 Then there are also two-way mirrors, lightly silvered so as to create a reflection while allowing those on the other side to see what you are seeing, perhaps without your knowledge. Sure, you want to use your writing as an opportunity to check yourself, but keep in mind who else is reading you. Audience is always important to a writer and nowhere is audience awareness more important than reflective writing. You have to know who you are addressing. If the piece is strictly for yourself, then total candor may be advisable. *May?* You ask? Yes, **may**. There are times when total transparency is less than optimal. Self-delusion can sustain you for a long time when necessary. When it has been one-of-those-days, you may not want to reflect on how none of your students got it, the teacher next door made a less than appreciative remark about the way you decorated your door, and the universal law that says whenever there is chaos in your classroom *that* is when the people from central office will show up for an observation. At times like that you really don’t need an intense analysis of all your personal faults in alphabetical order with an attached Depth of Stupidity score. Besides, that is what administrators are for. Come back and reflect on the day *after* you have treated yourself to your favorite over-priced coffee. Deep soul wrenching angst may also not be the best idea when you have others reading your work. If you don’t understand why you are a magnet for all irony of the world, it is unlikely that that your students do. Pouring your guts out on social media is probably not your best option either, you never know who is friends with your friends’ friends and my see your confession via their commiseration. Again, get to know your audience or you may find out more about them than you anticipated.

Fun house mirrors can be entertaining. Their distortion can create comic effects. If you want to write comedy, a warped reflection of society seems to always be a hit. You can take every day, normal situations like getting along with your spouse and turn it into a hilarious narrative that will entertain you and everyone you share it with. However, while it is true that there is a little bit of truth in all comedy and it is the recognition of that truth that makes us identify with the comedian, the amount of truth we are referring to may be very miniscule. Do you want to build the direction of your life on a minute morsel of truth that has been distorted to the point of being nearly unrecognizable? The whole point of truth is to arrive at some form of truth, but is a distorted truth your destination? There really isn’t a requirement of all persons receiving social security that they take turns being out on the roads driving at a glacial pace every time you have somewhere to be. Sure, it is a funny thought, but if you start building your ego on it, you are going to end up in trouble.

A relatively new term would be a non-reflecting mirrors, two mirrors set at perpendicular angles, essentially reflecting on the reflection. At first glance, this seems like a paradox. The whole idea behind mirrors is to reflect, as well as reflective writing. Strangely, non-reflecting mirrors actually result in a truer image than a simple flat mirror as they reverse the reversed perspective of the first mirror. Non-reflecting reflective writing then would mean looking at how you look at things. This may be the most productive, if not confusing, form of reflective writing. It causes you to take a step back and consider your biases, both when it comes to your view of the world and your view of yourself. Why do you get defensive when someone questions your authenticity, validity, or reliability? What is going on below the surface that causes you to self-deprecate when someone compliments you on the way you manage to connect to that group of kids that makes the complimentary person pull their hair out? What is behind the continuous self-promotion with those whose opinion you value? What, or more to the point, who made you think that the world was out to get you? Sometimes, just asking yourself the question is answer enough, because if you put enough non-reflecting mirrors together with just the right amount of perspective, you have a kaleidoscope, a magic tube that creates infinity within a confined space and beautiful patterns out of odd bits of colored glass and beads.