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Getting personal: writing-stories

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Halloween, 1972. My face was broken, the cheekbones, the jaw. My head had gone through the windshield of the Volkswagen bug and then my leg, as the seat broke backwards, and then my face again, and my pelvis and my ribs hitting things, or being hit, ricocheting. I have a body memory of my right eye out of its socket, lying in wetness on my cheek. And then there was blackness, unconsciousness, coma.

Once the kind-faced doctor tried cheering me. “You’ve only lost about 10–15 % of your I.Q.,” he said. “There’s plenty left.”

Did he not know that his patient who could not do her times tables was a professor of sociology who taught advanced statistics at a major research university? She had not the slightest idea now what “10–15 %” meant, but she could hear, feel the word, *lost*.

What had I lost? Much more than I.Q. points. I had lost access to my brain. I had lost language: my sword and my shield. My habitual routes for naming things were torn up, blocked off; paths to words and formulae were gone. I could not locate where anything was stored in my brain. I could feel my mind searching – this way, no, that way, up here, try there – searching, searching in my brain, as if it were a computer, searching for words, thoughts, connections, searching for memory, endless searches. Sometimes I could sense the place where a word was “hiding,” but I couldn’t make it come out, be recognized, be spoken. When I could find the word’s first letter, I felt grateful. I still do.

Everything was jumbled in my brain.

A massive upheaval had cracked the strata of knowledge, throwing long buried sedimentia to the surface. As if I had experienced an earthquake in my brain, the orderly strata of knowledge had been destroyed – old material collided with new material. The shards had been reshuffled.

After the car accident and coma, I could not find simple words much less remember proper names, dates, titles of papers or journals, or perform statistical tests or fourth-grade arithmetic. Although I could not bring into speech what was happening in my head, I found that I could write about it. If I could not find the word I wanted, I could write its first letter or leave a blank space. In writing, the pace and the issues were my own, not the maddening questioning of others. Writing allowed me to record little thoughts, to revisit them and fill in the blanks, to piece them together, thought-by-thought. Writing gave me a feeling of control over time and space, and a faith that I would recover. Writing was the method through which I constituted the world and reconstituted myself. Writing became my principle tool through which I learned about my self and the world. I wrote so I would have a life. Writing was and is *how* I come to know.

Two years after the car accident writing the first textbook on the sociology of gender – *The dynamics of sex and gender* – was how I relearned sociological basics, and helped

construct the new specialty, the sociology of gender, as nondependent on advanced statistics. Through that writing, I also constructed myself as a feminist researcher interested in understanding how social and cultural factors influenced relationships between men and women, women and women, men and men. I came to a deeper understanding of gender-scripts.

Two decades later I wrote an article for *The handbook of qualitative research* entitled “Writing: a method of inquiry” (1993). The seeds for that article were planted during my recovery from my car accident. A quarter of a century after the car accident, I would name myself “writer” in the introduction of my book, *Fields of play: Constructing an academic life* (1997).

In *Fields of play*, I wrote what I called “writing-stories,” narratives that situated my sociological work in academic, disciplinary, community, and familial contexts. My claims to knowledge were contextualized, historically situated. Because of writing writing-stories, I am now able to write about the body and mind trauma which I experienced, but could not witness; its aftermath, the coma, the reshaping of my life; pain and loss remembered as I write.

The preceding paragraphs of this essay retell some of the traumatic experiences associated with my coma, and are part of a longer writing-story, “Paradigms lost” (1999). I have included the excerpt here to illustrate how important writing is to me, how grateful I am to it. I have come to absolutely respect the power, mystery, and complexity of writing.

My writing is an integral part of my life as a feminist scholar. It is a feminist practice, and like other feminist practices its effects are surprisingly complex, rich, and rhizomatic, having unexpected consequences for the writer and the reader. A feminist mantra from the 1970s was “the personal is the political.” In the 1990s, we privileged its inversion, “the political is the personal.” Writing-stories are both personal and political. Both ... and This article, “Getting personal,” is a call to writing-stories that situate your work in sociopolitical, familial, and academic climates. My ideas and relationship to writing shift and change. In what follows I want to share my current top-ten thoughts about “getting personal.” I hope some of the ideas are useful for your work; life.

Top ten

1. *People who write are always writing about their lives*, even when they disguise this through the omniscient voice of science or scholarship. No writing is untainted by human hands, pure, objective, “innocent.” The old idea of a strict bifurcation between “objective” and “subjective” – between the “head” and the “heart” – does not map onto the actual practices through production of knowledge, or knowledge about how knowledge is produced.

In the social sciences, try as writers do to suppress their humanity, thankfully it keeps erupting in their choice of metaphors, topics, and discourses. (I have colleagues who only do quantitative research, and who claim their work is unrelated to their lives. These include: (1) an immigrant from Formosa, who studies Formosan immigration patterns; (2) an East Indian demographer, tragically displaced from his homeland, who believes that sociology is the study of “relations in vector space,” i.e., sociology should not be about actual people in actual places; and (3) a colleague who suffers from crippling autoimmune diseases, who studies occupational rehabilitation protocols.)

2. *Writing is a method of discovery*, a way of finding out about yourself and your world. When we view writing as a *method*, we experience “language-in-use,” how we “word the world” into existence (Rose, 1992). And then we “reword” the world, erase the computer screen, check the thesaurus, move a paragraph, again and again. This “worded world” never accurately, precisely, completely captures the studied world, yet we persist in trying. Writing as a method of inquiry honors and encourages the trying, recognizing it as emblematic of the significance of language.

I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it. I was taught, though, as perhaps you were, too, not to write until I knew what I wanted to say, until my points were organized and outlined. No surprise, this static writing model coheres with mechanistic scientism, quantitative research, and entombed scholarship.

Much of that writing is simply not interesting to read because adherence to the model requires writers to silence their own voices, to view themselves as contaminants. Homogenization occurs through the suppression of individual voices and the acceptance of the omniscient voice of science or scholarship or the social-script as if it were our own. Writing as a method of inquiry is a way of nurturing our own individuality and giving us authority over our understanding of our own lives.

3. *Writing is always done in socio-historical context*. The context in which we are now writing is one of postmodernism. The core of postmodernism is the *doubt* that any method or theory, discourse or genre, tradition or novelty, has a universal and general claim as the “right” or the privileged form of authoritative knowledge. Postmodernism *suspects* all truth claims of masking and serving particular interests in local, cultural and political struggles. It does not – as some seem to think – automatically reject conventional methods as false or archaic; it simply opens them to critique, as it does the new methods of knowing, as well.

What postmodernism does is to recognize the situational limitations of the knower. It recognizes that you have partial, local, temporal knowledge – and that is enough.

4. *Writing is always done in specific, local and historical contexts*. You are affected by the immediate world around you – the kind of support you get or don’t get for the kind of work you want to do. You’re affected by the geography, the placement of your windows, the crying of your child in the next room, the buzz of the fan, the polluted air in your offices. All of these impact and affect your writing. Writing-stories demystify the process, and situate the work. Here is an example from *Fields of play*. It tells how a seemingly invisible poster on my wall shaped my attitudes towards work for over a decade.

... And feel most braced ...

Virginia Woolf doesn’t look at me. She’s staring, unblinking, at her own words in calligraphy on a 1981 calendar that I have framed in burnished wood, like an icon, and hung on my wall, eye level, to the left of my computer:

I do my best work and feel most braced with my back to the wall. It’s an odd feeling though, writing against the current: difficult entirely to disregard the current.

I omitted four of those words – “and feel most braced” – from the epigraph to a 1990 essay of mine on values, metaphor, and rhetoric. Why?

Did I think I could improve on Virginia Woolf? Did I think sociologists wouldn’t get the complex metaphor? That university life didn’t “brace” me? That my “heroic”

narrative required me to stand up by (for) myself? Was I questioning the concept of “wall” – boundary, barrier, enclosure?

Was I troubled by the image the words evoked? A frightening memory, me, nine years old, drowning in a quarry, underwater, my back forced against a wall, rescued by a man.

Probably, all of the above reasons and others, too, that I can’t yet articulate. Even my choice of quotations, like all my writing, I have come to think of as overdetermined. Like a mantra, every day, many times a day, I read Virginia Woolf’s words until they became a forgotten presence in my mind; and I saw her looking dark-eyed, unflinching, yet sad, at her words, and beyond. Virginia Woolf drowned herself, choosing a wall-less river, a current against which she would no longer fight, but I never connected the quotation with her death. As I do so now, I shudder.

One afternoon in 1993, I read the quotation aloud. How negative, how constraining, how limiting, I thought – not how depressing or prophetic, as I read it now. Writing “against” the current tied me to the “mainstream” always aware of its speed, eddies, whirlpools, displacing the power and centrality of my own “current.” I no longer desired to position my work as “counter” or “anti” or “against,” as I had been doing for years. I did not want to write about issues that were uninteresting; and I wanted to write through the “personal” binaries (me/them, good/bad, for/against) that were my walls, invisible to me then, bracing and constraining.

I took down the 1981 calendar that afternoon in 1993 and put it somewhere, “temporarily.” I find it now, behind the guest-room door, propped on the floor, braced by the wall: Virginia’s facing the wall (1997, pp. 173–174.)

5. *What you write about and how you write it shapes your life*, shapes who you become. I am enamored of a particular kind of postmodern thought, poststructuralism. Language is the centerpiece. Language does not “reflect” social reality, but produces meaning, creates social reality. Different languages and different discourses within a given language divide up the world and give it meaning in ways that are not reducible to one another.

Language constructs one’s sense of who one is, one’s subjectivity. What something means to individuals is dependent on the discourses available to them. For example, being hit by one’s spouse is differently experienced if it is thought of within the discourse of “normal marriage,” “husband’s rights,” or “wife battering.” Similarly, when a man is exposed to the discourse of “childhood sexual abuse,” he may recategorize and remember his own traumatic childhood experiences. Experience and memory is thus open to contradictory interpretations governed by social interests and prevailing discourses. The individual is both site and subject of these discursive struggles for identity, and for remaking memory. Because the individual is subject to multiple and competing discourses in many realms, one’s subjectivity is shifting and contradictory, not stable, fixed, rigid. What we know about the world and what we know about ourselves are always intertwined, partial and historical.

Writing about our lives, poststructurally, then suggests two important things: first, it directs us to understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times; and second, it frees us from trying to write a single text in which everything is said at once to everyone, a text where the “complete” life is told. The life can be told over and over again, differently nuanced. For it is known differently dependent upon where one sits in time in relationship to one’s life.

6. *Writing about your life in writing-stories can be a sacrament*. By this I mean two things: experiencing the flow of writing and experiencing *connectedness to others*. The sense of time

and space as separate is undermined, re-understood as deeply interrelated. As you write, you can find yourself connected to others; the meaning you construct about your life connects you to others, making communion – community – possible.

7. *Writing-stories offer the writing of new plot-lines.* Carolyn Heilbrun commented that we do not live lives, we live plot-lines. Because writing-stories let us discover new things about ourselves and our world, we have the possibility of writing new plots; with new plots come new lives. One's life always exceeds the cultural script for it; we are not cultural clones. Elsewhere I have referred to the possibility of rejecting entrenched cultural stories, writing, instead, collective-stories – stories which both resist and alter the accepted norm.

There are a number of these collective-stories, now. For example, the cancer survivor collective story; physical or sexual abuse survivor; the Downs syndrome achievement story; the bulimia and anorexic story; rape, sexual harassment, sex discrimination all newly storied.

I am struggling now to rewrite a terrible plot that has been handed to me, and all women and men of my generation. At a certain age we “retire”; we are expected, as my department chair said, “to just fade into the woodwork.” It used to be that men retired, and died. My parents followed that plot-line.

What might be the new story? What might be the plot-line? How do I resist and alter the old one? What can be the new collective-story?

8. *Writing-stories puts you right smack in the midst of the what's happening now in publishing: the memoir boom.* Autobiography has a long history in American letters. Over 11,000 of them have been published in the past two centuries. The key moral issue for American autobiographers from 1800 on has been the questions: How much responsibility can I take for my behavior and the course of my life? How freely do I choose my actions?

Early 19th-century autobiographers pondered the effect of God's plan for them. Most maintained that they had no control over their fates, and that God saved them from their passions. Later in that century, autobiographers told stories of self-development, mustering willpower to direct their lives, proving they had worked hard. With the impact of Freud on the early 20th century, autobiographers focused on motivation, instincts, and drives. Writing autobiographically was more difficult because the writers were seeking to understand their rational and irrational motives for actions and choices. In more recent decades, autobiographers talk about the influence of the social and society on who they become. Their life stories tell us how they use the discourses available to them to make sense of their lives.

Writing is a major part of an academic's life. Autobiography is a valuable genre. How freely do we choose our actions? How can we write about them so that others' lives are enriched?

9. *Writing writing-stories makes you a better reader.* You become more aware of plot, character, scene, dialogue – absences, presences in fiction, biography, poetry, etc. You become more aware of the poststructural insistence that all readers are writers, that the text is constantly being reinvented by readers.

10. *Writing about your life is not without perils.* Writing about your life brings you to strange places; you might be uncomfortable about what you learn about yourself and others. You might find yourself confronting serious ethical issues. Can you write about your department without serious consequences to yourself or your students? What about your family? Who might you be hurting? How do you balance “fact” and “fiction”? How do you write a “true” ethnography of your experiences? These questions, of course, are the ones that contemporary ethnographers ask themselves when

they try to write up their “data” about other people. How different it feels when it is you and your world that you are writing about; how humbling and demanding. How up-front and personal in-your-face become the ethical questions, the most important of all the questions, I think.

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