

Performance is a Good Breakfast: Metaphorical Plays on the Meanings of Performance

By: [Christopher N. Poulos](#)

Poulos, C. (2010). Performance is a good breakfast: Metaphorical plays on the meanings of performance. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 3:2, 209-216.

Made available courtesy of Left Coast Press: <http://www.lcoastpress.com/>

*****Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Left Coast Press. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document.*****

Article:

Setup

Performance is a good, hearty breakfast. I'm tempted to say it's a breakfast burrito. I'm sorely tempted to say it's a breakfast burrito with hurricanado sauce, stuffed with eggs instead of pork, wolfed down after a dissolute night of steamy, promiscuous sex — but ... it's already been done. I'm tempted to say it's something I swallowed quickly, like a pill, maybe like that funny little pill the doctor gave me last week, I suspect just to keep me quiet. I'm tempted to say that, in its essence, performance is that first moment of consciousness that opens up my day—a day in which I am free, free, free—free to be, free to do, free to dissolve, to collide, to blow hard wind (or at least hot air), to pretend, to love, and even just to play... I am tempted to call it my lover...

But it's been done.

What I really think is that performance is a heart-healthy, high-fiber, wake-up-and-smell-the-coffee kind of breakfast. Performance is a breakfast with all the major food groups represented, chock full of vitamins and minerals and antioxidants and all the elements of good health. It's just what your grandmother taught you the most important meal of the day.

So how did I come to this conclusion?

Well, one fine morning, half awake, I stumbled into a panel at the fifth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. You see, as is typical at these academic conferences, the actual breakfast choices are limited. This day, I opted to skip the muffin and take in an early panel instead.

For over an hour, I was spellbound, listening to a fine cast of characters playing metaphorical riffs on performance.

And then, I discovered that I had come to consciousness—I was awakened, stirred, prepared, fortified, in motion. Because of this steaming, hearty inland hurricane of a panel-breakfast, I was charged up, ready indeed for a day of qualitative inquiry—which is, of course, my trade.

A very good breakfast, indeed.

I felt so good, I doubted I had been slipped a placebo.

No, this was the real thing—metaphorically speaking, of course.

You see, I learned something that morning. I learned that performance is an opening to a moment of steamy, dissolute, free, sexy promiscuity—a lover on a collision course with, of all places, my lonely, empty stomach

where its heavy-hot hurricane-blown burrito essence awaits my next move, which may be simply to take an antacid (which I've always suspected only worked because I thought it should).

Which helped me to realize this: for me, breakfast isn't just the food I eat. It is that magic hour that wraps itself around that first meal, from the moment of first stirring until my first step out the front door. So performance, like breakfast, is that magic hour. On this fine spring day, I found myself eating a panel for breakfast.

What a magic hour it was!

And, when I was invited to contribute to this volume, honoring and responding to that fine metaphorical, energizing, fortifying breakfast, there was, for me, only one way to respond: Metaphorically.

So here goes.

What I really mean to say here is that performance is that breakfast time of day— the hour of the dawning, the birth of the new, the beginning—the moment that, day after day, wraps itself warmly around me, fills me up, draws me out, energizes me, opens me up, sets me free. Performance is the time-space of staging the new (or rebirthing the old as the new), that place of possibility, that moment of creation, that sacred hour that starts it all, again and again. Because of performance, we are free to follow the light of the sun, to swallow the goodness of the earth, to begin again, to bring our dreams to the everyday world, to create from the raw materials of imagination, inspiration, and awareness.

Performance is a breakfast in five acts.

We begin, as always, with an awakening.

Act I: Awakening

Most mornings, I don't really wake up.

You see, I sleep deeply, dream actively (Poulos, 2006; 2009).

So I don't just wake up. I sort of come to. Slowly.

For me, it's a gradual awakening.

A faint melody enters my ears— my muted cell phone alarm calling me out of my dreams. I stir in the early morning light, reach over to shut it off before it gets louder. Before I stumble out of bed, I lie there, briefly, pulling the covers up tight around me, feeling the soft coolness of the sheets against my skin, focusing on my breath, watching the rising and falling of my chest. Outside, the songbird symphony, courtesy of this hospitable hardwood forest habitat of central North Carolina that I co-inhabit with a great variety of very vocal feathered friends, erupts. It is a song for the ages, if you will but listen for a moment!

As I lie there, considering the remarkable voices around me (how does a creature that small turn out a sound so large?), I turn my attention to my dreams. Last night, I dreamed I was in a performance. The first and last scenes were breakfast scenes, circling from beginning through the middle back to the beginning. As I lie there, wondering why, I begin to ponder the relationships between awakening and performance, between dreaming and acting, between performance as a method of inquiry and, well, coffee — OK, not coffee per se, but the energy of coffee, the magic spark that coffee offers, performatively speaking. And remembering the dream, I realize that, in the dream, I could smell the dream coffee. And then, I realize that I can smell it now, here, in my house—the real thing.

Sue got up before me today. The coffee is ready.

I prepare to stumble out of bed, wondering: is there much difference between dream coffee and real coffee, between dreamed action and performed action?

As I get up, I realize that there is a little due surging through my heart. This day— like every day— is an open door, an empty stage, a call to possibility. That feeling of the magic of possibility flows through me, starts to wake me up.

Performance is a gradual awakening. It is the fresh embrace of anticipation. It is a new beginning. It is the dawning. Knowing this, I find I am ready for the next act, ready to begin my daily performance.

The ingredients are all there.

They just need stirring.

Act II: Stirring

As I pad down the hallway to the kitchen, the smell of that fine elixir—nectar of the Gods, we call it--fills my nostrils. Jamaican Blue Mountain, fresh ground— smooth, rich, with a nutty, earthy background (or so the label on the bean bin at the store claims). Best damn cup of coffee going. I stir in the real cream, my one indulgence in this mid-life, softening the contents of my favorite mug just a bit.

But it's that second cup, that full jolt of caffeine, that really starts my day, gets my heart racing, gets me to energy point one. It sets me up. And with that jolt, I sense that something— something important, perhaps—is afoot.

My consciousness is stirred.

Like the swirling cream in that fine cup of Joe, thoughts begin to swirl in my mind even as feelings begin to pump through my heart.

And I wonder about the **liminal** stages of performance, those betwixt and between time-spaces (like the time-space before the cream is fully part of the coffee, or when the curtain rises on the opening act) —between awakening and full consciousness, between dream and everyday reality, between inspiration and creation, between preparation and performance, between rehearsal and remembrance, between memory and present awareness, between thought and word, between story formed and story performed, between imagination and action, between hands poised and hands clapping ...

What is the energy that transforms these raw materials—the shade-grown beans, the filtered water, the heat, the heavy cream, and, above all, the desire —into the nectar of the Gods in my mug?

As I stir my coffee, I ponder the notion of alchemy, of making gold from worthless raw materials.

Maybe it's pondering my coffee —or maybe it's drinking it—that stirs me to think about performance. What is the magic, the alchemy, that stirs this world of performance into being? By what alchemy are our raw materials—the imagined worlds, the crafted words, the research, the acting bodies, and, above all, the desire —transformed into memorable performance?

And I feel I am onto something. Performance is a stirring... of consciousness. But just after the stirring, I find I need another kind of moment— a moment of preparation.

Act III: Preparation

Mug in hand, I stroll out to my deck, where I enter the concert hall of my avian pals and sit, now contemplating what it means to get ready, to prepare. Still flirting with the **liminality** of these early morning time-spaces, I sit

in the cool pink-grey of dawn, and reflect on the thin places between night and day, between dreaming and waking, between autoethnographic writing and performative writing, between my story and our story, between the wisps of memory that seem to spring up here and there and the ongoing narrative I want to craft of my life, between life as imagined and life as performed (or written), between preparation and action.

And I start to think of how I might prepare to move through this day—which will be, for me, a day of writing, a day of creation.

Performance requires preparation, of course. But somehow I suspect it also is preparation. There is some hidden, **generative** power in those moments of preparation, preparation that never really quite works out the way you envisioned it, but preparation that is nonetheless a necessary precursor for any action. My own preparation often consists merely of these simple, smoothly stirring moments of reflection. But then, sometimes preparation shifts, and consists instead of simple moments of flexion— of the bending and loosening of bodies and minds and mouths on the way to fluidity and flow. Sometimes it's moments of mere respiration on the way to perspiration on the way to inspiration that really constitute preparation.

Part of my preparation is the opening of my senses. I hear, I see, I smell, I touch, I taste ... my senses open anew to my world. And I find myself bound by the spell of the sensuous (Abram, 1996).

And then there is the memory work —ah memory? Memory—that thin silver thread that connects my past with my present, the same thread that somehow, magically, allows me to lasso a little glimpse of a possible future. Sometimes memory just slips up on me, catches me by surprise. Sometimes I work hard, searching, striving, reaching to recover that thin thread of memory. Sometimes, I just have to let go. Sometimes, I simply cry out, seeking the hand of my Muse to guide me. Sometimes, I just sit at the keyboard, and wait for a spark to light my fingertips.

You see, my fingers have tales to tell. I will surrender to them soon enough. They seem to have a mind of their own, once I unleash them on the keyboard.

Meanwhile, though, I am set to wondering.

My preparation, for a day like this, is to be steeped in wonder.

And so the mystery deepens.

Which, of course, means that, even as what I am looking for recedes before me, I know I am onto something. I am on a search (Percy, 1960).

Today, I will search for the many meanings of performance.

I am searching for a metaphor.

Who knows what will turn up?

And just like that, a thin wisp of an idea pops into my consciousness: Performance is a good breakfast.

And just like that, I am hungry.

Before I proceed, I'll need fortification.

Act IV: Fortification

For me, breakfast usually consists of fine, fresh ingredients. There is a moment, opening up sometime mid-to-late June, in this part of the world, when the perfect trifecta of luscious berries strawberries, blackberries, and blueberries— are all ripe, and readily available from our local Farmer's Market. There is nothing quite like this antioxidant combo, surrounded by steel cut oats and doused with protein-powder-enriched homemade yogurt, and a spot of locally grown clover honey, to get the day going. Tucking in to the steaming bowl, I begin to feel fortified.

Beside me, on an imaginary plate, is the imagined/remembered bacon of my childhood. It is the bacon I no longer eat but still want, want so bad I can smell it—the bacon that exists only in my imagination, to fortify my memory, my senses, my nostalgia for a simpler time. The bacon disappears quickly.

But the rest of it—this hearty, heart-healthy, nitrate-free breakfast energizes me, strengthens me, nourishes me, fortifies me.

Which, of course, sets me to thinking about performance again. When I tuck into a steaming bowl of performance-as-breakfast, I am fortified. When I go to academic conferences these days, I first actively seek out the offerings of my colleagues who traffic in the performative —the personal narrators (Buchner, 2000), the autoethnographers (Ellis, 2004), the ethnographic detectives (Goodall, 1994, 1996), the performance ethnographers (Denzin, 2003), the performance studies crowd (Pelias, 2004).

You see, there are things that feed me in this academic world, and things that sap my strength.

Invariably, I hope for an early morning performance offering.

Invariably, it's a damn good breakfast.

You see, a good performance—or even just talking about performance—say, rifling metaphorically on the meanings of performance—energizes me, strengthens me, nourishes me, fortifies me.

Fortified, I am already in motion.

Act V: Action

Action!

The curtain rises.

I am at the keyboard, madly writing this essay, racing against my deadline, hoping that somehow I have made a thin wisp of at least **liminal** sense of how I experience, think of, and metaphorize the nectar of performance.

I am in motion!

Man, I eat this stuff up!

Like I said, performance is a good, hearty breakfast. It's the beginning, the magic hour where anything is possible. Performance is that first moment of this day called a life, that moment of awakening. And it is that next moment, where imagination flows into the cup, and the stirring begins. It is the brief, in-between time-space of preparation, where imagination and inspiration begin to truly mingle, forming a warm, invigorating brew. It is an energizing, strengthening, nourishing, fortifying breakfast. And, of course, it is that alchemical, transformative moment where conception leaps into motion.

And before I know it, I'm falling into bed after a long day of writing.

I'm looking forward to tomorrow

To another fine breakfast.

References

- Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bochner, A. (2001). Narrative's virtues. *Qualitative Inquiry* 7:131-157.
- Denzin, N.K. (2003). *Performance ethnography: Critical pedagogy and the politics of culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I. A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Goodall, H.L., Jr. (1996). *Divine signs: Connecting spirit to community*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Pelias, R. (2004). *A methodology of the heart: Evoking academic and daily life*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Percy, W. (1960). *The moviegoer*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
- Poulos, C. (2006). The ties that bind us, the shadows that separate us: Life and death, shadow and (dream)story. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12, 96-117.
- Poulos, C. (2009). *Accidental ethnography: An inquiry into family secrecy*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.