Writers at Work

ANYONE WHO'S BEEN IN an introductory-level creative nonfiction writing workshop has probably heard that old chestnut, "Write what you know." Here's the problem: What we know best is our own lives. For younger writers, especially, it can be challenging to figure out how to write about one's own life in a way that makes the details as interesting to everyone else as they are to the writer. To this end, many workshop instructors enforce strict "no journal or diary entries" policies and do their best to keep critiques of breakup stories from turning into group therapy.

And yet. It would be foolish to suggest that writers—even the youngest writers—shouldn't mine their own lives for material. After all, it's often the search for meaning in specific stories that allows us access to the bigger, universal search for shared meaning.

In this issue, three writers examine the ways in which writing personal stories—and, more specifically, exploring trauma—can be both therapeutic and literary. **Tara DaPra** compares the process of revision to the process of psychotherapy; **Jennifer Lunden** explores the healing potential of telling our own stories; and **Sandi Hutcheson** discusses the delicate art of expressing anger on the page.

These writers argue that there's a two-way relationship between writing and therapy. The therapeutic process can lead to good writing, they insist. Just as crucially, perhaps, the act of crafting order and meaning on the page can also be a way to create order and meaning in the world.

Tara DaPra

Writing Memoir and Writing for Therapy: An Inquiry on the Functions of Reflection

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A YEAR AND A half into my undergraduate studies, my boyfriend Matthew committed suicide, which threw a wrench into the straight line I'd envisioned my college life following. I transferred schools before dropping out and then floated around for a while.

His was the first death I'd experienced, and it changed me irrevocably. Amid my grief, I puzzled over how removed Americans are from death and loss.

Eventually I resumed my studies, at the University of Minnesota, and enrolled in "Cinematics of Loss," a film class offered by the English department. The professor had recently written a book about how she'd never properly grieved her father's death—he had drowned when she was nine—until as an adult, she found herself sobbing at every film she attended. We watched Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Blue*, Peter Weir's *Fearless*, and Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Maborosi*. I wrote a paper analyzing the ways in which Todd Field's beautiful film *In the Bedroom*, based on Andre Dubus's short story "Killings," captures the differences between masculine and feminine grief.

One day, I approached the professor and said something clumsy like, "This is what I want to do with my life." I didn't know quite what this was, but I

knew I wanted to be engaged with the human questions of loss and grief, to acknowledge them as an essential part of being. I wanted to write and think and talk about them. I thought, first, about psychotherapy and then, briefly, considered becoming a funeral director. (With the Baby Boomers rounding that metaphorical bend, there'd be no shortage of work.) "Have you considered creative nonfiction?" my professor asked. I had never heard of creative nonfiction as a literary form, though like many, I'd certainly read it and even written a bit.

On the first day of "Introduction to Literary Nonfiction," the instructor, a graduate student, introduced herself and made an announcement: "This class is not therapy." Afterward, I went to her office hours in a panic. "But I find writing very therapeutic," I said. "Am I doing something wrong?"

She backtracked. "I do, too," she said. "It's just that last semester, I had students turning in diary entries about what jerks their boyfriends were."

In making her announcement, my instructor was wrestling to separate reflection, that fundamental element of creative nonfiction, from the task of general psychological introspection. But I wondered: Is there a difference?

In her classic essay "Memory and Imagination," Patricia Hampl writes:

> *Our capacity to move forward as developing beings rests on a healthy relationship with the past. Psychotherapy, that widespread method for promoting mental health, relies heavily on memory and on the ability to retrieve and organize images and events from the personal past. . . . If we learn not only to tell our stories but to listen to what our stories tell us—to write the first draft and then return for the second draft—we are doing the work of memory.*

Hampl describes how psychotherapy mimics the writing process, but I wondered whether the reverse was also true: Could writing about pain and loss do the work of psychotherapy? And if so, could this writing be "literary," or did it become something else, something lesser?

While there are clear parallels between reflecting in creative nonfiction and reflecting in our private lives, academia—like the larger culture—remains anxious about crossing into the land of therapy. Do writing teachers fear individuals will look to offer comfort; triage requires that we first attend to bleeding wounds. Yet should these situations (which any writing teacher will attest are unavoidable) discourage writers from sharing emotionally charged and personal material? And how can writing teachers acknowledge the complicated relationship between writing and real life without asking students to sanitize the works they present to class?

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tissues littered across the floor, strangers breaking down? Or are we afraid of opening our own wounds? We're trained to compartmentalize relationships and responsibilities, to be professionals. Writing is about writing. Want to be safe? Stick to nature, or call it fiction.

At other times, writing teachers struggle to draw the line between instruction and counseling. In another creative writing class I took, a classmate wrote about the death of her friend's son, and the professor responded by recommending she read books about grief. The student became frustrated that she was focusing on the subject matter instead of the writing. But in that same class, another student seemed to want more than a literary critique. He wrote about contemplating a jump from the bridge connecting the east and west banks of our campus. He was fixated on John Berryman, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet who'd taught at Minnesota and committed suicide off that very bridge, which led us to spend valuable workshop time talking around our concerns for his well-being.

These delicate moments do come up, and when they do, sensitive and caring

This tension bears out in Ann Patchett's afterword to Lucy Grealy's memoir *Autobiography of a Face*, which chronicles Grealy's story of disfiguring jaw cancer. Patchett, who attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop with Grealy, describes one of Grealy's readings:

> *As the crowd in Rizzoli's wept over the passage she read about being tortured by schoolboys in stairwells, my brave and heroic Lucy made it clear to the audience that she had no interest in being anybody's inspiration. She was not there as a role model for overcoming obstacles. She was a serious writer, and she wanted her book to be judged for its literary merit and not its heartbreaking content. When people raised their hand to ask a question, more often than not that question turned out to be a statement of what they themselves had endured. Lucy refused to let the evening divulge into a litany of battle stories. . . .*
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> *. . . She made her point: she was making art, not documenting an event. That she chose to tell her own extraordinary story was of secondary importance. Her cancer and subsequent suffering had not made this book. She had made it. Her intellect and ability were in every sense larger than the disease.*

Grealy's bristling at her readers is typical of the academic response to the emotional content of a memoir: We must not acknowledge the relationship between the content and the writer, lest the writer look like a flawed person and not a literary genius. Yet Patchett commits this very act when she calls Grealy "my brave and heroic Lucy." Lucy Grealy was a very talented writer, but she was also a girl and a woman who endured the emotional and physical pain of a devastating disease. While it's true that "her cancer and subsequent suffering had not made this book," it's also true that without cancer, there'd have been no book. Most readers don't pick up a memoir because they imagine it will be literary masterpiece; they're looking first and foremost for a compelling story. It's unrealistic of writers to expect readers of memoir—a genre that by its very definition reveals the consciousness of the writer—not to connect with them, just as it's unrealistic of writing teachers to surgically excise the emotional lives of writers from the material being written.

In 1997, Kathryn Rhett compiled a collection entitled *Survival Stories: Memoirs of Crisis*, which the *New York Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani critiqued as "conflat[ing] literature and therapy." Kakutani took the book's publication as an opportunity to decry everything wrong with the genre of memoir: "The current memoir craze has fostered the belief that confession is therapeutic, that therapy is redemptive and that redemption equals art, and it has encouraged the delusion that candor, daring and shamelessness are substitutes for craft, that the exposed life is the same thing as an examined one." I've read that sentence many times, looking to find the lapse in logic. I certainly don't argue with the first two assumptions: 1) "that confession is therapeutic" and 2) "that therapy is redemptive." At the very least, confession has the potential to be therapeutic, just as therapy can be redemptive. It's what follows—"that redemption equals art"—that causes the problem.

> Doesn't a life have to be exposed—at least in part—before the writer can examine it?

Kakutani takes issue with this idea. I agree that confession and redemption alone are no formula for good writing or art of any description, but that doesn't mean that they can't co-occur. And doesn't a life have to be exposed—at least in part—before the writer can examine it? Why can't a memoir speak about trauma or reveal family secrets and still be literary?

In fact, countless books do this well. They typically begin with the writer's emotional turmoil simply because it's an easy way to introduce conflict. *Losing the Garden: The Story of a Marriage* by Laura Waterman begins with the author's husband leaving their secluded home in the mountains of Vermont to commit suicide. He has planned it out—if suicide can ever be considered a rational decision, a question the book seeks to resolve—and she has allowed him to leave. This memoir explores an act that's strange and unthinkable. Likewise, Kathryn Harrison, in *The Kiss*, writes about her adult incestuous relationship with her estranged father. Some readers were put off by what was deemed the taboo nature of her subject (indeed, this may have dominated the conversation about the book), but I'd argue that the desire to read about these very private moments in the lives of others is not simply voyeuristic. It isn't simply gawking. It's a human instinct to witness another's pain, to attempt to understand it, and, ultimately, to learn from it. We want to better know the human experience, the human condition; both readers and writers of memoir are in pursuit of thoughtful reflection.

Other books explore a more prosaic but no less harrowing type of family conflict. In his essay "Shame and Forgetting in the Information Age," Charles Baxter considers this: "It is natural that a writer would want to write about parents, but recent memoirs seem to have reserved a special place for missing or empty or vacated or just bad fathers. Something has gone wrong with fathers; there is something either shameful or absent about them." He goes on to name several books I've read and loved: Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude*, Harrison's *The Kiss*, Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*. To his list I would quickly add Rick Bragg's *All Over but the Shoutin'*, J. R. Moehringer's *The Tender Bar*, and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. Readers want these stories not because they wish to eavesdrop on another's misfortune, but because fathers are imperfect, because the parent–child relationship is a complex and messy one, because the universal can be understood through the specific.

The repetitions of subject matter, as well as the commercial and literary successes of these titles, suggest that memoir reaches the reader's psyche in an important way and also that such stories can be thoughtfully crafted. So my struggle with Kakutani's critique and professors' disclaimers is that they tell novice writers of creative nonfiction to stay far away from sensitive subject material, from anything that might make

the classroom uncomfortably resemble a therapist's office. It was this dissonance that, for a long time, kept me from understanding that it was okay to write creative nonfiction, to create art in the form of text, and, concurrently, to find therapeutic value in the work.

From my experience in an MFA program, the academy doesn't like to talk about the fact that writing emotionally driven memoir is, in fact, cathartic, at least initially. That's the drafting stage—getting it out of one's head and on to the paper—and sometimes the draft comes out sounding like, "My boyfriend—boy, was he a jerk." If the writer doesn't know what to do with the material, if she can't see anything bigger than "this happened," there are three choices.

First, toss it. Perhaps it was just a vent. No harm, no foul.

But I favor the other options. One of them: put it away for a while. When you return to revisit the work, you can try to make some sense of the raw material. This requires a critical examination of what's on the page; it requires making choices about what belongs in the narrative and what must be cut. As William Faulkner famously said, "Kill your darlings." To revise raw material, to bring a piece of writing to a satisfying conclusion, requires a resolution. I have written on a subject that felt important, but wasn't able to conclude the piece, perhaps because the story was not yet resolved in my own life. That's okay. I've generated raw material that can wait patiently for me to return someday.

The final option is to show the draft to others to see if they can spot a narrative thread worth developing. But this option is tricky, because it requires the writer to expose herself to others, to present her as-yet-unresolved problem—I'm depressed/I hate my mother/my boyfriend left me and I feel sad—and to ask her fellow writers if there's anything worth developing. This is where writing teachers get uncomfortable because workshops sometimes sound like group therapy sessions. To help create distance between what's on the page and the living, breathing writer in the room, writing programs encourage the use of language like "the character" or "the narrator." But it's inevitable that a story thread must be exposed before it can be examined.

Research has confirmed that writing about emotionally charged memories is good for the health of the writer—and not just her psyche. In April 1999, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a study that linked writing about stressful life experiences to improved health. But as reported in the *Chicago Tribune*, Joshua M. Smyth, the study's co-author, cautioned, "It actually has little to do with raw catharsis, which, I think, is what people assume." Smyth explains that the health benefits were a result of cognitive restructuring—learning to think about problems in a new way—along with changing levels of stress and anxiety. So while the initial writing—the first draft—may provide a cathartic effect, the lasting benefit comes from seeing the problem in a new light—the organizing, editing, and structuring of a piece of writing.

But what of the cathartic effect? Should we be so quick to dismiss it? I imagine catharsis as an evolutionary adaptation, nature's mechanism of positive reinforcement. Catharsis feels good, so writers seek to recreate the experience, in this case by continuing to write about troubling experiences. This initial purge can lead to mulling over, which results in new ways of seeing old problems and an evolution of thought.

Writers, no matter their genre, find inspiration to write from the same source: something they hear or see or otherwise experience stays with them. They can't stop musing; they must investigate. Writing is just another form

of problem solving. Like psychology or medicine, it's a drive to understand the human condition experientially, one that's led by emotion and instinct. The success of a piece of writing is proven by readers connecting with the writer's words, knowing on some basic level that what the writer has composed touches on a truth of human experience. For this reason, I've always encouraged my students to write on sensitive topics but with the understanding that the purpose of our class is to examine the narrative and aesthetic merits of what's on the page, including—and especially—whether the emotion rings true. Finding a subject is an important part of developing as a writer. And if the writer receives any psychological benefit from constructing the narrative—and she very well may—that's wonderful. On the other hand, if the material is especially raw and difficult to process, the writing process may lead to clarity, but working with a therapist can also help the writer order the emotion. It should come as no surprise that this may also help the writing.

Of course, not all generating leads to thoughtful examination, and not all drafts can be crafted into finished products. The point is, that isn't the fault of the subject. Poorly run group therapy, where members do nothing more than complain about the same problems over and over again, doesn't make people better, either; in fact, it can make them much worse, by reinforcing negative thought patterns. But both writers of memoir and those in therapy must reflect thoughtfully on their stories … which leads me to recalculate my reasoning from the start of this essay. When my instructor declared that writing creative nonfiction is distinct from therapy, she wasn't actually seeking to "separate reflection, that fundamental element of creative nonfiction, from the task of general psychological introspection." Reflection, quite simply, is psychological introspection. One is written while the other is oral, but both good writing and good therapy require a narrative to be ordered and assembled. Patricia Hampl's words confirm this: "If we learn not only to tell our stories but to listen to what our stories tell us—to write the first draft and then return for the second draft—we are doing the work of memory." What my instructor really meant to say is that it's important to revise.

I began writing creative nonfiction because I felt an urgency to share my stories. Writing also provided an escape from my grief and a small way to raise the dead. But as Annie Dillard warns in her essay "To Fashion a Text," "You can't put together a memoir without cannibalizing your own life for parts. The work battens on your memories. And it replaces them." As happens often enough, science has caught up with art to confirm this notion. Neuroscientists now tell us that the simple act of recalling and restoring changes the brain's organic structure. The natural condition, it seems, is for stories and memories to change over time.

Dillard's words proved true in my case. The struggle to go on living when someone I loved could not see value in his own life, the pain and the anger and the deep, pooling sadness—all these emotions began to fade after I saw the ink on the page. The writing process brought those feelings from inside me out into the sunlight. It said, "This happened. Your pain is real." Catharsis was my initial motivator, but that alone didn't sustain me. Generating, which sometimes comes easily, other times painfully, is only the first step in the writing process. The real work is in workshop, revision, and polishing the completed work.

I've come to love wrestling out an argument and polishing rhythmical prose. Perhaps the only recompense for tragedy—for death and loss of innocence—is the chance to create some measure of beauty. The marvel of a well-crafted sentence—finding just the right diction and syntax—is a small triumph over pain, a way to create order in the world. That world, at times, may be nothing more than a writer and her pen. Writers find pleasure in moments of flow, a loss of consciousness, but as any practitioner of meditation will tell, this is simply preparation to engage in the world and to develop a more refined consciousness. After all, what is the human experience if not an attempt to order pain and chaos?

Jennifer Lunden

Salvage, Salvation, Salve: Writing That Heals

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FOR A LONG TIME, I felt like a victim of my own body. Struck by a debilitating case of chronic fatigue syndrome when I was just twenty, I was forced to resign from my job and eke by on welfare benefits, flat on my back in bed, day after day, uncertain if I would ever recover. My journals from that time are a testament of my despair; in them, I wrote the same story over and over again: *I am broken. I am broken. I am broken.* After many years of this, I realized it was within my power to make another story about what was happening to me.

I still don't know for sure why I got sick. But I believe that what happened—at least, in part—was that my stories got