

FROM IMAGE TO NARRATIVE: THE POLITICS OF THE PERSONAL

Marian MacCurdy

As recent articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The New York Times*, and *College English*, among others, have demonstrated, a debate continues in the profession between writing professors who believe first-year 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. In some ways this discussion is moot: we have all seen the benefits of both kinds of writing for our students, and indeed a course could offer students the opportunity to probe the same material from both personal and academic perspectives.

My college, however, has handled this issue by requiring an academic writing course from first-year students and offering an elective upper-level course in the personal essay which has become popular among students in our department. In a college of 5,600 students, we offer nine sections of this course per semester. I choose to teach this course for reasons which will become clear later in this essay, but 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 have often wondered why it is that so many of my students' essays describe 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, choose 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 schools, 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. Many 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 Faigley in his book *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, Faigley is right. Self-exposure and authenticity are not the same. However, 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 honest autobiography without some strong motivation. In practical terms, those of us who teach the personal essay have much to overcome in the arena of students' trust of each other and their teachers. It is one thing to write a personal essay for a faceless, nameless college admissions officer, for example, and quite another to write it in a particular class for a particular teacher. 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, one which may appear to them at first blush to be inappropriate for the college classroom. Those of us who elect to teach this genre may also need new perspectives to help negotiate this difficult task. This study looks at research in trauma theory and cognitive psychology for information to help our students 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 unearths it.

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, this paper argues that the writing and the therapy processes are similar enough to help 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.

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 necessarily only refer to catastrophic moments. Dictionaries define trauma as 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, therefore, 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, mild though they may be. 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—everything as reality shattering as a parent's death to as seemingly trivial as a student's math tutoring session with her father. To the students these topics have great intensity, and I have often wondered why students lean in the direction of emotionally charged topics.

One possible explanation has come from research into trauma, its causes, results, and treatment. 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 described in her recent book *Trauma and Recovery*. She presents the 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 iconic 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 so that the psyche—not to mention the body—can 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.)

Another important study recently reported by researchers Larry Cahill, James McGaugh et al. 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 as he travels to visit his laboratory technician father's workplace, Victory Memorial Hospital. The boy is then 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 proves that stress hormones released during traumatic experiences actually imprint the images from

those experiences into the brain. While previous studies were performed on animals, this is the first experiment of which I am aware that 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 fight or flight but also to instill 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 result of this study is the suggestion 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. They also, of course, can greatly affect our writing.

Reexperiencing sensory details 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 on-going 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 encoded permanently 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 seatbelt 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 within that narrative.

Robert Jay Lifton, who has studied survivors of Hiroshima, civilian 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 sensations they resemble the memories of very young children. Research 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 reconstructing the story:

Out of the fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation, 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 images generate. The therapist's job is to help the survivor move beyond the story of the story in order to reach the level of direct experience.

Remembering details and 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 by researchers 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 topics, those who had written about their emotional traumas showed a significant improvement in their bodies' immune functions. (For a detailed discussion of this material, see Pennebaker.) But good therapy can also provide techniques for good writing. The same thing that helps us recover from traumatic experiences—describing images in detail to another—produces writing alive with sensory description. Indeed, trauma theory can offer the writing instructor interesting insights into how to help students reproduce the sensory images which aid in effective personal essay writing. Creating moments alive with sensory details requires, for the personal essayist, remembering those details, not an easy task, especially when painful memories are being blocked. Students 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 students cease depending on these labels—often through classroom exercises including visualizations—images and the moments they convey can come forth rapidly.

The personal essayist holds up not a mirror 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; the scene is recorded in the same way that a play conveys dialogue and details of setting. In fact, it helps to see the narrative as a series of separate images linked by persistence of vision, the method that animators use.

This re-visioning of experience is not, initially, easy to accomplish. The first assignment in my personal essay class asks the students to write about a single childhood incident that had a helpful or a harmful effect on them during their youth.

Most students say they cannot recall anything particularly memorable from their childhoods. As these students jiggle their memories through in-class free-writing, 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. Their memories are hidden by the labels which they give to their experiences: summer camp was a time of growth, military school was a lesson in independence, death of a grandparent taught them about the process of death, divorce taught them responsibility and provided them with double birthday presents. Yet labels are not real experience but often stereotypical categorizations of their 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 for landing a small airplane, 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 to top it off I was not paralyzed by pre-singing panic as has 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. Of course, there is a time and a place for labels; however, process is important here. We should not allow the label to define the experience, for this can cause us to bury its emotional content, preventing us from understanding and assimilating it. 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 only 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 but 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 reexperiencing 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 dispassionately 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' 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 the authors 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; two, 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.

While this process can provide therapeutic benefits, whether or not catharsis occurs is not the point in a writing class. Our primary purpose with our students is to promote effective writing. Looking in minute detail at the images encoded in experience can be used in many writing contexts. One young woman trying to write a paper about her grandmother's house was drawing a blank. The paper was vague and fuzzy because she could not locate herself in the setting for the paper. We tried a visualization exercise where 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 impulse to hold the camera up to nature can provide the accuracy of detail which can lead to a kind of epiphany, 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 story they discover that others have been touched by pain as well, perhaps a different pain, but pain nonetheless. This commonality helps to ameliorate the excruciating isolation that is a by-product of trauma.

The same 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. In one of my classes a handsome blond-haired blue-eyed young man, the epitome of what has been considered perfect in our culture, revealed that as a boy, he lost an eye in an accident. After that revelation he was no longer the untouchable Brahmin but a person just like anyone else in the class. In another class 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 that while I couldn't pretend to understand that horror, I had lost my husband not too long ago and I understand grief. Perhaps others would, too. His eyes 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—but he was becoming unfrozen. He went to Boston, sat down by the Charles River where he and his brother often went, 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 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. This process does present inherent risks: students are drawn to exactly those experiences which carry the most psychic energy. This can be healing, can even produce excellent essays, but it also can take the student into areas which need professional help to negotiate. It is important to encourage students to seek

counseling when crisis moments become identified in their writing. Sometimes writing teachers are the first or even the only “adults” to become aware of the seriousness of a given problem; therefore, our responsibility to deal effectively with the situation becomes even more acute. Therapy and writing can work together to help the student gain a measure of control over an experience which can seem overwhelming.

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 of 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 her poem. 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 motivate her as a writer. This student’s new material includes 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

demeanor in the class 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. It appeared to have 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 paper with a focus which is not only more truthful to his emotional state at the time but turns the paper from an episode in autobiography to a personal essay.

I have further evidence of the relationship between trauma recovery and image from my own life and teaching. My students' next essay assignment was to write a paper about their bodies or some aspect of their bodies that they like or don't like or some time when they feel 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. As I gave the argument, 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 passed 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, 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 reexperienced 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.

Of course, it is no surprise that vivid details make for clear, more 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.

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 Le Doux 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 Le Doux 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 Le Doux 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 nonemotional 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.

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:

(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" published in *Presence of Mind* edited by Alice Brand and Richard Graves, 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.

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 narrative line by our persistence of vision. While recalling our images helps us to reexperience the past which can lead to insights about it, creating narrative from those images locates our stories outside of us enabling 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 George 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. We have changed the organism so that we have become more conscious of image as a powerful factor in our lives. Most of us are rather blasé about images today. We are used to them, given the primacy of TV and film in our culture, so we assume that they cannot control us. I remember as a very young woman seeing a horror film, *Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte*, and being attacked by an image of a crazy woman hacking off a man’s arm. Although I am no longer haunted by that image, it took years to free my mind from its hold on me. That image would creep in uninvited at the most unlikely moments. Clearly, it had power for me, a power I did not choose. How much more power do images have that come from our own lives? As we saw earlier, telling our images to another helps us to recover from trauma. The telling of our images allows us to put our experience outside of ourselves. The images have become story which can be told, retold, studied, and compared to others’ stories. In other words, a cultural context is now possible. Individual barriers of isolation have been broken.

Another student, Meg, a young actress and a fine writer, was struggling with her first paper—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 almanac and blue globe and Little Women and rainbow stationery 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 bussers 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 commitment 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 swallowing 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, kenyou help me with this?" indicating the book, I ask in a voice softer and higher than my own.

"Aaaheee," he replies exasperatedly. "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 newspaper down on his lap. I walk to the couch to sit next to him. "What is it? Gimme," reaching for the red book. My handwriting is precise. My numbers are well formed and the problem 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 GOT 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 understanding 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 problem, 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 equation, hunched over my flannel lap, stingy 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 crying, 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 watergun 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 tutor, 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 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 54 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 is because she had no substantive 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 stepgrandmother 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 the phone, 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 he had to remember saying goodbye in that nursing home, something that caused him much pain, but in blocking that he had blocked her greatest gifts to him as well—her strength and her sweetness. In reconstructing that image 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.

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 dream, 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 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 life blood 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.

However, our students have few academic opportunities

to probe those images. Some in our discipline are understandably uncomfortable with autobiographical writing. The recent 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). 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 out 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.” 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 judged.

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, therefore, 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 from their subjects 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.

Most of us blank out 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*, Mortimer Mishkin and Tim Appenzeller (the former is the chief of the laboratory of neuropsychology at the National Institute of Mental Health), states 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.

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 which inform each other; the writing teacher is the facilitator for that dialogue. Yet our profession is understandably uncomfortable articulating any link between writing and therapy. We are encouraged to deal with the author's text, not his life. Indeed, this is the only ethical stance for a writing instructor; however, we must be aware that our students do not always make that distinction.

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 may or may 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 are 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 thusly: "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 or 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. 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. 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. 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 knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself? There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking or reflecting at all.

My student needed to go beyond 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.

As Pennebaker et al. 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 between 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 will 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.

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 Composing," 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 dirtyUnhealed wounds and undeveloped souls will thwart the smartest curriculum. (261)

Many students move toward wholeness in a course such as personal essay. As students move from their narratives to the personal essay itself, they become 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.

WORKS CITED

- Agosta, Carolyn, and Mary McHugh. "Sexual Assault Victims: The Trauma and the Healing." *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Handbook for Clinicians*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Disabled American Veterans, 1987. 239-251.
- Bishop, Wendy. "Writing Is/ And Therapy?: Raising Questions about Writing Classrooms and Writing Program Administration." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 13.2 (1993): 503-514.
- Britton, James, et al. *The Development of Writing Abilities* (11-18). Schools Council Research Studies. London: Macmillan Education, 1975.
- Cahill, Larry, et al. "Beta-Adrenergic Activation and Memory For Emotional Events." *Nature* 371 (20 October 1994): 702-704.
- Faigley, Lester. *Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*. Pittsburgh Press: 1992.
- Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Fincke, Ronald A. *Principles of Mental Imagery*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989.
- Foucault, Michel. *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar With Michel Foucault*. Ed. L. Martin, H. Gutman, and P. Hutton. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.
- Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Harper/Collins, 1992.
- Lopate, Phillip. *The Art of the Personal Essay*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.
- Miller, Christina. "Mental Powers." *Longevity*, May 1990: 74-75.
- Miller, Hildy. "Sites of Inspiration: Where Writing is Embodied in Image and Emotion." *Presence of Mind: Writing and the Domain Beyond the Cognitive*. Ed. Alice Glarden Brand and Richard Graves. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1994. 113-124.
- Mills, Joshua. "In Your-Facism vs. Light." *The New York Times Educational Supplement* 8 (January 1994): 19-20.
- Mishkin, Mortimer, and Tim Appenzeller. "The Anatomy of Memory." *Scientific American Special Report*, 1987.
- Moffett, James. "Interchanges: Spiritual Sites of Composing." *College Composition and Communication* 45.2 (1994): 258-61.
- Norgaard, Rolf. "Comment and Response." *College English* 56.1 (1994): 98-100.
- Ornstein, Robert, and Richard Thompson. *The Amazing Brain*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1991.
- Pennebaker, James W. *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Confiding in Others*. New York: Avon, 1992.
- Segalowit, Sid. *Two Sides of the Brain*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1983.
- Springer, Sally, and George Deutsch. *Left Brain, Right Brain*. New York: W.H. Freeman & Co., 1985.

- Swartzlander, Susan, Diana Pace and Virginia Lee Stamler. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 17 February 1993: B1.
- Williams, Tom. "Diagnosis and Treatment of Survivor Guilt—The Bad Penny." *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders: A Handbook for Clinicians*. Ed. Tom Williams. Cincinnati, Ohio: Disabled American Veterans, 1987. 75-91.

