From Trauma to Writing
A Theoretical Model for Practical Use

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As recent articles in The Chronicle of Higher Education, The New York Times, College Composition and Communication, and College English, among others, have demonstrated, the debate continues in the profession between writing professors who believe students are better served by writing courses that require strictly academic prose and those who argue that students, especially beginning writers, are more likely to find their own voices when asked to pursue autobiographical prose. David Bartholomae, for example, in an article in College Composition and Communication, called the personal essay "sentimental realism," and went on to label it a "corrupt, if extraordinarily tempting genre" (71). In some ways this discussion is moot: We have all seen the benefits of both academic and personal writing for our students, and indeed a course could offer students the opportunity to probe the same material from both perspectives. And, of course, some students will write these stories in our classes whether we ask them to or not, as many first-year writing instructors have discovered. I expect this debate will rage on, but while it does, some of us, in whatever circumspect or direct ways that seem appropriate to our situations, will continue to explore the benefits of the personal essay to our students and to our own pedagogy. Recent interdisciplinary studies in the fields of psychology, composition, trauma theory, and neuroscience have begun to produce important and practical models for use in the classroom and the writing workshop to help writers both produce good writing and experience positive psychological benefits from that writing. Indeed, what I have discovered from this study is that the methods which produce good writing are the very ones that facilitate healing: iconic image rather than voice-over narrative is the core of both processes.

My own odyssey with this subject began several years ago when I began teaching an elective upper-level course in the personal essay, which has become a popular one among students in our department. In a college of 5,600 students, we offer nine sections of this course each semester. In my early years with this course, I felt somewhat apologetic teaching it because so often students pick painful topics to write about. Indeed, I began to wonder why so many of my students' essays described very difficult, even painful, life events. I have occasionally received that extraordinary paper which looks with microscopic detail at a seemingly insignificant event and weaves that event into a meta-comment about life. Most student writers, however, are more likely to choose the more obviously emotionally charged topics. In addition, once students get beyond the clichés that can undermine the power of the experience, I have found that those emotionally charged topics can generate sharp imagery, clear sensory detail, and thematic sophistication, a point we will investigate later.

Our students are the products of many years in our school systems, institutions which have historically maintained a division between the cognitive and the affective aspects of learning. Most college students, having also spent their first eighteen years living with their families, have internalized parental views on everything from politics to family taboos. Learning to combine the public and the private, the intellectual and the emotional in their writing can be a difficult task for young writers. Some writing instructors have extolled the virtues of "honest" or "authentic" writing, implying that autobiographical writing is superior because it is "honest." This argument, of course, begs a larger question: Who determines that personal writing, simply on the basis of its subject matter, is any more authentic than the argumentative or expository essay? Lester Fagley, in his book Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of
Composition, makes this point: “Why is writing about potentially embarrassing and painful aspects of one’s life considered more honest than, say, the efforts of [the] student . . . who tries to figure out what Thucydides was up to in writing about the Peloponnesian War?” (121). Of course, Fairgely is right. Self-exposure and authenticity are not the same. However, this fact need not be construed as proof that personal or therapeutic writing has no place in the academy. The intellectual depth and honesty required of the effective academic essay are lauded by the academy while the emotional and intellectual truth of the personal essay in the context of the academy is not always equally valued. Since the academy has struggled with the place of the personal essay in the curriculum, autobiographical writing can feel dangerous to students. Presumably students do not willingly attempt this without some strong motivation. Many of our students have learned how to create a persona in their writing that is distanced from what they really believe, from the person they see themselves to be, in order to offer the teacher “what she wants,” as they mistakenly believe. Maturity helps attenuate that distance, but the process may not be very far along when we encounter the student personal essay writer. Our students need to learn a new form of discourse in order to encounter the personal essay. Those of us who elect to teach this genre may also need new perspectives to help negotiate this difficult task.

In a recent article published in the Journal of Advanced Composition, Wendy Bishop follows up on Donald Murray’s argument that all writing is autobiography: “If all writing is autobiography, a life in writing must of necessity consider writing as a process of self-discovery and the writing classroom as a site of such exploration” (505). She then offers a view on this issue from Lad Tobin: “We cannot create intensity and deny tension, celebrate the personal and deny the significance of the personalities involved” (Tobin qtd. in Bishop 505). Bishop goes on to argue that the distinction between therapy and writing instruction is clear but narrow: “The analogies between writing instruction and therapy have something to offer me and something I need to offer to the teachers I train” (514). What we have learned about the writing process requires that we engage with the psyches of those we are teaching. Therefore, Bishop argues, we need to learn more about the process of therapy and its intersection with writing instruction.

Writing professionals are, of course, acutely aware of the dangers of merging the processes of therapy and writing instruction. Writing instructors are not therapists. Even if we had the appropriate training, the purpose of the writing classroom is different from the purpose of therapy: Therapy’s goal is mental health; our goal is to help our students become strong writers. However, the writing and therapy processes can inform each other. The common wisdom in working with the personal essay is to separate students’ texts from their lives, and this distinction is indeed necessary, but as will be seen later, it is also at times more theoretical than real, at least in our students’ minds. Research in trauma theory, neuroscience, and cognitive psychology can provide information to help writers move from the stories about their lives to the stories in their lives, that is, to move them from a narrative that skims the top of their experience to one that uncovers it.

While many students choose to write about painful, even traumatic, experiences in their personal essays, they tend not to think of them as traumatic. “Trauma” to many connotes mental “unhealth” if not outright illness. Yet trauma does not only refer to catastrophic moments. Dictionaries define trauma as a bodily injury produced by some act of violence or some agency outside the body; the condition resulting from the injury; or a startling experience that has a lasting effect on mental life. Trauma can be a single incident or a series of incidents; it can be a broken finger received playing football or a psychic wound caused by the violent death of a close family member. In popular language we speak of one who has been “traumatized” by some terrible experience, but in point of fact no one can reach adulthood without some moments of trauma. However, we cannot judge how “traumatic” any particular experience may be for a given individual. What to one could be easily assimilated into life can for another become a defining life experience. Many of my students choose to write about these “traumatic” experiences—events as reality-shattering as a parent’s death, to as seemingly trivial as a math tutoring session with a father. To the students these topics have great intensity, and I wondered why writers would lean in
the direction of such emotionally charged topics. One possible explanation has come from research into trauma, its causes, results, and treatment.

**Trauma and Memory**

I discovered that trauma produces something called an iconic image, that is, a mental picture that is stored deep within the brain in the limbic system and is not easily available to the cerebral cortex. Traumatic memories are sensory, that is, the body reacts to them even when the conscious mind is not aware of the cause of such reactions. This is because these iconic memories are stored in the amygdala, a part of the limbic system which not only retains these images but gives them their emotional weight.

While these images are non-cognitive, they have deep emotional presence although they are not easily accessible. They pop up sometimes unbidden when we smell, hear, see, or touch something that takes us back to the time the traumatic event occurred. It is these images that must be accessed if a story about the trauma is to be told. But these images are hard to verbalize because they are locked into a part of the brain that is pre-verbal. This is even a chemical process. Animal experiments show that when high levels of adrenaline and other stress hormones are circulating through the bloodstream, memory traces are deeply imprinted into the brain, as Judith Herman describes in her recent book *Trauma and Recovery*. She presents psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk's concept that in "states of high sympathetic nervous system arousal, the linguistic encoding of memory is inactivated, and the central nervous system reverts to the sensory and icon forms of memory that predominate in early life" (39). In other words, we sense painful memories even if we cannot verbalize them, which is perhaps why we tend to be drawn to our emotionally difficult experiences. We seek a way to make the unknown known. This makes some psychological sense since happy times do not need to be processed. They can recede into the general soup of life to add to our sense of well-being whereas painful moments must be processed, adapted to, and ordered for the psyche—not to mention the body—to remain alive and healthy.

Pain is an exquisitely efficient teacher—short-term. (The long-term effects are, of course, something else. That is why negative reinforcement can work in child rearing to produce behavioral change. However, it has unacceptable side effects that are often not seen for years.)

In an article from a recent book edited by Daniel Schacter, researchers John H. Krystal, Steven M. Southwick, and Dennis S. Charney argue that traumatic events produce a shift away from verbal encoding of information toward encoding via "emotional, pictorial, auditory, and other sensory-based memory systems" (158). This shift helps to explain why a simple verbal statement of a painful event fails to convey accurately the horror of a traumatic experience. Indeed, they argue that "traumatic memories may not be encoded or retrieved linguistically" (163) unless that retrieval encourages the survivor to integrate the emotional memory with the description. In another article in the same collection, Larry Squire suggests that memory reconstruction is directly related to the visual mental system since they both appear to involve some of the same brain mechanisms (219). This means that traumatic memories are likely to be tied to sensory, iconic representations, not strictly linguistic, intellectual concepts about those memories.

The human brain is layered with three separate functioning systems that our evolutionary history built on top of each other: the cerebellum, which controls the autonomic nervous system; the limbic system, which drives our unconscious emotional responses; and the cerebrum, which allows cognitive functioning. We share the limbic system with other mammals, and as such it is a necessary component for survival. (See Alice G. Brand's article in this collection for a more complete description of brain biology.) Two important components of the limbic system are the hippocampus and the amygdala. The hippocampus provides a keen memory of context—for example, it registers where on a wooded path you saw a rattlesnake. However, it is the amygdala that registers the emotional reaction to that sighting. It produces the surge of adrenaline which signifies fight or flight. Neither of these responses goes first through the cortex, which of course saves much needed time in the event of danger. However, it also means that traumatic experiences are permanently encoded as
images and emotions together in the brain and cannot be retrieved independent of each other. Indeed, recent studies indicate that this symbiosis is even more direct than we thought.

An important study reported by researchers Larry Cahill, James McGaugh, and their colleagues in the journal *Nature* demonstrates that stress hormones released during an intense emotional experience actually enhance memory of that experience. McGaugh and his associates designed a narrative with accompanying slides and offered that narrative to two groups: one which received the beta blocker propranolol and one which received a placebo. The subjects were exposed to two narratives, the first an emotionally charged story about a little boy whose feet are severed in a terrible accident while going to visit his father at his workplace. The father is a laboratory technician at Victory Memorial Hospital. The boy is rushed to the hospital where doctors struggle to save the boy's life and successfully reattach the boy's severed feet. The second version, an emotionally neutral one, simply describes the boy leaving home, also with his mother, to visit his father at the hospital where the father works. As the researchers said, “Propranolol significantly impaired memory of the emotionally arousing story but did not affect memory of the emotionally neutral story. The impairing effect of propranolol on memory of the emotional story was not due either to reduced emotional responsiveness or to nonspecific sedative or attentional effects. The results support the hypothesis that enhanced memory associated with emotional experiences involves activation of the beta-adrenergic system” (702). The study demonstrates that stress hormones released during traumatic experiences actually imprint the images from those experiences into the brain. While studies indicating this have been performed on animals, this is the first such experiment I am aware of which studied the effects of stress hormones on sensory memory in human subjects. The study indicates that our hormones are activated not only for purposes of flight or flight, but also to imprint memory traces of difficult experiences deeply into the brain, probably for survival value. Both *The New York Times* and National Public Radio reported the results of this study, indicating high public interest in this material. One possible implication of this study is to offer beta blockers to emergency medical personnel to inhibit retention of painful memories. However, EMTs I have talked with have been horrified by this possibility. These professionals argue that their memories are a part of who they are and why they choose to do this difficult work. It makes more sense, they argue, to learn how these memories are encoded and how best to incorporate them into the rest of our psyches rather than to allow a kind of amnesia to reign. Sensory details from our lives are significant contributors to our humanity.

Re-experiencing sensory details encoded during extreme life moments is at the core of trauma recovery. Herman argues that traumatic memories can be distinguished from normal ones because “they are not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story” (37). Mental health professionals experienced in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder believe that essential traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; instead they are “imprinted in the brain in the form of vivid images and sensations,” as Herman has said (38). When victims speak of the moments of their trauma, they do not produce clear narrative lines but instead describe pictures and sounds which remain permanently encoded in their minds. For example, I recently broke my finger by closing it in my car door. I do not remember even this relatively mild trauma as a consistent narrative. Instead I remember seeing the gray seat belt caught in the door, picture yanking on it with my right hand, remember seeing my left middle finger deeply grooved, bent, and blue. I do not remember opening the door and pulling my hand out of the door after I injured it. I remember not narrative but moments and images within that narrative.

However, verbalizing emotional experiences is actually quite difficult since the power of those experiences is encoded nonverbally. As Wilma Bucci, in her article “The Power of Narrative,” explains: “To translate emotional experience into words, the massively parallel, analogic, subconscious contents of the nonverbal system must be connected to the single channel, symbolic format of the verbal code” (103). Most people find this hard to accomplish—evidenced by such statements as “I was struck dumb”; “I was speechless”; “My heart was in my mouth”; etc. Bucci argues that the best way to capture an emotional experience
verbally is by the use of concrete, specific images "as poets know."
She says: "Such concrete and specific images constitute the type
of material for which the referential connections are most active,
and which are likely to activate referential connections in the
listener. Images and their concatenations in episodes constitute the
essential symbolic contents of the emotion schemas. . . . In that
sense, the telling of a story is precisely the expression of an emo-
tion schema, or parts of a schema, in verbal form" (104).

Image and Detail

Robert Jay Lifton, who has studied survivors of Hiroshima, civil-
ian disasters, and military combat, calls the traumatic memory
an "indelible image" (Herman 38). Traumatic memories focus
on fragments rather than narratives, "image without context" as
Herman puts it (38). In their reliance on imagery and bodily sen-
sations they resemble the memories of very young children. Re-
search into trauma recovery indicates that healing is more likely
to occur when survivors can describe not just the events of their
trauma but the images their memories have encoded. Herman
describes the therapeutic process which begins with reconstruc-
ting the story:

Out of the fragmented components of frozen imagery and sen-
sation, patient and therapist slowly reassemble an organized,
detailed, verbal account. . . . As the narrative closes in on the
most unbearable moments, the patient finds it more and more
difficult to use words. At times the patient may spontaneously
switch to non-verbal methods of communication. . . . Given
the "iconic," visual nature of traumatic memories, creating
pictures may represent the most effective initial approach to
these "indelible images. The completed narrative must include
a full and vivid description of the traumatic imagery. (177)

However, these images may not be immediately available. In
order to cope with trauma and its aftermath, survivors often bury
these images because they can get in the way of daily functioning.
In those cases, the narratives of the experiences, when offered,
often rely on clichés and the "story of the story," that is, the
remembered tale which avoids the depth of feeling that clear im-
ages generate. The therapist's job is to help the survivor move be-
ond the story of the story in order to reach the level of direct
experience.

Remembering details, specific images, and writing them
down helps us to heal. The telling itself has efficacy, as Christina
Miller reported in the May 1990 issue of Longevity. She
described work done by researchers Pennebaker et al. at Southern
Methodist University and the Ohio State University College of
Medicine which shows that when college students were asked to
write about past traumatic experiences for twenty minutes a day,
four days in a row, while a control group wrote about trivial top-
ics, those who had written about their emotional traumas showed
a significant improvement in their bodies' immune functions.
(For a more complete description of Pennebaker's work, see his
book, Opening Up.) In another study (1994) by Pennebaker and
Francis, subjects in the experimental group were asked to write
about their thoughts and feelings about coming to college, for
three consecutive days, while a control group wrote about neutral
topics: "On average, the experimental subjects showed more
positive effects, as indicated by fewer health center visits and im-
proved grade point averages, compared with the control sub-
jects" (cited in Miller 115).

The same thing that helps us recover from traumatic experi-
ences—describing images in detail to another—produces writing
which is alive with sensory description. Indeed, trauma theory
can offer the writing instructor important insights into how to
help writers reproduce the sensory images which aid in effective
personal essay writing. Creating moments alive with sensory de-
tails requires, for the personal essayist, remembering those de-
tails, and this is not always so easy, especially when painful
memories are being blocked. Writers may not move immediately
into the defining images which have shaped their experiences.
Most writing instructors can recall student essays which provide
dispassionate accounts of deaths or accidents which seem devoid
of vivid imagery. We have also read essays in which the writers
label their emotions ("I felt angry, I felt sad, I felt excited, etc.)
or lean on clichés and weak intensifiers which dull the emotional
impact of the experience. However, once writers cease depending
on these labels—often through classroom exercises including visualizations—images and the moments they convey can come forth.

In her article “The Power of Narrative,” Wilma Bucci postulates what she terms “referential activity,” a process for symbolizing emotional experience while retaining access to the “analogic components of the feeling state” (106). In other words, verbalizing an emotional state must convey a sense of the affect. These referential connections are most productive when direct, specific, and concrete images are being described verbally; they are less productive for abstract concepts: “Thus high RA [referential activity] is reflected in language that is concrete, specific and clear, that captures a quality of immediacy in the speaker’s representations, and that is likely to evoke vivid and immediate experience in the listener as well” (109). Bucci offers the following example of low-RA prose:

I love people and I like to be with people. And right now I feel very bad because I can’t be with them and do the things I would like to do. But I’m looking forward to a happier and healthier future and—I don’t know what else to say. What else can I talk about? (109)

As Bucci points out, this speaker is talking about emotions but is unable to connect her words to the emotions that underlie them. Bucci has developed systematic procedures for describing qualities of language style: “The methods of scoring RA include qualitative rating scales, and objective measures based on quantifiable linguistic features. These measures have been validated by experimental and clinical work . . .” (110). The RA rating scales measure Concreteness, Imagery, Specificity, and Clarity of Speech. Bucci adds two more elements to the scale: ET (emotional tone) and AB (abstraction dictionary). The emotional tone word list consists of diction that demonstrates the emotional state of the speaker and is likely to produce an emotional reaction in the listener. AB words are abstract nouns that indicate intellectual concepts based on logical reflection and evaluation. Bucci has put together a computer dictionary (called CRA) to measure RA which reflects the style rather than the content of the speaker’s words. The high-CRA list includes words people use when they describe images and events (such as prepositions) and other words representing spatial relations (“in, out, outside”). A low-CRA list includes words which generally represent logical relations and functions such as quantification. The referential cycle Bucci usually finds

would begin with emotional arousal indicated by high ET [emotional tone], leading to a narrative of an incident, a memory, or a dream, which appears as an RA peak. This would then be followed by concomitant increases in ET and AB [abstract words]. The CRA peak is essential for the cycle. High ET and AB utterances without a CRA peak indicate activation of sub-symbolic and verbal symbolic representations, without connections between them; thus the dissociation that is the focus of treatment is allowed to continue unchanged. (114)

In other words, Bucci argues that speech which does not integrate concrete images and the emotions those images convey into the concepts that they can produce will not provide a healing function for the individual. In the Pennebaker and Francis 1994 study of college students mentioned above, which studied the effects of writing about their thoughts and feelings about coming to college, the experimental subjects were classified into three subgroups, those showing health improvement, those who remained unchanged, and those who became worse. Bucci attempted to discover the factors that influenced these outcomes. She discovered that the initial writing session produced words high in emotional tone (ET) and CRA and low in the quality of abstraction (AB):

. . . indicating the telling of narratives with considerable emotional content, and with little abstract language. . . . Subjects in this initial session were describing episodes representing emotion schemas, with both imagery and related emotional components. The second day is characterized by some decline in CRA and ET, and an increase in AB, as the subject begins to reflect on the stories and experiences he or she has reported. On the third day, these improved subjects show concomitant increases in all measure, indicating insights about emotional material expressed in concrete and specific form, not intellectual insight alone. . . . This pattern corresponds to the optimal pattern of a therapy session. . . . This pattern is not seen in the other groups. The unchanged group shows relatively low CRA and ET, while AB follows essentially the pattern of the health
improvement subjects. The subjects who became worse are clearly differentiated from the other two groups by high AB across all three writing sessions, and by ET consistently below the levels of the other students, as well as by CRA that never rises above the standard score mean. The measures indicate that this group begins by warding off emotional experience to a considerably greater extent than the other two, and consistently remains within the abstract verbal mode, rather than using language first to access emotional experience and then to represent it in symbolic form. .. Emotion was aroused by the task, but they were unable to symbolize this adequately. (117)

I have offered here this material to demonstrate that researchers are finding ways to describe the process by which writers produce both effective prose and therapeutic benefits. When the writing connects the emotions with the images, healing occurs—and so also does good writing, as we will see. Particularly interesting in Bucci’s system is the fact that AB begins to rise after ET and CRA peak, meaning that abstractions and intellectualizations of experiences follow when the emotions produced by the experiences have been expressed. In “Language, Power, and Consciousness: A Writing Experiment at the University of Toronto” (in Section III of this collection), Guy Allen argues that his students’ academic writing improves once they learn to write effective personal essays. According to Allen, empowerment, confidence, and community can all be built up in the personal essay class and can positively affect writing ability; similarly, Bucci’s work indicates that once writers can find the words to express their emotional lives, intellectual growth can follow. What David Bartholomae calls “a corrupt genre” can prove liberating to the intellect as well as to the emotions.

This process of liberation, however, is usually new to most writers, and therefore they need help to discover what techniques can work best. The personal essayist holds not a mirror up to nature but a motion picture camera. I suggest to my students that they imagine a film camera in their hands that is recording all that they saw, heard, and touched when the moment they are describing occurred. Such a camera will not record a voice-over or a narrator pasted on later; it will record the scene in the same way that a play conveys dialogue and details of setting—as they unfold. In fact, it helps writers to see narrative as a series of separate images linked by persistence of vision, the method that animators use, not as a series of abstract concepts about the event.

Re-Visioning Experience

The imagistic re-visioning of experience is not, initially, easy to accomplish. My first assignment in my personal essay class asks the students to write about a single incident from their childhood that had a helpful or a harmful effect on them during their youth. Most of the writers say they cannot recall anything particularly memorable from their childhoods. As they juggle their memories through in-class freewriting, brainstorming, and visualization exercises, they begin to remember scenes, pictures usually, which pop into their minds, pictures which they had buried in order to do the hard work of coping with life. Such memories are often hidden by the labels which students give to their experiences: Summer camp was a time of growth, military school was a lesson in independence, the death of a grandparent taught them about the reality of human mortality, divorce taught them responsibility and provided them with double birthday presents. Yet labels are not actual experience but are often stereotypical categorizations of the experience.

For example, over one semester break I participated in a symphony performance of Haydn’s Missa Cellensis. Just as I stepped up to sing my first solo, I looked out into the stone cathedral where we were performing, this huge open space big enough to land a small airplane in, stared up at the stained glass windows that framed us on three sides, their panes finely cut jewels with the late afternoon light burning through them, heard the symphony playing the introductory bars perfectly in tune, and realized that I was not paralyzed by pre-singing panic as had happened occasionally in the past. I understood why Middle English poets loved the image of light behind stained glass. I thought, “Music doesn’t get any better than this.” Instantly I was horrified. How could I have described one of the peak experiences of my musical life with such a cliché, a media cliché at that, one which conjures up Madison Avenue images of beer and male bonding? But of course I hadn’t described this experience; I had labeled it. And
this label separated me from my direct experience. As James Britton has pointed out, with respect to any experience we may either be participating in it or evaluating it out of a desire to understand it better. When language is used in the role of spectator, it strives to represent the world. The personal essayist cannot begin to encounter her subject until she can internally see the moments and participate in them once again. Only when that is accomplished can she step back to represent what she sees. From Peter Elbow and others we have learned how to help students find the moments they wish to focus on. However, we still need methods to help students reconstruct image, and trauma theory and new directions in cognitive psychology may be instructive here.

Trauma survivors rely on the mind’s capacity to cope. However, we cannot both process an experience and cope at the same time. Therefore, survivors often have difficulty expressing the very images which can help them the most and can be aided in this process by techniques to reconstruct image. Jessica Wolfe describes her approach to the trauma narrative with combat veterans: “We have them reel off in great detail, as though they were watching a movie, and with all the senses included. We ask them what they are thinking” (Herman 177). Once the images are expressed, a full narrative can be constructed, but the story must begin with image. As Herman says, “A narrative that does not include the traumatic imagery and bodily sensations is barren and incomplete” (177).

In an article on survivor guilt in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders: A Handbook for Clinicians, Tom Williams describes the therapeutic process involved in working with survivors of trauma: “For a therapeutic intervention to be successful, one must get the story of the trauma in precise detail. For example, it is helpful to know the details about environmental conditions, particularly smells, articles of clothing, and other situational cues. It is important for them to tell you about the trauma scene as clearly and vividly as possible. . . . The more they tell the story, the less intense the emotions become” (80). This technique may not at first be easy for the survivors to accomplish because it necessitates re-experiencing the emotions associated with the experience, something most survivors have carefully avoided just to cope with life. Once images start to come, so also do the feelings which have been suppressed, and Williams makes sure to tell his clients that “people do not die from crying, and that once they start crying they will stop” (80). This needs to be said because many survivors have spent years avoiding their feelings precisely because they feared being overwhelmed by them. Williams goes on to offer an excerpt from two interviews with a Vietnam War veteran. In the first interview, the veteran speaks utterly passionately about being shot and burned in a field, smoked out by the enemy in an ambush. The vet demonstrates no connection to the horrors described. It is as if these events happened to someone else. In the later description he begins to allow some emotional material to enter his speech. Williams’s point is that only after connecting emotions to the events can healing occur, and in his opinion one of the best ways to facilitate this connection is to encourage the survivor to describe the setting and the events in as much imagistic detail as possible. In an article on sexual assault victims in the same volume, Carolyn Agosta and Mary McHugh describe a similar technique: “You encourage her to talk about what happened in detail. As she experiences a safe place to discuss her rape, she begins to feel the emotions of that violent encounter, then she may begin to recover her memory. . . . As this occurs, her fear level will heighten, she will become more in touch with her pain, and she will experience relief” (244).

Granted, the traumatic experiences these therapists deal with are severe. I include this material to demonstrate two things. First, the process for connecting with images and emotions is recursive and holistic. Seeing the images draws out the emotions and vice versa. Second, healing can occur when this process is undergone. Whether a student is describing a family’s experience with divorce, getting lost in a Turkish bazaar at the age of ten, or a car accident, the goal is to avoid the generalizations, the dispassionate accounts often replete with clichés but lacking concrete images which can plague student papers. Helping our students to connect with their emotions by finding the images, the pictures that lie inside their memories, can move them beyond the clichés and into the uniqueness of their moments, beyond the comments about an experience to the experience itself. This technique can be used in many contexts. One young woman, Tina, was trying to write an essay about her grandmother’s house and
was drawing a blank. The piece was vague and unfocused because she could not locate herself in the setting for the paper. We tried a visualization exercise in which she listed as many pictures as she could remember from that house and discovered to her surprise that even though her grandmother had died when she was ten, she could remember whole rooms, even down to running her fingernail along the grooves in the couch, playing with the doilies that covered each tabletop, and noting the half-empty bottle of Canadian Club on the counter. Her final essay was grounded in both an emotional and a physical reality that she had thought was unknown to her.

The following is a list of images that popped into my student’s mind as she completed the in-class visualization exercise of her grandmother and her home: “tall, thin, beautiful, soft velvet hands, smoke, tin-foil flowers and spoons, check bones, elegance, manners, polyester pants, wrinkled face, floral aprons, china figures, little horses, garden in the field, tomatoes, pumpkins, doilies, pledge, fried chicken, hockey, gray outside, cold, pine with white stone and lady’s face on it, designer imposters—giorgio—wobbled voice, scratched from smoke, red cigarette box with young queen Elizabeth on cover, spoon collection on wall above chair, hand-crocheted pot holders, sand-dune fencing against the snow, tea bags without strings, sugar cubes, special phone that buzzed, rhubarb jelly, shuffleboard outside, Mirium, peephole making the hallway look long, oil of olay, stained pillowcase, skin sliding on her arms, sewing needles and pin cushions, lace over her bedspread, Canadian Club with coke.”

My student then wrote the following first draft of her paper, based on the images she recalled:

I used to love going to grandma’s apartment. I really don’t know why. Her apartment building was filled with senior citizens and it smelled like a hospital. The smell would hit me as soon as the buzzing door opened. I’d walk up the stairs with my mother, and it would smell like old people, sickness, and mothballs. But it reminded me of grandma. Grandma’s door would always be opened. I think after she buzzed us in she'd open the door and then sit on her green chair with doilies on the arms, looking as though she'd been waiting for hours. There was no desperation in her face, just impatience that we had kept her waiting.

Sometimes mommy would leave me there while she ran errands for grandma. Grandma would teach me how to make tin foil spoons out of the her cigarette wrappers. I’d place my tiny thumb at the top of the foil and twist a stem with my other hand. When grandma knew I was coming she’d save the wrappers in a kitchen drawer next to the crocheted pot holders and poached-egg holders. Sometimes I would make twenty at a time, depending on how many packs of cigarettes grandma had smoked the week before my arrival.

Grandma’s apartment was fun because there were so many knick-knacks to play with. Ceramic mommies, babies, ponies, stuffed animals, dolls, snowing shake-up domes, mugs with faces on them, bibles with four leaf clovers pressed in the pages and old, yellow pictures of mommy when she was my age. There were show-off trips down the hall to Mirium’s, or to the lounge downstairs which had sliding doors leading to shuffle board courts. In the fall, we would go outside to the garden where we could pick pumpkins & tomatoes. When it was cold I would watch her cook. She made apple pie and rhubarb jelly, and pemiel bacon and fried chicken. Sometimes we would sit and my grandmother, the true Canadian she was, would watch hockey and sip her cc & coke while I cheated at solitaire.

When grandma visited us daddy would get mad because the house smelled like smoke. Sometimes he would say something and she would get annoyed. She would never give him excuses, she just got angry. She always began sentences with people’s names, and she would say, “Now Carl” as she tilted her head and looked sternly at him.

She would always tell me to help my mother and get mad at me when I played with the boys next door. Sometimes she would just hug me and I would feel the bones in her back and smell her shirt, a mixture of designer imposters giorgio and cigarette smoke. She would hold my hand and I would stroke her arm because her skin would slide around on her arm and it was soft like velvet. I would touch her face and feel her high cheekbones. She was so elegant and so beautiful. Now she was wrinkled and had short white, wavy curls on her head.

The phone rang one night the day after I got an extension in my room. It was about twelve-thirty in the morning. I answered late, and before I picked up the phone I knew it had to do with grandma. I heard Mirium on the phone with mom. “Helen,” she kept saying, “Helen.”

My mother left the next morning to see grandma in the hospital. Mommy told me that grandma was very sick, that she was probably going to die. Grandma kept talking about grandpa, who had died when I was one or two. She was
stern about being in bed; mom said it took three people to
hold her down.

I didn't cry at the wake. I was laughing at one point, and
then I was mad at myself for it. I was scared but bent down at
her casket. Grandma's cheeks were too puffy. She had too much
make-up on. When no one was looking, I touched her arm.
Her skin didn't slide on her arm anymore and she was cold. It
wasn't my grandma, just her body. Before the funeral, our fam-
ily sat in front of grandma's casket. I watched two strangers
close my grandma's box. They dropped the lid, I started to cry.
Grandma was dead. Tears rolled out of my eyes, I couldn't see.
My cousin Richard held me as I shook and sobbed. I didn't
stop crying until after the car ride, after the prayers, after we
left the cemetery. On the ride home the funeral procession left
the cemetery. As we drove down the street, all other cars fol-
lowed the Canadian tradition of pulling over and stopping
to pay respect. It was then I realized no one had let me say
goodbye.

And of course this is why Tina's first attempt to write had pro-
duced a blank—because no one had let her say goodbye, and her
emotional responses were therefore hidden within her. She had
to connect with how she really felt about her grandmother's
death before she could connect with her life. I asked Tina after
she wrote this first draft to describe her writing process, and the
following is an excerpt from her response:

When you asked me to close my eyes in class on Wednes-
day, I faced very strong images of my grandmother and her
apartment. Grandma died when I was in sixth grade, and I
found it remarkable that I remembered some of the images on
this list. When I went home after class I called my mother to
share the images with her and she was amazed. She couldn't
believe some of the details I remembered, and to quote, she got
"goose pimples"!

Upon closing my eyes, my grandmother's apartment was
in front of me. Piece by piece the furniture in her apartment
"appeared." I could remember the entire room. Once the set-
ing of the rooms were established, I swear I could almost
smell her apartment. The rest of the images were almost like a
dream sequence. I remembered running my fingernail along
the grooves in her couch. Playing with the doilies that covered
each tabletop. The fence outside her window. Bottles in her
bathroom. Even the bottle of Canadian Club that was on the
counter half-empty. (This image was the spookiest to my mom
because I told her that I remembered that bottle and grandma
mixing it with coke, something that my mother never would
have mentioned in conversation.) I don't know why this was so
vivid to me. I surprised myself in how much I remembered!
Writing my essay later that night was so easy because every-
thing just spilled out.

Seeking the Commonality of Experience

When writers connect with the images behind their narratives
and the emotional weight of those images, their stories can spill
out. Holding a mental camera up to nature can bring to con-
sciousness those detailed images and lead to a kind of epiphanv,
a revelation of the commonality of experience. Trauma victims
of course feel isolated by their experiences. They believe that no one
can possibly comprehend what has happened to them. And in
some ways they are right. They have been irrevocably changed by
their experiences. However, as they tell their stories they discover
that others have been touched by pain as well, perhaps a differ-
ent pain, but pain nonetheless. This commonality helps to ame-
lorate the excruciating isolation that is a by-product of trauma.

The same discovery occurs in the personal essay classroom
when students begin to discover that while experiences may be
distinct, a painful awareness of being utterly different from others
can be shared. Differences can even bring people together and give
them permission to speak. In one of my classes, a tall, handsome,
but mute young man sat with his arms crossed in my classroom
for weeks without saying a word—to me or to anyone else. He
appeared either terminally shy or disenfranchised, perhaps even
angry with the class. In office hours, he finally told me what was
troubling him. At the beginning of the semester his brother had
been murdered by a gang of thugs in Boston — and he couldn't
write, think, be. He felt completely alone—who could possibly
understand his pain? As he stared at me with brittle eyes, I looked
at him for a minute and then told him that such a murder must
be just the worst horror he could imagine, and while I couldn't
pretend to understand that, I had lost my husband not too long
ago, so I understand grief. Perhaps others would too. His eyes

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melted, and he began to weep for the first time since his brother was murdered. After that moment he began to write—just a little. He went to Boston, sat down by the Charles River where he and his brother had often gone, and talked to his brother—and himself. He knew then that his brother would not want him to be silent, frozen in unexpressed rage and grief. He knew then that he must come back to Ithaca and attempt to communicate his story to others. The day he read his essay in class, he did not weep, he did not show anger in his voice, but his face was red and his hands shook. I studied the other students’ faces. Would they speak, would they respond to him, or would they retreat from such a story? One by one they spoke: “Thank you for daring to tell us; thank you for trusting us enough.” And then the other stories began to be shared—the hidden traumas that too many know and too few express. My student’s bravery changed the class and made us all a little more honest.

Most of us who teach writing have encountered situations such as these, moments when our students reach to us (rather than to instructors in huge lecture courses) for understanding. Of course, some of these students need a kind of help which a writing class cannot offer, and at that point we need to nudge these students in crisis to the appropriate support service, as I did in this student’s case. However, this class offered him his first opportunity to speak of his experience to anyone, and both his writing and his psyche improved as a result.

In another course, “Women and Writing,” a class that happened to be composed of all women, one young woman kept writing stories about a goddess figure that was beautiful, blond, and omnipotent, but this character had no humanity and the stories lacked depth. The goddess was a stereotype, a composite cross between Wonder Woman and Madonna. I asked her what drew her to these stories. I also told her that they seemed removed from her, like an overlay rather than something that came from her core. She stared at me, nodded her head, and said she would rethink the assignment. She came back the next day with a powerful poem about a rape, her rape, and said, “This is what this goddess protected me from.” After first discussing her option of taking this issue to our campus counseling center, I asked her how she felt about sharing her writing with the class in our usual workshop. She said she didn’t know if she could, that she would have to see how she felt in class. When the time came, she chose to read it. In a faint, wispy voice, this young woman, her head down, her legs twisting into each other, read her poem to her fellow writers. Again, bravery changed the class. Of the eighteen women in that class, nine had been the victims of sexual abuse, but we did not realize our commonality until this one student dared to tell her story. She risked public embarrassment as well as the possibility of being overwhelmed by what she had suppressed. However, unearthing her story provided both a therapeutic advantage and a literary one. This student’s first stories were flat, with stereotyped characters and bland description. She had not yet been able to reach her creative core because she had blocked her experience and with it, the pictures and emotions which motivated her as a writer. Psychic blocking isn’t selective; when we block, we lose our connection with our deepest selves. (This is why some trauma survivors can have flat affects.) This student’s new material included the kinds of details that characterize effective writing, and she was much more fully in control of her material than even she had expected. In addition, her entire classroom demeanor changed. She looked up and out to the other students, not down to her feet.

In another student example, a young man wrote a charming essay about wandering off from home one day at the age of six. The paper recounted the child discovering neighborhoods, meeting strange new playmates, and finally placing a phone call home which alerted his frantic parents to his whereabouts. While the paper offered some interesting moments, it rambled, led nowhere, had no clear focus. In a conference I asked why he chose that topic, what emotional weight it had for him. In other words, why was he drawn back to that day? We tried some exercises in which he could return to that time in his life, and he suddenly remembered that his parents were in the process of getting divorced during this period, and he often ran away to escape their fights. He had blocked those arguments and remembered only their result—he wandered away. By returning to the scene of his motivation, he was able to write a more coherent piece with a focus
that was not only more truthful to his emotional state at the time, but turned the writing from an episode in autobiography into a personal essay.

I have further evidence of the relationship between trauma recovery and image from my own life and teaching. I was giving my students their next essay assignment—to write a paper about their bodies or some aspect of their bodies that they liked or didn't like or some time when they felt their bodies worked well or let them down. They could also write about an accident, a time when they realized they were not immortal, that their bodies were vulnerable. They asked for an example. I told them of a time when I was six and was hit by a car as I was sledding down the sidewalk. The car was turning into a driveway just as I was passing the driveway on my sled. I slid under the car, receiving only a sprained wrist. My students wanted details. What part of the car did I pass under—between the wheels or behind them? I hadn't thought about this before. I was silent for a moment, and then said, "I remember smelling a muffler, remember looking up and seeing a muffler, so it must have been behind the four wheels." All of a sudden I felt claustrophobic; I re-experienced what it felt like to be flying under that car, and I realized that the reason I never could hide under beds like other kids could was because of that car. This realization could not have come without the memory of the smell of that muffler above me being recalled. So sensory image is the precursor to making the kinds of conscious connections that can free us from the past. It is also the core of writing that engages the reader.

The technique that therapists often use—to encourage clients to re-experience specific moments from the past—is the very one that helps writers unlock their memories. I do not ask students to begin writing whole essays. We begin with visualization exercises that allow them to make lists of the pictures they see in the mind's eye. In one exercise, they visit their childhood bedroom and make a list of all the objects they see there. In another, they imagine being in a grandparent's home and make lists of what they see, smell, hear, touch, taste. Only after they have a firm grasp of the pictures in front of them, do they begin to write a full essay. Once a writer decides on a topic that has energy and power for her, we use the same technique to flesh out the memory details and enable the writer to re-experience the moments. Vivid details are, of course, essential for clear, compelling writing. Nor is this awareness limited to the personal essay. All writing can benefit from this approach, academic as well as personal, joyous as well as traumatic. I am arguing here for a technique which has, I believe, universal efficacy; however, the personal essay presents distinct problems for writers since so often they do not have clear access to the images which drive their experiences and may therefore drive their narratives.

Brain Hemisphericity and Image

Medical science is beginning to investigate the connection between memory and image. One such study completed by Michael Gazzaniga, at the Cornell University Medical School in New York, looked at the results of severing the two sides of the brain, done occasionally with epileptics whose seizures cannot be controlled with medication. One subject was shown a computer screen. On the left side was the word "orange," while on the right was the drawing of a bird. The man was asked to look at the left side of the screen and describe what he saw. The man drew an orange, then quickly changed it into a bird. When asked why the change, he said that he first saw an orange but then realized that it was really a bird. When asked how to account for this shift, he said he didn't know, that perhaps he was thinking of the Baltimore Orioles. The right side of the brain—which saw the word "orange"—could not decode it verbally, and the left side—which saw the bird—could not relate it to "orange." The subject created a narrative to make sense of images which his brain could not process, given his condition. Narrative jumped in to make sense of a reality that made no sense, but image was the precursor to that narrative. In another experiment described in Left Brain, Right Brain, written by Springer and Deutsch, Gazzaniga and LeDoux tested the subject with pairs of visual stimuli presented simultaneously to each side of a point located on a screen:
When a snow scene was presented to the right hemisphere and a chicken claw was presented to the left, (he) quickly ... responded correctly by choosing a picture of a chicken (with) his right hand and a picture of a shovel (with) his left. The subject was then asked, “What did you see?” “I saw a claw and I picked the chicken, and you have to clean out the chicken shed with a shovel.” In trial after trial, we saw this kind of response. The left hemisphere could easily and accurately identify why it had picked the answer, and . . . without batting an eye, it would incorporate the right hemisphere’s response into the framework. While we knew exactly why the right hemisphere had made its choice, the left . . . could merely guess. Yet, the left did not offer its suggestion in a guessing vein but rather a statement of fact as to why that card had been picked. (263–64)

Gazzaniga and LeDoux interpret these results to mean that the primary task of the verbal self is to construct a reality based on behavior. They believe that our verbal selves are not always aware of the origin of our actions and therefore cannot be depended upon to interpret those actions correctly. As quoted in Springer and Deutsch: “It is as if the verbal self looks out and sees what the person is doing and from that knowledge it interprets a reality” (264). In this context the verbal self assumes information it cannot actually have, producing an inaccurate narrative.

Work with split-brain patients may indeed offer insights into clinical psychology as well. David Galin believes that split brain research can validate Freud’s theory of an unconscious. Galin argues that normally the right and left hemispheres function together—but under certain conditions they can be opaque to each other. As a result, a situation resembling split brain can occur: “Imagine the effect on a child when his mother presents one message verbally, but quite another with her facial expression and body language; ‘I am doing it because I love you, dear’ say the words, but ‘I hate you and will destroy you,’ says the face” (Springer and Deutsch 261). If this occurs, the two hemispheres may be in conflict, in which case the left may try to prevent communication from the right side. During these moments, the left dominates completely, while the right goes underground, functioning as a Freudian unconscious, “an independent reservoir of inaccessible cognition” (262) which can create emotional turmoil. Both the Gazzaniga and LeDoux and the Galin studies indicate that necessary information may not always be accessible to the conscious mind, research findings which may have consequences for writers, particularly those investigating emotionally charged images and topics.

Another area of research interest involves the interrelationship of brain hemispheres, image, and emotion. Nonverbal sounds which produce a left ear advantage (right hemisphere) are crying and laughing. Indeed all these sounds processed by the right hemisphere are highly emotional. As Segalowitz argues in Two Sides of the Brain, “Recognition of them automatically involves dealing with feelings as much as with auditory perception” (101). Emotional questions compared with non-emotional ones produce left eye movements indicating right brain involvement. In another experiment, subjects were presented with a list of words which had either positive, negative, or neutral connotations (e.g., kiss, mother, pleasure, loyalty, snake, morgue, greed, cancer, cottage, ink, apparent, bland). The words were also either high or low in imagery. The emotionally charged words induced right hemisphere responses as did high-imagery words (Segalowitz 102). Some clinical researchers argue that positive emotions are more usually linked to left hemisphere activity and negative emotions to the right, but this is a controversial area at present. In any event it appears that the right hemisphere is more able to identify emotional stimuli. Since it also processes visual, sensory stimuli, this can account for the emotional wave that can hit writers when they begin to access long-buried experiences, especially those that have imagistic power. This recursive process can flush out the emotional truth and imagistic clarity of a given moment. When we are back in time to a specific experience, we can be flooded with images and emotions at the same time. Even smells long forgotten can assert themselves. One student told me as she was visualizing her grandmother’s bedroom, she suddenly smelled her perfume. Another—just from looking at her grandmother’s old wooden-handled fork—smelled pirogies cooking. Tina, in the essay about her grandmother referred to above, wrote that she could “almost smell her apartment.”

Ornstein and Thompson, in The Amazing Brain, describe a study in which the brain activity of subjects was monitored while they read two types of written material: technical writing and folk
tales. The left hemisphere registered no changes, but the right was more activated while the subject was reading stories than while reading the technical passages. Stories evoke images and feelings which appear to be right brain activities (162). In another experiment recounted in the same volume, subjects were asked to relive intensely emotional experiences. Here the left hemisphere seemed to process the happy experiences, while the right handled the negative ones. The authors speculate that the “left hemisphere may be involved in fine motor control, the right hemisphere in the control of large motor movements such as running and throwing. It might be that it was useful in our evolutionary history to have the control of large movements placed closely in the brain to the focus of negative feelings, so that if something had to be done, such as running or hitting, it could be done quite soon” (162). These studies indicate that we process pain and pleasure quite differently. Discovering exactly what these differences are can help us to access those moments more efficiently both in our writing and in our lives. As Hildy Miller argues in her essay “Sites of Inspiration,” some composition specialists encourage writers to access the site of inspiration that relates to emotion and image by “having them intentionally regress into concrete and experiential ways of thinking. Such a process is necessary because in both our individual and cultural development, a split between concrete experience and abstract thought widens over time” (114). The more we learn about brain biology, the more we will be able to develop techniques that can help us access those parts of ourselves and our experiences which can provide the emotional and imagistic weight to our writing.

Image into Narrative

Writers have known for a while that the process of writing, of ordering our images into a coherent narrative, seems to give some measure of control over that which we cannot control—
the past. The first step—recalling image—is followed by creating moments that are a string of images, just as film is a series of still pictures combined and perceived as a moving narrative line

by our persistence of vision. While recalling our images helps us to re-experience the past, which can lead to insights about it, creating narrative from those images locates our stories outside of
us, which enables us to feel that we have begun to form order from chaos. The relationship between thought and language is a close but mysterious one. As Orwell wrote in “Politics and the
English Language,” as thought corrupts language so does language corrupt thought. Perhaps the same feedback loop exists with image and narrative. First, we must access image, then connect
with the experience that generated the image, then incorporate that image into a narrative that informs our lives, which then affects the way we process images in the future. As we do this, we have changed the organism so that we have become more conscious of image as a powerful factor in our lives. As we saw earlier, telling our images to another helps us to recover from trauma. Such tellings allow us to put our experience outside of ourselves. The images become stories which can be told, retold, studied, and compared with others’ stories. A cultural context becomes possible. Individual barriers of isolation have been broken.

Another student, Meg, a young actress and a fine writer, was struggling with her first essay—a single moment that affected her as a child. She chose to write about an argument between her mother and her aunt. While the paper was inventive and well written, it lacked a core of truth that makes personal essays speak to others. It offered no details that create immediacy and verisimilitude. I wasn’t sure why the paper was written, how the topic touched the author. As Meg and I talked about the paper I told her that I felt she had told her mother’s story, not her story. She thought for a moment then said, “I know what I really want to write about. You gave us a class exercise to write about two moments in our lives, a happy one and a sad one. I’d like to write about the sad one. It’s about my dad helping me with math, but I’m afraid to write about it because it will be depressing. He was awful when he helped me learn math.” I told her, “No, Meg, now this is depressing. After you write about it, it will just be sad.” She smiled, nodded her head and turned in the following paper, a universe away from the first attempt:
I take small steps out of my room of fish tank mural and Apple
computer and clothes hamper and paint pens and green al-
manac and blue globe and Little Women and rainbow sta-
tionery and corduroys and turtlenecks and acrylic sweaters
and size 10 Carter’s and Pine Bros. cherry cough drops. I’m new
to this school and this state and thirteen years old and school
newspaper founder and editor, and too short hair, and thick
glasses and school lunch and principal’s favorite and busser
and walkers and morning announcements and gym and was
there recess and Space Shuttle memorial and Romeo and
Juliet and David Bowie and writing short stories with heroines
named Audrey and Kate Wing and Stephanie Lerner who were
my only two friends and no bra and no breasts and no hips and
no period and no boyfriend and needing to be out of Owen
Brown Middle School before I had begun and Suzi Lobbin,
Sun-In streaky hair and popular whose sole purpose on this
earth was to torture, ridicule, and berate me, yet I was mature
and well-adjusted and highest reading group and gifted and
talented and high potential and intelligent and task commit-
ment and works well with others and a pleasure to have
in class.

And failing Algebra One.

There is acid swishing about in my stomach as I walk out
of my bedroom onto the brassy orange carpet that lines the hall.
Angry red algebra book open to the homework, notebook
open too. My tall girl’s body in a nightgown, flannel with puffy
sleeves, lavender floral pattern that my mother can’t touch
because it tears at the dry skin of her fingertips in winter. Book
and notebook against chest, breathing strained, I keep swal-
lowing and composing sentences in my head. I make my way
through yellow linoleum kitchen and orange dining room . . .

I am headed to the den, where my father sits, with the
Wall Street Journal and a TV sitcom blaring.

“Dad, kenyju help me with this?” indicating the book, I
ask in a voice softer and higher than my own.

“Aaaahh,” he replies exasperated. “Jesus Christ, Meg,
you might want to think about this before the last minute.”
Acidic sarcasm raises the inflection and with it his dense, wiry
eyebrows.

“It’s not the last minute, Dad. I’ve been doing it in my
room, there’s just so much stuff I don’t get. Couldja help me?”

“Yeah,” he says, brows furrowed. He crumples the news-
paper down on his lap. I walk to the couch to sit next to him.
“What is it? Gimme,” reaching for the red book. My hand-
writing is precise. My numbers are well formed and the prob-
lem headings lettered beautifully. “Meg, how many times do I

have to tell you? You HAVE TO WRITE DOWN EVERY
STEP.”

And I wonder, is this a rhetorical question? If forced to
answer I fear the number would be quite large.

“Dad, I don’t know what that means, write down every
step. What do you mean?”

“YOU’VE GOTTEN TO WRITE EVERYTHING DOWN!
YOU CAN’T LEAVE ANY STEPS OUT! YOU HAVE TO
WRITE DOWN EVERY STEP, GODAMMIT.”

This is spoken fortissimo. Dad and I have an understand-
ing that the more decibels he employs, the more clear these
mathematical concepts will become. This system, thus far, has
been somewhat unsuccessful, but neither of us has given up yet.

The lesson continues with Dad doing an example prob-
lem, muttering about “new math” and procrastination, then
instructing me to do the next problem while he turns back to
the regularly scheduled programming. I start to work the equa-
tion, hunched over my flannel lap, stinging tears forming in
my eyes, heat crawling up my back, my breath caught. I get stuck,
don’t understand, how did he get from here to there? Why do
I have to be in smart math? Why do I always leave the den cry-
ing, nose running, my algebra understanding still minuscule?

My father is a chemical engineer for a steel manufacturer.
He earned two degrees in college, one in chemical engineering,
the other in metallurgy. He’s a member of MENSA. He reads
a lot of science fiction books, the kind that feature scantily
clad, buxom women on the covers. He knows the scientific
name of nearly every growing thing. He hybridizes day lilies
and fashions ornate walking sticks from branches of trees in
the neighborhood. He has a neon-colored Super-Soaker water
gun which he purchased at KIDS ‘R’ US so he can terrorize the
neighborhood kids. Monsters, as he calls them. He snacks on
uncooked spaghetti. He drinks a lot of wine and would smoke
cigars in the house if my mother would let him. I don’t know
much else about him except that he yells, he’s impatient, he
says the wrong things, he’s got an explosive temper, he makes
broad judgments and character assassinations not based in
truth, he’s got a fairly closed mind, he’s a horrible algebra tu-
tor, he’s cynical, thinks everything’s a fraud, and he gets a lot
of speeding tickets.

I did indeed fail algebra one that year. It was probably the
best thing. I took it again my freshman year with the “average”
kids and did fine. Suzi Lobbin was in my class. I think it was the
next year that she got pregnant and stopped attending school.

I never asked my dad for help with math again. I never
much asked for anything from him after my thirteenth year.
I have included this essay to demonstrate the depth of detail possible when writers are fully connected to their subjects. Meg's mind was full of pictures from her childhood; she just needed the "permission" and the opportunity to access them. While this incident might not be classified as "traumatic" by most, Meg still blocked writing about this scene, which demonstrated a side of her father she found difficult to accept. She wanted to protect him—and herself—from her truth, her responses to his behavior. But in doing so she blocked the source of her energy and creativity by telling someone else's story. Only by recovering her images, her memories, and then her voice could she become an effective writer.

Another student wanted to write about her grandmother, whom she loved very much. She turned in a first draft, but it was almost totally lacking in details. In conference I asked her to close her eyes and try to visualize her grandmother, her grandmother's house, and the things they did together. She could only remember playing Scrabble® and hearing the clock ticking on the mantle—tick, tick, moment after moment, the clock on the mantle next to the photograph of her grandfather, who died when he was fifty-four, and a photo of her grandmother's brother, who also died relatively young. Neither man was ever mentioned by her grandmother. Of her grandmother she remembered almost nothing. She finally realized the reason her essay had no details was that she had no substantial experiences with her grandmother to remember. What began as a tribute to a woman she loved became an expression of sorrow for a relationship that she never had.

These realizations do not come easily. Meg tried so hard to censor the girl who was angry at her father for his math "brutality" that while she remembered those moments, she buried their import for her. She simply took them as a part of her history, without letting herself feel how hard it was for her to accept those experiences. Another student, Brian, had a step-grandmother he loved. She was a strong, determined woman who could work longer and harder than most men. But the inevitable happened: She got old and senile. One day when the phone rang and Brian asked his grandmother to answer it, she agreed, shuffled over to a bowl of ripe bananas and picked up one, holding it to her ear.

"Hello, hello," she said. He ended the paper with that scene, which left both him and us hanging. In a conference the student expressed some dissatisfaction with his ending. I asked him if he had told all the story. No, he said, but what follows was hard for him to remember. She had gone into a nursing home, and he didn't want to remember that part. But he did remember it—and so well. His last memory of her is her smile.

Zola was in room 205. I hesitated in front of the door, waiting for what I thought would be the perfect time to make my entrance. I took a deep breath, grabbed the handle and slowly turned the door knob. Zola lay in a bed that rested in the center of a dimly lit chamber that felt like a hospital room. It was apparent she didn't recognize me because when I came into her room she gave me a wide-eyed gaze that looked right through me, past the door, and to the other side of the hall. I took a chair, pulled up alongside her bed, and sat gazing out the window. The evening sky was coming across the land and the sun was quietly surrendering to the dark night. I reached over and grabbed Zola's hand in mine. . . . What once were strong hands full of muscle now lay floating in my palm. Zola's hand didn't move the slightest. These tiny wrinkled fingers had surpassed their working use long ago.

It was getting late and suddenly I realized I had been there a good hour and a half. Zola looked tired. I got up, kissed her lightly on the cheek, and walked towards the door. Just as I was approaching the entrance, I turned around towards Zola for my last look. Zola returned my glance by craning her neck in my direction. She looked directly into my eyes, and suddenly she smiled that same yellow-toothed grin that I had seen so many years ago.

That smile is the real story; it's what she really was to him. He had abandoned his memory of that smile because remembering her smile meant he also had to remember saying goodbye in that nursing home, something that caused him much pain. But in blocking that memory he had also blocked out her greatest gifts to him as well—her strength and her sweetness. In reconstructing the image of her smile he reconstructed his conscious memory of her, and both he and his essay grew in the process. His last memories of her are no longer of the senile old woman holding a banana and believing it was the telephone, but of the strong,
loving woman who helped anchor him to the planet, and now he has shown that to us as well. He was able to integrate his traumatic images of her into his happier ones, creating a more holistic memory of her—and of their relationship.

Narrative is the chain that links our moments together. But image is what we see in the dark of night, what we wake up with from dreams, what we remember when we recall those we love. It is image that burns itself into our minds whether we want it to or not, and it is image which can free us from a past that will always have a hold on us until we look straight at the images that live behind our eyes. Image is also the lifeblood of the personal essay. It grabs us and forces us to see through the writer’s eyes. It sutures reader and writer into a living unit.

Personal Essays in the Academy

Our students have few academic opportunities to probe the images I have been talking about. Some in our discipline are understandably uncomfortable with autobiographical writing. The 1993 debate in the Chronicle about the ethics of requiring students to produce personal writing reflects a genuine concern many teachers have regarding this genre (see Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamer). But, as outlined earlier, if the personal essay course is an elective, students can choose to open themselves up to this genre; they will not be coerced into it by an enthusiastic first-year composition instructor, and they can pick their own topics, which offers them the control. The intensity of the experience is theirs.

The personal essay has at times been denigrated as simply a therapeutic genre, an exercise in catharsis, or even a moment of voyeurism on the part of the reader. This vision of the genre creates problems with assessment. Rolf Norgaard, in a letter published in the College English “Comment and Response” section, expressed discomfort with this issue, believing that we cannot separate the content from its execution:

How are we to assess such writing? Can we tell a student that her experiences or family life weren’t terribly original or

striking? . . . Perhaps personal, autobiographical writing can promote a more graceful style. . . . but to what end? If we use writing to teach students to understand their psyches, not a shared world of issues and ideas, we leave ourselves little room for anything but tangles about assessment. (100)

This comment blurs together two major issues: First, the personal essay is an art form, and as such it can be held accountable to the rules of that art form. Students can be taught how to write a personal essay in the same way that they can be taught to write any other genre. Meg’s experiences with her father and math are not uncommon in our culture. But she created the moment so clearly and with such honest detail that we can identify with her. The details are unique, the theme universal. In fact, it is not the uniqueness of her theme which draws us but the underlying truth it conveys, one we all share. It is the craft that conveys this truth, and that can be taught—and, therefore, evaluated. However, teachers of the personal essay need to feel comfortable with the principles of the art form, just as teachers of academic writing must understand the rules of that genre. Once that is accomplished, grading the personal essay is no different from grading a research paper. Most students welcome the distinction between their lives and the craft of telling the stories about their lives. It provides them with a safe distance that helps them see their work as malleable, dynamic. Most of my students choose to rewrite their essays many times and take great pride in doing so. At this point the grade often becomes irrelevant. The writers simply wish to produce the best possible story they can. The process offers them the opportunity to transform the past into art.

The second important issue here is Norgaard’s concern that the personal essay lacks a shared world of issues and ideas. We need to remember the long tradition of autobiography, memoir, and personal commentary, which is a part of the Western rhetorical tradition. Montaigne, White, Orwell, and contemporary writers such as Alice Walker clearly have contributed to our collective awareness of what it means to be human. The personal essay carries us into a universe of shared experience and shared humanity. And when the essay moves into sensitive areas, we are
reminded that trauma is an integral part of human experience. We cannot proclaim our humanity without acknowledging our capacity for suffering and the results of that suffering. The successful personal essay does not wallow in itself; it promotes identification. Personal essay writers learn how to communicate their experiences without alienating their readers with narcissistic sufferings. And paradoxically enough, the very technique which works in therapy—to describe specific scenes with as much detail as possible—is the same one that creates reader identification and thereby prevents the uncomfortable sensation of being a voyeur inside someone else's life. In addition, the practice and time spent with the genre and the distance which comes from writing enable students to recognize where their experiences fit into the greater life of the culture as a whole. They then begin to see themselves as part of a larger environment.

An article in USA Today (11 January 1994), reported a poll which demonstrated that almost one-half of young adults had witnessed an act of violence in the last year, and nearly a fourth were crime victims. Even if our students are lucky enough to escape the violence of our cities, many have endured the familial anguish of parental divorce, abuse, neglect, or death. These are the students who appear before us in our classrooms. Most of us who have spent time in the classroom understand that students who are currently caught by difficult experiences have a hard time putting those aside to learn. Indeed, those moments can define what and how we learn. Giving students an opportunity to integrate past and present can be an aid to learning.

I am not suggesting that we require autobiographical writing of all students, only that we offer the opportunity for those students who seek it. Although some of my students tell me that they expect the personal essay class to be easy, they discover that it is one of the hardest classes they will take since it demands so much of them. They must probe, question, peer into their deepest most significant moments to write a good personal essay. They must tell the truth, their truth, something not easily done in our culture.

Most of us blank out in order to cope. We can’t do two things at once—both process an event and deal with new ones—and survival depends on coping with what is currently in front of us.

Research into brain functioning can help to explain this phenomenon. In a report from Scientific American written by Mortimer Mishkin and Tim Appenzeller (the former is chief of the laboratory of neuropsychology at the National Institute of Mental Health), the authors state that the same organ which processes sensory memories, the amygdala, also allows them to acquire their emotional weight. The authors suggest that the amygdala not only “enables sensory events to develop emotional associations but also enables emotions to shape perception and the storage of memories” (10). In other words, we cannot recall a difficult memory without also re-experiencing the emotional charge it produces. This can certainly account for writer’s block in some cases. We tend to avoid unpleasant memories, and writing about them revisits them and the emotions attached to them. Yet we are drawn to writing about them when the time is right because without encountering them at some point, we will remain their prisoner. A typical example of this phenomenon was the plight of a quiet, sweet-faced young female student who could not find a topic for her final paper assignment—to write about a conflict in her life or within herself and how it was resolved. My student said she had written about everything important earlier in the course. I asked other students in the class to share their topics with the class in the hopes of offering possible inspiration for others. One student’s subject was her father’s explosive temper. After class, the quiet young woman came up to me and said, “I can’t believe I didn’t think of this until class today. It’s so obvious. My father was alcoholic most of my childhood. We never talk about it, especially now that he is sober.” She turned in a powerful essay which greatly pleased her—both because the writing was excellent and because she started making connections between her father’s past alcoholism and her passive stance in life.

Separating the Text from the Life of the Writer

It is important to stress that I am not suggesting that writing teachers assume the role of amateur therapists. The purpose of any writing class is to foster good writing and the concomitant
thinking skills that accompany such an activity. But the original meaning of the word "amateur" is instructive here. Our love for our students, for their truths, for their potential clarity of vision and writing talent can motivate excellence more than anything else. Our profession has, for a number of years now, adopted the process model in writing instruction; that model necessitates a clear understanding that writing is a recursive act. Conscious and unconscious processes engage in a dialogue in which each is informed by the other, and the writing teacher is the facilitator for that dialogue. Yet our profession is understandably uncomfortable articulating any link between writing and therapy. The most effective and ethical approach to this issue, as I have already suggested, is for writing teachers to deal with the author's text, not his life, recognizing, however, that this distinction does not take into account the recursive nature of the writing process. And indeed, we must be aware that our students do not always make this distinction, since to write about a moment often means we must re-vision it, and to re-vision a moment often means to open our lives to its consequences.

I encountered a striking example of this dilemma in my personal essay class. A student's first essay described an experience he had at the age of eight. His parents were engaged in a loud argument which became violent. My student was in his bedroom, unable to avoid hearing every word, every pounding of a fist on a table, every slap. He also desperately had to use the bathroom, but to do that meant crossing into the room where his parents were fighting. He waited until he thought he would burst and finally ran into the room. While the essay was both funny and tragic, it clearly described a young boy frozen into himself by fear. The rest of the semester he wrote essays in which he functioned, in his life as well as in his essays, only as observer. The essays were emotionally and stylistically flat. Clearly, he was not an engaged participant but the protected observer. Certainly, I could demonstrate from the texts themselves that his writing needed engagement, but this student was intuitive and would go beyond my discussion of his text to discover the source of his blockage once his essays' limitations were pointed out. I knew that if I had this conversation with my student, the door would be opened to a subject he might or might not wish to handle—and one which went beyond the confines of the writing class. I decided to have this conversation with my student. He, of course, did make the connection, which began a long period of self-discovery and soul-searching. He discovered that many of his interactions with others were flat too, a result of his childhood experiences. In a moment of ironic humor he asked me what my qualifications were for my job—and no, I do not have an MSW; however, this student understood that his writing—he was a film/screenwriting major—would always be limited until he looked hard at that night so many years ago.

I learned from this experience that even adhering to the dictum that we deal with texts, not lives, can engage us in broader more personal discussions than our profession generally sanctions. As Phillip Lopate argues on page xlv of his introduction to The Art of the Personal Essay, "The self-consciousness and self-reflection that essay writing demands cannot help but have an influence on the personal essayist's life." Montaigne himself described the convergence of life and text in the following way: "I have no more made my book than my book has made me" (Montaigne qtd. in Lopate). Students quickly recognize that the separation of text and life is artificial; therefore, conversations with our students regarding their work can become problematic. To allow such conversations with our students is to risk overwhelming them with psychic material of which they are unaware. To avoid such conversations is to limit their growth as writers and as people. I have no easy answers for this dilemma. I will say, however, that no one should teach the personal essay without recognizing with brutal awareness that she may well encounter student papers which grapple with extremely difficult topics. This is not a course for everyone—not for all teachers, nor for all students. This is why I do not advocate a first-year personal essay course, nor do I mandate paper topics. Students need the safety of writing about what draws them. They should not be forced to write on topics they do not wish to pursue, even if the instructor believes certain topics to be necessary to their growth as writers. We can provide our students with the opportunity to pursue topics via classroom exercises, visualizations, and suggestions for
further writing, but the rest is up to them. If and when they come
to their chosen moments with complete free will, they are ready
to write, to look at their pasts in new and perhaps surprising ways.
In *Technologies of the Self*, Michel Foucault argues: “What
would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted
only in a certain amount of knowledgability and not, in one
way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower’s straying
as field of himself? There are times in life when the question of
knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and per-
ceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to
go on looking or reflecting at all.” My student needed to go be-
Yond his usual way of seeing himself and his world. Perhaps
those of us who are called to teach writing also need to re-vision
our roles with students and the historical distinctions between
text and author, therapy and writing, and public and private
discourse.

One of the reasons why David Bartholomae finds little to
recommend the personal essay in the academic curriculum is his
concern that such a course maintains “the figure of the author at
a time when the figure of the author is under attack in all other
departments of the academy” (70). Of course, I am not so sure
that every other department in the academy will so readily give
up personal authorship of conference papers, individual owner-
ship of patents, literary awards, and perhaps even Nobel prizes
(or for that matter, articles in *College Composition and Commu-
nication*), but be that as it may. My concern here is with this
concept of “the author,” of “the self” even. Our students come
to us with selves just beginning to become aware of the forces
that have pressed on them for eighteen to twenty years. Recogni-
tion of “intertextuality” can only come with an awareness of the
texts we all write from the moments of our lives, and those that
are written upon us by experiences over which we have little or
no control. Those of us who work with writers just beginning to
recognize how their experiences have affected them witness time
and again the empowerment that can come from expressing the
inexpressible; we watch as writers gain a measure of control over
their pasts by constructing voices that can order experience and
witness the sense of community that can be built from commu-
nicating those experiences to others.

As Pennebaker and others have shown, most people are
helped by speaking or writing to another of their experience,
even if the “other” is not a trained therapist (Christina Miller 75).
Felman and Laub argue in their book *Testimony* that personal
and cultural recovery from trauma requires a conversation be-
tween the victim and a witness, that indeed the witness is an utter
necessity to complete the cycle of truth telling. If we shy away
from offering our students the opportunity to tell their truths, we
may be preventing them from learning what control they can
have over their own lives. The more violent and threatening our
culture becomes, the more we need to acknowledge the effects of
trauma on our students. Those of us whose professional lives are
defined by the classroom need to be aware that every pair of eyes
facing us has probably borne witness to some difficult moments
that can affect learning. At the 1996 National Association for
Poetry Therapy Conference, poet Lucille Clifton said to a room
full of educators and clinicians about the children they work with:
“Every pair of eyes facing you may have endured something you
could not bear.”

Some may argue that the mission of higher education does
not include attention to personal healing; however, as James
Moffett argues in a response to “The Spiritual Sites of Compos-
ing,” an “Interchange” in the May 1994 *College Composition
and Communication*,

> We get good at doing something as a part of getting well and
realizing our deepest being. I know, the university feels it
shouldn’t play doctor or priest, dirty its hands with therapy
and its mind with religion. But if it has real live students on its
hands, its hands are already dirty. . . . Unhealed wounds and
undeveloped souls will thwart the smartest curriculum. (261)

Many students move toward wholeness in a course such as per-
sonal essay, and we certainly hope that this occurs. As writers
move from their narratives to the personal essay itself, they be-
come both owners of their moments and witnesses for others.
The particular becomes contextualized for both writers and
readers. Personal essays begin with the individual but end with
the universal, a process which itself creates connections that can
heal. However, for our purposes as writing instructors, we seek
academic benefits for our students which can be demonstrated, and certainly nothing will encourage a student to discover her "voice" faster and more directly than probing her history to seek her truth of it. Writing someone else’s history, or something else’s, can be fascinating and enlightening, but students cannot form the connections between worlds without unearthing their own values, ethics, and underlying assumptions produced by their past experiences and how they have encountered them. The personal essay asks students to begin a journey into themselves, but the journey will take them ultimately out of themselves and back to a community which can reestablish our common humanity.

Notes

1. For a full discussion of the neurobiology of trauma, see Bessel A. van der Kolk, et al., Traumatic Stress, New York: Guilford Press, 1996.

Works Cited


Healing and the Brain

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On August 15, 1989, The New York Times (Goleman) reported that neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux, experimenting with animals, discovered nerve pathways that led directly to a small structure buried in the brain called the amygdala. According to LeDoux, when, for example, you think you see something that looks like a snake, the amygdala gets the message forty milliseconds before the intellectual part of your brain does. You jump because your emotions react first, not because you reasoned through the danger of the snake. William James hypothesized this for basic emotions like fear and anger about one hundred years ago.

I was first drawn to this biology because I was trying to find a way to talk about emotion and language besides in opposition to cognition. I was angry with cognitive scientists for insisting that intellectual enterprises have sovereignty over emotion, for insisting that with the human intellect comes an objective reality, an ineluctable truth. We now acknowledge through such terms as social construction, cultural indeterminacy, and interpretation that this is phenomenologically a lie. But cognitivists in general are slow to come to terms with the evolutionary given that affective processes determine the “life and death selection” of behavior (Brown 408). When LeDoux confirmed what philosopher Bain, psychologist Bartlett, social scientist Zajonc, and others (Brand, Psychology; “Defining”) claimed of emotional primacy, I found it in brain biology. I found new evidence for committing our energies to the entire affective continuum from arousal to human values. And I found much to celebrate about our cognitive biology.