Communication is survival. You and I believe that, but how do we convince composition students? We know that we must convince them, early on, or they won’t be motivated to genuinely improve their writings. But how do we proceed, without simply repeating all of the common sense things that past English teachers have said? How do we avoid the here-we-go-again student reaction to our good advice?

I have always tried to do it through metaphor—usually through creatively vivid literary examples of the necessity of good communication. I have used characters as diverse as Hamlet, Bartleby, and J. Alfred Prufrock to argue the potential tragedy of “failure to communicate.” Such examples work, but the trouble with them is that they require so much preliminary explanation that the main teaching points are too long postponed. What is needed is a metaphor that is not only creatively persuasive but also immediately accessible, and most of all short.

I have found it.

It is a Kiowa legend called “The Story of the Arrowmaker,” by N. Scott Momaday. It appears in his The Way to Rainy Mountain, a collection of myths, historical events, and personal experiences which recount the Kiowa tribal experience in the vivid language of the oral tradition that has helped to preserve that experience. I pass out copies of “The Arrowmaker” to students with no explanation other than the simple statement that it is a story about language:

If an arrow is well made, it will have tooth marks upon it. That is how you know. The Kiowas made fine arrows and straightened them in their teeth. They drew them to the bow to see if they were straight. Once there was a man and his wife. They were alone at night in their tipi. By the light of the fire the man was making arrows. After a while he caught sight of something. There was a small opening in the tipi where two hides were sewn together. Someone was there on the outside, looking in. The man went on with his work, but he said to his wife:
“Someone is standing outside. Do not be afraid. Let us talk easily, as of ordinary things.” He took up an arrow and straightened it in his teeth; then as it was right for him to do, he drew it to the bow and took aim, first in this direction and then in that. And all the while he was talking, as if to his wife. But this is how he spoke: “I know that you are there on the outside, for I can feel your eyes upon me. If you are a Kiowa, you will understand what I am saying, and you will speak your name.” But there was no answer, and the man went on in the same way, pointing the arrow all around. At last his aim fell upon the place where his enemy stood, and he let go of the string. The arrow went straight to the enemy’s heart.

I give the students plenty of time to read and re-read and consider the story, and then I ask for reactions. At first, the response is very tentative, both because the students do not know me yet and because they do not understand why I seem to think that the story is so important. It interests them, because of its mysterious dramatic action, but it is little more than a curiosity at first. Mostly they wait for me to explain, but I out-wait them—it is important not to “teach” this story in any conventional sense—and I respond to their puzzled expressions with more specific questions. Is the arrowmaker a wise man? Why does he do what he does? What risks does he take? What might have happened if he had responded differently? Such “plot” questions usually make the students more comfortable, and several of the bolder ones begin to speculate about the various consequences of the arrowmaker’s choices. I let that speculation unfold for a few minutes, and then I interrupt it by suddenly asking which students I know best. Again, puzzlement. But I press the point. I did not know any of you a few minutes ago, I say. Now I know several of you better than the rest. Which ones? Why? Then the answer comes to one or more of them (again, I wait for that to happen, and rephrase the question until it does). I now know best the ones who have spoken, the ones who, like the arrowmaker, have risked themselves in language!

We then discuss what the risks are, and the students usually reveal their understandable fears of ridicule by others. Some even volunteer accounts of experiencing such ridicule. For example, a male student might tell of the ordeal of calling a girl for a date, and the difficulty of language in that situation. Someone else might mention the difficulty of answering questions during a job interview. Whatever the example, the group always comes back to the necessity of declaring oneself in words. And I casually observe that sooner or later each student in the room will have to do that very thing on paper to pass the course. Each student, I emphasize, will
have to venture forth in language to satisfy the course requirements, and of course the implication is that all of life is like that.

At this point, if it has not come up before, I ask the students how they feel about the man standing in darkness, the man who died because he did not speak. Usually somebody is indignant about him, feeling that the arrowmaker took unfair advantage of his silence. I then readily agree that it is easy to sympathize with the man in the dark, because maybe he couldn’t speak, or hear, and so perhaps he was not given a fair chance. But I also add that our sympathy doesn’t alter what happened, nor can it do much for those voiceless ones among us. The tragedy remains. The man in darkness will remain anonymous because he has not been actualized in language, while the arrowmaker, the person Momaday himself refers to as “the man made of words” has a wholeness and a continuing identity, positioned as he is at the center of the circle of light.

Then I ask the students when the high point of the story’s dramatic action occurs. By this time the discussion is lively (it has been obvious to me several times in the course of this part of the discussion that the students were by then consciously avoiding the destructive silence they had just observed) and we agree that in retrospect the climactic moment has to be when the arrowmaker speaks, because it is then that he risks himself (what if, I sometimes ask, the man in the dark was an enemy who understood Kiowa?). The actual physical event, the shooting of the arrow, we decide is anticlimactic, a foregone conclusion once the arrowmaker has successfully risked himself in words.

Finally, I encourage the students to talk about the particulars of the physical scene, because I want the metaphor to stick, so that I can refer to it again and again during the duration of the course. We discuss the light-dark contrast, and the fact that the man in the dark is alone while the arrowmaker has companionship, and especially that the arrowmaker is positioned in a circle, which I point out is the traditional Native American symbol for wholeness and completeness and continuation, the never-ending and ever-renewing circle of the earth. I then ask about the arrows, and what they might be symbols of, and of course the response is words. The arrowmaker shapes them in his teeth, and arrows penetrate. I suggest to the students that “penetrating” is a very positive word in a communications context, for it is what we mean to do when we say we want to “get through to someone.” We want to penetrate whatever obstructions there are and really communicate. I conclude by pointing out that the story of the arrowmaker, with its vivid contrasting images and its simple but persuasive language, does exactly that.