SELFHOOD AND THE PERSONAL ESSAY: A PRAGMATIC DEFENSE

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There are many plausible reasons to dislike the personal autobiographical essay—and to refuse to teach it in a writing course. There is the sameness of the topics: eating disorders, deaths and traumas, challenges and successes. There is the predictable moralizing, what David Bartholomae has termed "sentimental realism," with culturally accepted commonplaces employed as learning lessons. There is the mismatch between the personal essay and the kinds of writing expected in the university, where there is a limited tolerance for autobiographical narratives. Any program that stresses this genre risks the disdain of colleagues in more established disciplines. With composition already perceived as a feminized "soft" discipline, it can become doubly feminized (and intellectually vulnerable) by any taint of sentimentality, a term with a long historical association with women's writing and reading. There is the understandable reluctance of teachers to take on any role that resembles psychotherapy and draws them into relationships that they feel unqualified to sustain. As Richard Miller has argued, there is a physiological unease involved in responding to writing (or speaking) that deals with trauma:

> The bodily discomfort arises, I believe, because it is unclear,
> exactly what is being asked of those who are within reach of
> the speaker's words: beyond saying, "I can hear you. I can see
> you," beyond authorizing the speaker's version of events, what
> can listeners do? What role can they play? (1996, p. 277)

And even Montaigne himself had doubts about the value of his essays for readers—what, after all, did the reflections of an unknown, retired lawyer matter? These reservations are shared by a wide swath of composition teachers, and I respect these concerns and would never endorse a program that imposed this genre upon them.

My focus in this essay is on a more profound philosophical challenge to the personal essay that was part of the "social turn" in composition studies in the 1990s, particularly the critiques of Lester Faigley, James Berlin, and David Bartholomae. I will focus on the detailed attention that Faigley gives to the personal essay in his book, *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*. Faigley examines a set of exemplary student essays (with teacher

commentary) published in William Coles and James Vopat's *What Makes Writing Good*. A majority of these essays seemed to embody values of an ideology that Berlin would call expressionism (often later altered to expressivism). The writers of these personal essays seem to be free agents, operating outside of culture, or systems of power, or genres; writing originates from a "self," a uniform consciousness. The measure of "authenticity" was how honestly the writing represented or portrayed that self. And as Emerson claimed, the more truthful the writer is in representing this inner thought and experience, the more the expression speaks for others, the more universal it is.

The term "authentic," according to Faigley, is fraught with problems. How, after all does a teacher determine if a piece of writing is "authentic;" how does the process of authentication work—are we speaking of accuracy of memory (which, as psychologists have shown, is altered with retellings)? Is it the expression of emotion? Is it a personal voice? Is it a stylistic preference of teachers? What is the touchstone, the stable pre-discursive self, that is the measure of authenticity? The term itself (like the term "natural") disguises its own ideological and historical roots, the "unstated assumptions about subjectivity," which Faigley tried to make explicit:

> Modern American notions of the individual self derive in
> part from nineteenth-century liberalism and utilitarianism,
> which in turn drew on Thomas Hobbes' theory of the atomic,
> self-interested self. The blend of economics and psychology in
> these notions of self remains evident in writing pedagogy ….
> two notions of the individual are often conflated—the self-
> aware Cartesian subject possessing a unified consciousness
> and the "freely" choosing competitive individual of capitalism.
> (1992, p. 128)

Faigley suggests a criticism that James Berlin makes far more bluntly: that the expressivist pedagogies which promote the "free choices" involved in personal essay are complicit with capitalism which also promotes the free choices of the consumer.

From a practical standpoint, the personal essay presents students with a complex task—to speak about their experiences without the critical tools that would help them examine the discourse they are using. Consequently Faigley and Bartholomae claim that they ventriloquise, and echo the moral language of parents and coaches:

> To ask students to write authentically about the self assumes
> that a unified consciousness can be laid out on the page. That

the self is constructed in socially and historically specific dis-
cursive practices is denied. It is no wonder, then, that the selves
many students try to appropriate in their writing are voices of
moral authority, and when they exhaust their resources of anal-
ysis, they revert to moral lesson-adopting, as Bartholomae has
noted, a parental voice making clichéd pronouncements where
we expect ideas to be extended. (1992, pp. 127-128)

To critics like Faigley and Bartholomae, nothing could be more inauthentic
(and one senses, irritating) than the moralisms that close down thinking and end
many personal essays.

Finally, drawing on the work of Foucault, there is the question of intru-
sive institutional power—the ways in which practitioners of the personal essay,
while claiming to grant freedom to the writer, are imposing a set of values and
expecting students to reveal insecurities, traumas, family difficulties, health is-
sues, and personal details of their lives. No trauma, no good grade. The personal
essay becomes a form of confession, with the archetypal confession being the
omnipresent "Shooting an Elephant." In effect, Faigley wants to call the bluff of
expressivist teachers: they claim to give "ownership" to the student, to give up
authority to the student, yet by passing judgment on the authenticity of these
personal accounts, they assume a power of surveillance that can be more invasive
than the traditional pedagogies they originally opposed.

Faigley's challenge, then, is a profound one. Proponents of the personal essay
are revealed as naïve, as blind to the situated, social, ideological nature of lan-
guage use. There is the troubled quest for an essential, pre-social "self," for a lan-
guage that is "free," for a "voice" that is unique—even for writing in the absence
of any sense of audience. This free space just doesn't exist. Faigley and others
argue that the "self" of expressivist pedagogy is a social construction, constituted
by language and culture, located in history—and as Anis Bawarshi has argued
in his brilliant book, *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*, even our desires are
shaped by social genres (which also fulfill those desires).

The persistence of expressivist key terms like "voice" and "authenticity" rep-
resent, in Faigley's views, a disciplinary problem in the field of composition
studies—the failure to engage with the more satisfactory, generative, and de-
fensible descriptions of writing as informed by postmodern theory. Hence the
tendency to write the narrative of composition studies as a progress narrative,
and to treat the "social turn" as a paradigm shift, a rejection of deeply flawed
views of composing that could now be treated as a kind of historical artifact. The
term "post-process" is emblematic of this view—a rhetorical move that casts ex-
pressivism as a discredited tradition, that must give way to a fuller, richer, more

defensible view of writing instruction. In fact, the critique is profoundly ethical: the charge is that those who teach the personal essay engage in inappropriate and intrusive relationships with their students—and they promote an individualistic view of authorship that is naïve and ultimately disempowering.

In this essay I will attempt a defense of the personal autobiographical essay, drawing on a powerful line of psychological research, led by Martin Seligman and Stephen Maier, and more recently extended by Carol Dweck. This body of work examines the explanatory styles and attitudes of resilient, "healthy" individuals—and, I will argue, helps explain the enduring appeal (and psychological utility) of the type of essay writing that Faigley and others criticize—that which stresses individual agency.

We can begin with what I consider one of the weaker parts of this challenge to expressivism and the personal essay: the charge that it is easily appropriated by the powers of consumerism, since both associate identity with personal choice. This is, in the end, an argument from similarity, since it would be difficult to establish any solid cause-effect relationship. One might just as easily argue that the sophisticated awareness of the social construction of needs could also be co-opted by advertisers and marketers (the similarity is there too). In fact, it is very hard to predict how ideas will be taken up and used in other situations. To my knowledge there is no empirical evidence of a connection between expressivism and capitalism—it is sheer speculation. The only major study I know of that even attempts to trace the ways in which literacy practices contributes to career development is Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class*, which among other things traces the reading histories of many militant leaders of the labor movement. These leaders were radicalized not by the indoctrination of Marxists (whom many found rigid and uninteresting) but from reading classic authors, particularly Charles Dickens, whose belief in personal altruism would seem at odds with the collective movement they would help build. George Orwell, in his magnificent essay on Dickens, describes a similarly complex act of appropriation and influence. There is no neat, clean, determinist, ideological line that can be drawn.

The claim of "surveillance" is similarly weak, and rests primarily on the rhetorical power of the term itself, evoking Foucault and Bentham's panopticon. The problem has to do with the virtually unbounded way in which the term can—and has been—used. Is there any act of teaching or assessment that is not, in some form, an act of surveillance? Were my conferences with my children's teachers not an act of surveillance? Monitoring is occurring no matter the genre of writing we assign: as teachers we ask for accounts of the writing process, we read drafts, we monitor the thought processes of our students. It is impossible to imagine the work of education (or participation in any social unit) without

these forms of attention and assessment. So the fact of surveillance is a given (which I think is Foucault's point). It is inescapable. The ethical question is the manner and purpose of the surveillance, and here the case needs to be made that a student writing about significant events in an essay, read and evaluated by the teacher, is likely to be personally harmful. I won't deny that this is a possibility, though I would add that teachers can be insensitive working in any genre. Obviously, any teacher who feels uncomfortable responding to papers like the ones in the Vopat and Coles collection should not be assigning that kind of writing. I am not at all arguing that it should be a universal requirement. But on the other hand I have seen generations of teachers at my own university handle such writing with tact and sensitivity. I have read thousands of evaluations and the issue of surveillance is virtually non-existent in student accounts. It is raised almost exclusively by academicians criticizing the genre.

It is also tempting to respond to Faigley by challenging his linking of the personal essay and the "unified consciousness." One could easily argue the reverse: associate the essay instead with the "fragmentation," the deconstructive impulse of postmodernism. The essay is a perfectly fine vehicle for exploring the multiplicity, fragmentation, and constructedness of the "self." The essay, as Montaigne deployed it, celebrated the instability and inherent irrationality of the self; human claims to be rational, were, in his view, a form of presumption and vanity. Human beings are too temperamentally volatile and self-interested, and language too imprecise, to claim steady rationality. In his long essay "An Apology for Raymond Seybond," he has long satiric passages where he rebuts claims about human reason by citing evidence (much of it fabricated by Plutarch) about identical abilities in animals. Men praise their analytic ability to distinguish plant types; well, goats can do that too. And despite his claim in the famous address to his readers, that he would prefer to portray himself naked—as if self-presentation was a matter of disrobing—his project was clearly a complex act of discursive construction, one that he commented on frequently in his many additions to the original essays. In one addition he commented on his tendency to make additions:

> My first edition dates from fifteen hundred and eighty: I have long since grown old but not one inch wiser. "I" now and "I" then are certainly twain, but which I was better? I know nothing about that. If we were always progressing toward improvement, to be old would be a beautiful thing. But it is a drunkard's progress, formless, staggering, like reeds which the wind shakes as it fancies, haphazardly. (Montaigne, 1595/1987, p. 1091)

Montaigne resembles Laurence Stern in that he seems to push to the limits, even undermine the genre he is in the process of creating. There has been no more strenuous critic of "unified consciousness" than Montaigne, and the personal essay, with its openings for amendments and cycling back, became the vehicle for making this challenge.

Such a defense, though, would sidestep the objection many compositionists have concerning the personal essay. Simply put, the deep, and often amusing, skepticism of Montaigne's essays bears little resemblance to the efforts of students. In the introduction to his collection, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate argues that the most successful essayists are either older, or like Joan Didion and James Baldwin, they assume, early on, an older persona—they have outgrown or abandoned beliefs in human perfectibility and distanced themselves from the assurances of true believers, heroes, and reformers. Yet in student essays it is precisely this belief in perfectibility, personal agency—this optimism—that regularly animates their essays (and often embarrasses their teachers). Every difficulty is a learning experience; every death a reminder of the preciousness of life. The "self" that is portrayed is not exactly a "unified self" but a progressive one, part of a constructed coherent narrative of self-development (the very kind of narrative Montaigne refused to write). Any defense of the personal essay needs to address this sensibility, this propensity for belief and affirmation that animates their writing. To defend the personal essay—as young students write them—entails defending this bias toward affirmation.

FAITH, OPTIMISM, AND "SENTIMENTAL REALISM"

> Normal human thought is distinguished by a robust positive bias.
>
> —Shelley Taylor

In 1896 William James published his great essay, "The Will to Believe" (which he later regretted titling, preferring "The Right to Believe.") In it he debunks a view prevalent in his time: that beliefs should be the product of an objective and dispassionate review of the facts. To accept unsupported opinion is to be duped and we are to "guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence which may shortly master our body then spread to the rest of the town" (James, 1997, p. 74). Intelligence, according to this viewpoint, was strongly associated with skepticism, doubt, coolness, withholding affiliation. James turns the argument on its head claiming that even this position represented a form of belief—and that passion, commitment, and belief are essential in making the pragmatic tests of truth. The scientist's passionate belief in an ordered, explainable universe is a crucial tool in helping him or her to extend that explanation. And if beliefs lead

to mistakes, then "our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things"(1997, p. 19).

One of the glories of James' career was his openness to the psychological utility of a vast range of religious beliefs, from mesmerism to Buddhism to evangelism—all of which he treated with elaborate respect. In the early 1970s, Peter Elbow reactivated this argument in his essay on the believing game, arguing that the academic culture held a bias against the functionality of belief, and a bias in favor of skepticism and critique which are often seen as the mark of perceptive thought and real academic work. By contrast, assertions of belief, whether based on a religious faith or a personal code, are often viewed within the academic culture as dogmatic, unsophisticated, simplistic; they are evidence that the student is "written" by his or her culture and helpless to push back against it. Students are victims of what James would call "dupery." David Bartholomae, in particular, would claim that these assertions are usually nothing more than moral commonplaces that are passively absorbed by students, and handy for "wrapping up" their personal essays.

The capacity to self-monitor in matters of taste—to identify and resist the appeals of sentimentality—is part of the identity equipment of academics, particularly in the humanities (Newkirk, 2002). It is a form of cultural capital, an ingrained preference for the ironic, distanced, critical, and complex that, as Bourdieu demonstrated, serves to establish class distinctions. Even the poorly paid adjunct, teaching a literature survey, has the satisfaction that she can avoid dupery, that she is alert to the intellectual softness of sentimental appeals with the attendant clichés and commonplaces. As Suzanne Clark writes, few criticisms are as damaging as the use of the epithet "sentimental":

> The author's rationality is in question, and so is the credibility of the argument. If you are the victim of a "sentimental" epithet, you have been excluded from the magic circle. It is as if your readers are too tough for you, and you are too much of a sissy for them …. (1994, p. 101)

Richard Miller has argued that these judgments and preferences are not purely intellectual; they are experienced bodily as forms of discomfort, even revulsion. There are a range of terms (including "taste" itself) which register this physical reaction, many dealing with oversweetness ("syrupy," "sappy," "saccharine"). A more dated term, "schmaltzy," has the root meaning of rendered chicken fat, what one might imagine at the base of the stomach. Miller's point is that our reactions to emotional autobiographical writing is often instant and visceral, experienced in the gut; our sense of taste is embodied, instinctive, and employed without disengaging from our own perspective (as our own theories of social construction would require of us).

The issue may not be whether a writer uses commonplaces, for all discourse communities rely on claims and commonly agreed upon warrants; this essay is littered with them. The issue is that personal essays of young students often employ a type of commonplace that jars or irritates (or nauseates) a type of reader. They run against an aesthetic; in their wholehearted affirmation, they position the writer in (and ask the reader to endorse) a discourse community of motivation and self-help, a place of coaches and graduation speeches that represents everything the academic reader habitually defines himself or herself against. It is not genuine thought but ventriloquism—the student being written by culture. This discourse of self-efficacy and optimism simply has no cultural capital for these readers.

Yet paradoxically, there is now abundant evidence of the psychological utility, even necessity, of the very narrative patterns—of uplift, and overcoming obstacles—that many writing teachers find so annoying and unthinking. In her book *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind*, psychologist Shelley Taylor summarizes a range of studies to argue that an "unrealistic," even "self-aggrandizing" view of the self has major positive benefits for personal happiness. This exaggerated sense of personal agency emerges so powerfully and quickly in early childhood that it is very likely "natural [and] intrinsic to the cognitive system" (Taylor, 1989, p. 44). Like the evolution of organs or immune systems, it may be hardwired to support the perpetuation of the species—as anthropologist Lionel Tiger has argued, "optimism is a biological phenomenon" (Taylor, 1989, p. 40). The key beneficial illusion is a heightened sense of being able to master one's environment:

> The illusion of control, a vital part of people's beliefs about their attributes, is a personal statement about how positive outcomes will be achieved, not merely by wishing and hoping that they will happen, but by making them happen through one's own capabilities. (Taylor, 1989, p. 41)

Of course, events are not in our control, and humans face trauma and tragedy. But even victims of terrible illness and loss are often able to derive meaning and benefit from their situation, perhaps working to inform or help others in their same situation. Or to find that their tragedy brings an existential clarity to their lives. Taylor quotes a 61-year-old cancer patient:

> You can take a picture of what someone has done, but when you frame it, it becomes significant. I feel as if I were, for the first time, really conscious. My life is framed in a certain amount of time. I always knew it, but I can see it, and it's made better by the knowledge. (1989, p. 195)

A commonplace, perhaps, but a profoundly functional one.

Taylor's argument is supported by a line of research on "explanatory style" conducted by Martin Seligman and his colleagues. Explanatory style refers to the ways in which individuals account for the difficulties they face; for example whether they see themselves as victims or agents, whether they posit the cause as a pervasive personality flaw, and what kind of flaw. In effect, Seligman is looking at narrative patterns which have relevance for the ways students write about trauma and difficulty. He identifies three crucial dimensions of explanatory style:

> Stability. Causes can be accounted for as stable in time (and thus likely to reoccur indefinitely) or they may be temporary and remediable.

> Range. Causes may be perceived as a global trait of the individual ("I'm stupid," "I'm not a people person."). Or they may relate to a specific, local, and limited kind of problem or situation.

> Locus. Causes can be seen as internal or external—as arising from purely individual failures or flaws in judgment or personal weakness, or as arising, at least partially, from outside circumstances.

According to Seligman a great deal rides on the kind of explanatory style an individual comes to adopt. The condition he has called "learned helplessness" is characterized by a particular pattern where people "explain bad events by internal, stable, and global causes and explain good events as external, instable, and local" (Seligman, 1988, p. 92). Success is the unstable result of luck; failure is the product of character. Marvin Minsky captured the spirit of this argument as follows:

> Thinking is a process, and if your thinking does something you don't want it to you should be able to say something microscopic and analytic about it, and not something enveloping and evaluating about yourself as a learner. The important thing in refining your thought is to try to depersonalize your interior; it may be all right to deal with other people in a vague global way, but it is devastating if this is the way you deal with yourself. (as quoted in Bernstein, 1981, p. 122)

Seligman's research identifies the devastation Minsky refers to, the profound consequences—for physical and mental health—of the explanatory style associated with learned helplessness. In addition to a longstanding association with

depression, researchers now believe that this explanatory style is an ineffective way of dealing with stress that compromises the immune system, leaving the individual susceptible to a range of infectious diseases. Not surprisingly, a "healthy" explanatory style is associated with increased motivation, persistence, and educational achievement.

All of which suggests a fundamental dilemma for academic readers. It is hardly surprising that young writers employ commonplaces of effort, overcoming obstacles, learning from difficulties, naming heroes and saints in their lives—that they construct their narratives as a form of heroic progression. There is now a huge body of research to document the benefits—even the evolutionary necessity—of such formulations. And as William James and Peter Elbow argue, this positive bias can be self-verifying. If a student believes that an obstacle like a failing a test is a learning opportunity (clichéd as that view is), she is likely to be more successful in gaining a benefit from it than someone who treats that failure as one more sign she is not good at the subject (a global reaction). Yet aesthetically these formulations in personal essays, as I have noted, frequently fail to satisfy, and even repulse, the academic reader who is gratified by an entirely different, more nuanced, ambivalent, ironic sensibility.

STUDENT AS CO-THEORIST

To illustrate this dilemma I will quote extensively from a paper of one of my own students written early in a first-year course. The assignment which I call the "Right to Speak" paper requires them to pick a public issue on which they have personal experience that has caused them to have some viewpoint; the goal of the paper is to show how this viewpoint arises out of the experience. In preparation we read Sallie Tisdale's "A Weight Women Carry" and "Grade A: The Market for a Yale Woman's Eggs," an award-winning essay by Jessica Cohen. I also read aloud an essay on euthanasia in which I recount the last days of my mother's life when she refused food and water for twelve days. I suggested additional topics, reminding them that they are all experts on their own education, and have a right to comment on it. One student, Brianna, chose to write about the cruelty and shunning she endured in middle school. The paper begins with a description of the bodily experience of depression she felt each day as she got ready for school:

> The pain I went through those four years is nearly indescribable. Every morning I would wake up with a heavy chest. It literally weighed me down. My heart in particular would feel heavy and burdened. I could feel it struggle with every pulse.

It was like my heart was forced to beat against its will. I could feel the disdain in its pounding, its unwillingness to keep going. In response to this weight my shoulders would slump forward, pulling the rest of my upper body down with it. My head hung low. My eyes drooped. It never ceased to astonish me how my emotional pain managed to manifest itself into physical mannerisms.

The main body of the paper is a description of a set of humiliating encounters in school.

I seemed to be the bearer of silence. I would go over to a group of kids who were laughing and giggling in order to play with them, and the giggling would immediately stop. I would ask some people to play something with me, and they would always have something to do. Recess time was the worst. I always seemed to try to join a game of four-square just a little too late, as there was never any room for another person …. And I especially was never able to penetrate the wall of backs and shoulders of the kids standing around in a circle talking to one another. This left me standing alone against the school's wall observing all the other kids at play, desperately wishing I could be them.

One particularly painful scene, so vivid in her mind that she had to interrupt her writing and cry when she was composing it, involved her not being chosen to help in a cooking project:

I remember one day during home base, a time during the day where each specific section gets together to talk about random nonsense, a girl named Susanna from another home base came in to announce she was baking cookies. Her home base teacher had told her that she could pick one friend to bake cookies with her. She asked all of us who wanted to be that lucky person. Of course, everyone raised their hands and eagerly began pleading to pick them. She ended up picking a girl named Megan, who immediately hopped out of her seat and ran to Susanna's side. I sadly lowered my hand and gave Susanna a look of grief. She smiled at me and said "Hmmm, well maybe you can bake with me too, Brianna". Before I could allow any sort of happiness ease my hurt body, Megan immediately straightened up, flung her eyes open,

and involuntarily hushed "No! No!" in Susanna's ear. She caught herself and slowly turned to look at me and gave me a nervous giggle.

My stomach sank so low it might as well have fallen to my feet. I had to try so hard to not cry in that moment. An intense, sharp pain stabbed into my heart and stomach. It hurt so much that I felt like puking for a split second. That was the first moment I realized how alone and unwanted I truly was. It had manifested before my eyes. I had never actually seen or heard anyone display their disapproval of me before. To this day, I still cannot look Megan in the eyes without thinking about the cookie incident. To this day, I feel the same stab in my heart and stomach when I think about it.

The rest of sixth grade and seventh grade continued on very much the same way. There were endless displays of "No! No!" detonating in my face every day. Whether it was a hushed giggle accompanied by a finger pointing in my direction amongst a couple of girls, the rumors about how I was a compulsive liar and ate lard for breakfast, or even the obese, ugly cartoon drawings of me that were left in my locker, it was made clear to me that my loneliness and pain would last for a long time.

She completely closed herself off from the rest of the world. "I was a bottle of thoroughly shaken soda pop just waiting to explode." And in fact, near the end of the paper she describes cutting herself:

I took my razor from the shower and slashed my wrist with it three times. It felt good. The release of pain was extraordinary. I wanted to cut more. I wanted to go all up and down my arm, but I knew I would get caught cutting myself if I did that, so I stopped after three cuts. I carefully put my razor back in the shower, turned the water on, and washed away all the blood, snot, and tears, cleansing myself once more.

At this point her paper shifts abruptly to the insight or understanding she wants the narrative to convey:

While I never acquired scars from my razor-incident, I've never fully recovered from those four years. My body is still an open wound that I don't think will ever be healed. And as much as I wish I had a happy and normal adolescence, I

wouldn't change the past even if I had the power to. While I will never fully recover from my trauma, I have taken away something so positive that it far outweighs all the negatives of my middle school experience: kindness and compassion. My agony has molded me into a far better person than I could have ever been had I not been so scorned and neglected.

During my four years of misery, I would think to myself if only they knew. If only they knew how I feel right now. If only they knew what happened behind closed doors, maybe they wouldn't be so mean and cruel. I think about this every time I interact with a person. I don't know their back-story. I don't know the emotional baggage they carry around with them. All I know is that I need to be sensitive towards their feelings.

I think about the how complicated and intense my pain and emotional grief was, and all because people weren't nice to me. It's such a simple thing, really. Just be a good, kind person. Something as simple as a smile or a "hello" can brighten up someone's day. And who knows, maybe that person really needs it. Because of my past, I am now able to possibly better someone's future—a fair trade-off for my pain, I think.

In this final section we can see Brianna's attempt to take agency and assert that she has made constructive use of this experience, while acknowledging that she still lives with the trauma of those years. One of her fears in writing the paper was that it would elicit "pity," that it would receive an undeserved high grade "out of pity or awkwardness." By claiming a positive outcome she finally becomes an agent in her own story; it is the pattern of explanation that Seligman and Taylor associate with a healthy resilient reaction to difficulty.

When, with her permission, I shared the paper with a group of teachers, one reaction was doubt about her claim that she wouldn't "change the past" if she could because of what she had gained. I had kept touch with Brianna in the year since she was in my class, and knowing her interest in introspection and psychology, I invited her to respond to this concern about her paper. She wrote:

I suppose I would have preferred to avoid all that pain. Who wouldn't? But I truly believe I would not be the person I am today had I not endured what I did. I firmly believe that every evil is accompanied with a good, and vice-versa. With all that pain came an incredible sense of sympathy and caring towards

others. Yes, I am still hurting and not fully recovered (and may never be) be from my experience. I have been greatly impacted psychologically and it's going to take a lot of hard work to be able to function as I would like to be able to. But this is balanced with a gift of compassion that I think more people in this world need. If that pain was what I needed to go through in order to attain this gift, then so be it, because that makes me one more person who will treat others the way they deserve to be treated and hopefully I can spare them some of the pain I endured.

In her commentary on this paper, she said that the process of writing was an "emotional rollercoaster," and not one that brought her the sense of catharsis that she had hoped for. So I wanted to get her reaction to the question of whether this kind of writing should have a place in a writing course:

I completely understand where these concerns come from, and I can certainly appreciate them. But I think the purpose of (good) literature is to bring up these sorts of issues and topics; topics which are uncomfortable, topics that are important and relevant to many people, and topics which evoke strong emotions so that we may recognize and discuss them. The great thing about personal essays is that if some topic is true for one person, there is more than likely at least one other person out there who can relate and identify with that person, and therefore the topic is worth sharing and discussing. By turning a blind eye to these types of essays, we might as well be turning a blind eye to literature itself. Now obviously if a student or teacher is truly uncomfortable with this sort of thing, then guidelines or alternate assignments can be made. But I don't think the personal essay should be dismissed from classrooms.

As a final question, I asked her if she saw any relationship between personal essay writing and the other writing that she had done in academic courses.

I absolutely believe there is a connection between this type of writing and the writings in other courses. This kind of writing is very personal and therefore may evoke strong feelings and emotions. One of the hardest things to do in writing, which is one of the challenges a personal essay presents, is write a well-written paper about a topic you are passionate about. In most cases when someone is passionate about a certain

> subject, they have so much to say that it's difficult to discipline themselves into writing a paper that is coherent. This is a very critical skill to be able to achieve: to be able to release your emotions and take a step back to look at a subject from a disciplined and impartial point of view. This is a skill that is required in many, if not most, types of writing, such as persuasive essays or debates, or even analytical and critical papers. I would argue that this skill is one of the most basic and important skills to have in writing. The personal essay without a doubt exercises this skill, and therefore is very relevant to other types of writing.

This response situates Brianna in the complex debate concerning "transfer" from a first-year writing course. Her position seems to align with those who argue for the possibility of "far transfer" (Wardle, 2007): the capacity of learners to develop a meta-awareness of writing processes—in this case her sense of managing complex emotional material—that can be of use in writing assignments which do not closely resemble the personal essay.

TOWARD A HERMENEUTICS OF RESPECT

But to return to "the nervous system." This student paper can create a discomfort for writing teachers, and it is important to speculate about the source of that discomfort. I would argue that it does not arise from the personal material—which for the most part is handled with narrative skill, particularly as she describes the bodily sensation of her depression and exclusion. Her occasional use of metaphor is also compelling ("I seemed to be the bearer of silence;" "I was a bottle of thoroughly shaken soda pop just waiting to explode"). The reader's discomfort does not arise from a concern about acting the therapist—the paper is clearly not asking for this. No, the discomfort most likely comes from statements like this:

> If there's one positive thing I took from middle school, it's that you should be a kind person.

Or this:

> While I will never fully recover from my trauma, I have taken away something so positive that it far outweighs all the negatives of my middle school experience: kindness and compassion. My agony has molded me into a far better person than I could have ever been had not been so scorned and neglected.

At moments like these, the writer locates the paper within a form of moral, even moralizing discourse that academic readers are often deeply suspicious of—and embarrassed by ("what would the comp director think of this?) This is the language of self-help, or therapy, or guidance counselors, or graduation speeches. Brianna clearly locates herself in this discourse at the end of the paper, where she quotes what she wrote in her senior yearbook four years after these events took place:

> My life's philosophy is a simple one, but extremely important. In my high school senior yearbook I leave with one very important message to all. I like to think of it as a summary of my entire grade school experience. Under my picture you will see the quote "Be nice to people—they outnumber you 6.6 billion to one." True, no?

The academic reader is deflated by words like "simple," "nice," and "very important message." Our mission, after all, is to disrupt the view that any life philosophy can be simple, or that morality can be reduced to such truisms. One reader of Brianna's paper suggested that with more time and reading in a writing course, she would develop more "distance" on the topic. Yet she is writing from the perspective of five years, and in her comments a year after the paper was written, the moral core of her essay is consistent. It may be that it is the readers of this essay that want "distance"—because the essay puts them in too close proximity to a form of moral assertion that makes them uncomfortable, as if they have wandered into a meeting where they had hoped to listen to Joan Didion and they get Dr. Phil.

One way to respond to an essay like this one is to employ a hermeneutics of distrust, to treat the moral assertions of the paper as mere clichés and copouts; this is what David Bartholomae seems to do when he calls them "commonplaces." In some of the earlier versions of a critical studies approach, as these commonplaces were viewed a form of "false consciousness," a passive acceptance of cultural truisms that served dominant interests—a manifestation of James' "dupery." The task of instruction was to help students play the "doubting game"—to deconstruct or problematize these beliefs, to show their arbitrary constructed nature, and expose the political interests they serve. As should be clear by now, I am arguing that this approach would be counterproductive in the case of this essay; it would be to challenge its core, its very reason for being—and to dismiss the profound functionality of this "simple" belief system for the writer. It would be a form of violence and disrespect, a failure of imagination and empathy, an ethnographic tin ear. It would also be a failure to use the self-critical tools of cultural criticism that would ask readers to interrogate their own discomfort.

But this greater openness to these moral commonplaces does not mean that all the reader can do is say, "I can see you, I can hear you." Like any discourse, "sentimental realism" can be performed well, and it can be performed poorly. Not all writers can write "in your face" scenes as Brianna has, or be as attuned to bodily response. The effect of her paper rests on this ability, as she says near the end, to reveal to readers the depth of distress that these too-typical middle school behaviors can create. At the same time there are perspectives missing in the paper: one teacher who read the paper asked why parents and teachers didn't intervene (think of the clumsy move of Susannah publicly choosing a peer to do the cooking). Surely they bear some responsibility. I wished I had posed this question to her during our conference on the paper, so I asked her this question a year later in our email exchange. She acknowledged that her parents could have stepped in earlier, but she understood why her teachers didn't:

> I put on a really terrific front at school … they were SHOCKED when my mom told them that I was miserable in middle school. Even to this day, when I talk to them about it they are completely dumb-founded. They say things like "You were always so happy and bubbly all the time. I just can't believe that you hated middle school so much." So to be fair, my teachers didn't have anything to pick up on and intervene in. But the bottom line is that people are responsible for their own actions. Besides, anyone who has experienced the public school system understands that it's almost like its own separate society. You're expected to deal with things on your own. Allowing for an adult to step in is like cheating or breaking the rules, and you are immediately coined as a target for bullying. While I would agree that adults should have stepped up, I would also argue that there shouldn't have been the need to do so.

I regret that we didn't explore this "front" in our conference because her descriptions of it might have heightened the pathos of her situation. In addition to enduring the shunning, she had to maintain a front that would keep the adults around her from guessing her distress. But she rejects as a digression the suggestion that she explore the responsibility of adults in this situation because it was the behavior of the girls, her peers, that is criticized. There should have been no need for adults to intervene. The more "mature" or sociological move to view the situation in a systematic way, spreading the blame to adults, would blunt her moral criticism.

I realize that papers of this kind raise anxieties among teachers, particularly those new to the profession, about crossing the line into being a therapist

(although as Lad Tobin has written, we fool ourselves if we think this is a clear line). I don't want to minimize this concern, but in my experience it need not be an obstacle. To begin with, students who choose write about traumatic issues are, almost without exception, not asking us to be therapists. They want us to be sensitive and curious readers who help them elaborate and explore topics they have chosen to write about. I will often begin my questions about their papers by saying that I respect them for taking on a difficult and emotional topic and that if any of my questions make them uncomfortable not to answer them—but almost invariably students welcome the questions. Michelle Payne comments in her study, *Bodily Discourses*, that allowing this kind of writing to be done in a course has the effect of normalizing the subject matter—it is not shameful, unspeakable. It can be the subject of a paper; writing is therapeutic by not being therapy, but normal school work. She writes: "It is especially important, I think, for women who have suffered bodily violence to believe a 'unified, normal' self is possible through writing in an academic context" (Payne, 1997, p. 206).

It is also important to remember that this essay is part of a sequence that led, as it does in many first year classes, to assignments that dealt with responding to reading and to research. An essay like this one can help a teacher in directing students to topics that can combine the personal and academic, building on what Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm call "identity markers." In Brianna's case, this paper clued me in to her interest in the psychology of distress, her fascination with the ways in which social stress is experienced bodily. In another paper she describes playing the role of Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and finding the way of walking to convey her emotional stiffness. When she chose later in the semester to research panic attacks, which she also has experienced, I knew from her previous writing that this was a good topic for her (and it was a very successful paper). As Marcia Curtis and Anne Herrington argue in *Persons in Process*, the most engaged and committed undergraduate writers are those who have a personal stake in their academic subject; they are the ones who dismantle the personal/academic binary. And for me this essay was a key to helping Brianna do that.

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Finally to the issue of power. One charge against the personal essay is that it can become solipsistic, so self-preoccupied and individualistic that the writer is powerless to appreciate or challenge systematic social evils. One thing academic language provides is a more powerful capacity to critique and challenge injustice. I would not deny this is sometimes the case (virtually every "travel" paper I have received fails in this way). But this argument can be turned on its head—that much of the writing in the "academy" insulates practitioners from the way rhetorical power actually operates in the wider culture. There would not be a need

to argue for "public intellectuals" if most of us were good at public discourse. A dismissal of "sentimental realism" can alienate academics from the way writing (and narrative) functions in the wider culture—to commemorate, provide solace, entertain, persuade, inform. One can easily imagine a public function for Brianna's essay—to help teachers be alert to the excluded child, or to make middle school girls aware of the pain that the ostracized girl can feel. While essays like Brianna's may be therapeutic, they are also forms of public moral writing, as witnessed by the considerable popularity of "This I Believe" series on National Public Radio. To the extent that composition studies has embraced the public, non-academic uses of language, it should pay serious attention to the power of moral discourse like hers.

I personally experienced this removal from public discourse several years ago at an annual NCTE conference. Somehow I was on the "research strand," which as anyone familiar with the conference knows is the kiss of death, a kind of consumer warning. A group of us were scheduled to present in a huge ballroom, and as the scheduled time approached it became clear that the panel outnumbered the audience—so we pulled together a few chairs in a pathetic huddle to make the session feel more intimate. In the session I was criticized by a prominent researcher for promoting narrative and descriptive writing, and not the more powerful "language of the academy." I was, in effect, disempowering my students.

I remember thinking at the time, "If we and our language is so powerful, why isn't anyone here?" For I knew in some other ballroom, my colleague Donald Graves would be speaking to an audience of over a thousand, which would respond enthusiastically to his humor, his stories of children in his study, his descriptions of their writing, and his ability to mimic conversations with these children. At times these stories had the weight of parables, exemplary stories. He would alternate from humor to pathos to indignation without any notes, and never losing his audience. And he changed the face of elementary education.

Who, I was thinking, really has a handle on the "language of power"?

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