

Creative Writing Creating Community: the power of the personal¹

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Abstract:

Teachers are often dissuaded from encouraging personal narratives, not only for the purposes of academic voice and a consideration of audience, but because of the discussions that arise when delving into the personal. But what is more important is not what subjects are tackled, but how, and not whether students use first person or not, but when. Encouraging memoir may appear to lend itself to an increasingly difficult to navigate territory for the teacher who opens that can of worms, but memoir does not inevitably lead students to Freudian turns on the couch. When the emphasis is placed on the telling and not on the tale, teaching memoir does not present the teacher as therapist and the students as patients, but the writing as an instrument for developing sophisticated thinking spurred on by an invested community. Writing, not the content of that writing, becomes subject to the criticisms of the class, causing students to take risks as writers and as thinkers, and to hold others equally accountable. Memoir offers distinctive pedagogical results, but the methods used to arrive at them are not so distinctive that they cannot be transferred to other creative, or even academic, writing courses.

My teenaged father² attended a poetry workshop with poet Léonie Adams at Columbia University in the middle of the last century. While workshopping a poem one day in class, a fellow student poet recoiled from the criticisms being made about her poem by saying that she could not alter the poem because the alteration would not be true to how the relationship she had written about had been. As my father told the story, which was most certainly altered by memory, Adams had just taken a long drag on a cigarette (smoking in class being common at that time), when my father uttered something to the effect of “we’re not trying to fix the relationship; we’re trying to fix the poem” – to which Adams choked out the smoke she had inhaled.

Creative writing workshops must begin with clarity about what criticism is and is about, because student writers, like many writers, are often inevitably married to what they have written and will have to become somewhat unwed if the criticism is going to be noteworthy and impersonal. Unlike other forms of creative writing, when it comes to memoir writing, the personal becomes even more personal, and the criticisms, therefore, must be even less personal.

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to the students in my Fall 2008 Creative Writing: Memoir class at Quincy University for their support with this project, and especially to the following students: Shalea Brown, Jake Egelhoff, Amber Epping, Stacy Hankins, Kathryn Seckman, and Kendra Yakle.

² Poet Frank Fagan.

Just as memoirs have begun to crowd the shelves of neighborhood bookstores, they have appeared more and more in college bookstores. This recent popularity of memoir has led to an increase in memoir reading and writing in the college classroom. One cannot help but note that this interest in memoir has corresponded with the further development of an I-centered, Reality TV culture in which exploring oneself publicly, either on reality and talk shows or through Facebook or Twitter, is a common occurrence. As educators, it would appear that our role would be to work against this popular culture eruption that is frequently deemed solipsistic and self-indulgent, since there are daily reminders that when not kept in check, such self-aggrandizing can lead to destructive individual and collective results. It has become apparent, however, that when carefully and thoughtfully constructed, personal inquiry can lead students not only to profound analysis, but to remarkable written results. Memoir writing can become, then, an analytically productive as well as creative endeavor.

In his article on memoir as pedagogy, Steve R. Simmons, who included memoir in his agriculture and university-wide freshmen courses, argues “memoir writing is an overlooked but exceptional pedagogy for fostering reflection and student-centered, transformative learning” (1). The overlooking or dismissal of memoir is often due to prejudices against storytelling, and the impression that creative writing is wholly distinct from academic. But like Simmons, Carol Schick and Wanda Hurren, in their article on reading autobiographies and memoirs in the social studies classroom, found that “reading about the lives and times of others in the form of fictionalized history, auto/biography and memoir is an exemplary pedagogical practice,” so the practice is not uncommon in a variety of disciplines (2). Memoir has been a productive resource in teacher education, for example, as Sharon Hollander found that memoirs “can be used to bridge the gap between general and special education” and to “promote quality reading and writing, inspire original and insightful responses from students, and foster a sense of community in class” (2). Memoir can be used to foster intellectual transformations and bridge gaps between the creative and the academic, but ironically, in contrast to these positive claims about the use of memoir from various disciplines, and the overall surge in memoir as a vehicle for education, the personal narrative remains under attack as one advances in school.

Sarah Michael’s points out in her article, “The Dismantling of Narrative,” “[t]he process of dismantling narrative development is a central part of what it means to become literate in school, to acquire the forms of discourse -- description, explanation, justification – that get accorded a privileged status in school and other institutions” (303). In keeping with this claim, in

college English classrooms, as well as in the classrooms of other disciplines, argumentation is widely privileged over narrative. Students are frequently taught to remove the first person from their sentences and to adopt a professional or academic discourse. I, too, discourage the unintentional use of “I” (and also “you”) in my freshmen composition courses, and in arguments of any kind. Indeed, I am even a bit uncomfortable using the first person in this academic essay. But there is a time and a place for “I” and there are times when its omission is more palpable than its insertion. Its insertion is also not only necessary in certain writing situations, but the interrogation and evaluation of “I,” figuratively and literally, can garner exceptional academic results.

Ardashir Vakil wisely points out that “Students should be taught how to write essays or respond to texts, to think abstractly and analyse; but the drastic reductions in their opportunities to think and write creatively, that is to write from the unconscious and to get in touch with their own native voice is a sad narrowing of focus, both for the students and teachers” (165). Vakil urges a restoration of the creative in education. It is clearly arguable that the distinction between creative and academic writing, while commonly perpetuated, need not be so distinct, and there are fruitful bridges to be built with the materials of analysis and creativity; memoir writing is one of them.

We are as a species natural storytellers, so oral narrative often comes easy to most. Indeed, the first written assignment in many basic writing courses is a narrative assignment because students are typically confident when telling their own stories, and the narration can later become a vehicle for developing, or eventually incorporating, more complex forms of discourse. Memoir writing at its best functions in a similar way: the personal narrative becomes a source of and for analysis as well as a product of creativity. Students should be taught not only how to find their academic voice, but also how to think abstractly and analyze their creative writing while identifying their creative voice. Vakil argues that “Good writing deals with a different part of the brain from good criticism,” but he also explains that becoming critics of other people’s work allows students to become “better readers of their own work” (164). The great leap in creative writing is to make students become as good at criticizing their own work as they are at criticizing other’s. While this is always a challenge, it is even more of one when the student is writing directly about her own life, without the veil of fiction. Writing is always a personal vocation, but when the content of that writing is also personal, the creative writing teacher finds herself in an even more precarious position as a critic.

English teachers are often dissuaded from encouraging personal narratives, not only for the purposes of academic voice and a consideration of audience, but because they are reminded that they are not equipped to enter into the sorts of discussions that may arise when delving into the personal. Such discussions, we are often taught, should be left to the school psychologist. Lucia Perillo argues pointedly that “Working on the psychic turmoil must be handled elsewhere,” in her *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece, “When the Classroom Becomes a Confessional,” because the English instructor’s “expertise pertains only to [our] students’ writing, not their lives” (A56). She also points out, however, that, “if students can learn to distance themselves enough to make genuine art even out of life’s most horrific subjects, then they are cultivating an artistic rigor that they can bring to all of their work” (2). What becomes most important, then, is not what subjects are tackled in the classroom, but how, and not whether students use first person or not, but when. As Karen Surman Paley concludes in her book, *I-Writing: The Politics and Practice of Teaching First Person Writing*, “Personal narrative has a significant place in the composition classes of those instructors willing to learn how to teach it” (xii). The same can be said of the creative writing classroom.

Encouraging memoir writing may appear to quickly lend itself to an increasingly difficult to navigate territory for the teacher who opens that can of worms, but teaching memoir does not inevitably lead students to Freudian turns on the couch. When the emphasis is placed on the telling and not on the tale, as in other creative writing classrooms, teaching memoir does not present the teacher as therapist and the students as patients, but the writing classroom as an instrument for the development of sophisticated thinking and writing spurred on by an invested community. Writing, not the content of that writing, must become subject to the criticisms of the class, causing students to boldly take risks as writers and as thinkers, and to hold others equally accountable. While this approach may be necessary in all writing classrooms, and may become even more significant in the creative writing classroom, in the memoir classroom such distancing is even more paramount, since the “I” of the piece is so fully centered.

Having taught writing and literature at the university level for nearly fifteen years, and having taught three literature and writing courses on the topic of memoir, two of which were identified as creative writing courses, it has become apparent that the genre of memoir does offer distinctive pedagogical results, but the pedagogical methods used to arrive at those results are not so distinctive that they cannot be transferred to other creative, or even academic, writing courses.

In many ways students in any writing classroom consider their writing to be “about” them and are invested in their products as reflections of themselves. But the student memoirist often has a greater investment in memoir than other forms of academic or creative writing precisely because it is more directly “about” her, and she also has a stronger investment in accuracy or getting her stories “right” or “straight” since she has the capacity to directly implicate others, and because what is written will inevitably become the memory of others, and may even replace the writer’s own memories. As I wrote in my article, “Memory Lost, Memory Regained: The Memoirist’s Power in Shaping Truth”:

Although the idea of truth in memoir writing is inherently questionable, we must still strive to get our “facts” right for our own integrity and the integrity of those we write about. Regardless of what the truth is, the memoirist’s memoir will become the truth. Through the process of writing, the memoir replaces memories, so that in time the memoirist comes to remember her memoir rather than her memories. And the memoirist also has, at least in the public eye, the power to replace the memories of those closest to her. When her family and friends disagree with her memories, she wields great power, as it is her memories that are written and will be remembered, not theirs (*Review Americana*).

Due to this great responsibility not perceptible in, say, fiction and poetry, memoir writing seems to make more visible certain aspects of the creative process than other forms of creative writing, even those aspects which are evident in all creative writing classrooms where the integrity of one’s words requires deep critical thinking and precise expression -- the sort of precision that student writers often dismiss in academic writing. The vulnerability and responsibility of creative writing of any kind naturally develops a sense of ownership, which can facilitate community and a shared governance of the classroom, which is also more difficult to create when students are not as personally invested in the subject matter (as they often are not in relation to their academic work). But while such vulnerability exists in all creative writing classrooms, it is particularly potent in the memoir classroom.

By considering the methodology and outcomes of a 300-level course titled *Creative Writing: Memoir*, which I have taught twice at my home institution, and reviewing student comments generated in and by that course, as well as excerpts from student writing, the particular power the personal has in a creative writing classroom to facilitate critical thinking, generate community, and motivate exemplary writing becomes evident. The practices illuminate that the sort of critical thinking and community building that takes place in a creative writing memoir classroom can be created in other creative writing classrooms as well, when similar pedagogical methods are employed.

The Course Philosophy and Materials

There were nine students registered for the course *Creative Writing: Memoir* – an average number of students for 300-level courses at my institution. The goals of the course were inspired by three philosophies: 1) To write a memoir, one must have read memoirs; 2) In order to write a memoir well, the memoirist must employ the same techniques as in other creative writing; and 3) Writers greatly benefit from being critically challenged by a community of readers. We therefore began by reading, analyzing, and critiquing excerpts from published memoirs. The excerpts were selected on the basis of quality and variety, both in voice and subject. Excerpts included but were not limited to those from: Jim Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*; Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*; James McBride's *The Color of Water*; Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club*; Ruth Reichl's *Tender at the Bone*; Caroline Knapp's *Drinking: A Love Story*; Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Wait Till Next Year*; and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. I chose not to have the students read a memoir in its entirety, since they would be writing roughly 20-25 page memoirs and too much time would be given over to discussing the reading. In the beginning, we spent one period discussing the excerpts and the next doing various creative writing exercises that played with content as well as language. On writing days we wrote our responses to various subjects as broad as fear and compassion; we exposed our faults, both physical and emotional; and we toyed with word choice, structure, voice, and dialogue, among other narrative elements. The students also wrote for homework concise two-page analytical and critical arguments grappling with some aspect or passage of the selected excerpts. As their knowledge of the genre, understanding of the memoir writing process, and critical reading abilities developed, we then began imagining and drafting memoirs.

Fostering Trust, Community, and Student Engagement

In order for this class to be successful, a unique community had to be created. This need for community is not as necessary in a literature or even a composition course in which the instructor is the primary source of instruction. But in a creative writing classroom, it is expected that the students will teach each other almost as much as the teacher teaches them. And in a creative writing memoir classroom, community is absolutely necessary because the deeply personal nature of the writing creates atypical vulnerability and a desire for reciprocity.

It may not be difficult to get people to think and write about themselves, but a sense of community and student engagement do not necessarily follow easily from this assumption. Engagement depends on an equal investment in the process, and that investment is built upon

the community that is created. Creating community in any line of work is a challenge, since the primary ingredient in any relationship is trust, and creating trust between two people is trying, let alone among many. Doing so in a classroom is particularly challenging given that students typically do not enter a classroom intending to create such relationships, the way they might enter some other sort of situation, and thereby tend to be unprepared for, or even blindsided by, the expectation that such a relationship be formed. In my classroom, even though students had registered for the course, some inevitably entered the classroom with little understanding of memoir. We, therefore, began by discussing the distinction between autobiography and memoir: 1) An autobiography generally seeks to cover an entire life; 2) A memoir tends to focus on a specific time in one's life and also to focus so closely on that period or event that it eschews any information that is not directly related to it (unlike the autobiography that seeks to include all); and 3) Memoirs, unlike autobiographies, tend to be written by ordinary people who have had something extraordinary happen to them, or who can write about the ordinary in an extraordinary way. As we began discussing the excerpts, we also considered what was accurate in memoir writing and what was fictionalized, what was writer-focused, and what was reader-focused writing.

Knowing that creating trust and community was imperative, on the first day students were reminded (as they are in all of my classes) that the course was going to require work, and that they would get out of it what they put into it, but also that I was not solely responsible for the success of the course. Additionally, and more specifically, it was also made clear that the subject matter involved taking risks and becoming comfortable with discomfort. These warnings were essential because it is common for students to imagine writing about themselves as "easy." After all, it is assumed that writing about what one has experienced has to be easier than making stuff up, and one would think, also more difficult to criticize since the instructor clearly does not have more knowledge than the students regarding the subject matter. But with an emphasis on the writing, the students quickly learned this was not the case.

On the first day, I made a point of retelling my father's story (which has served me well in a variety of courses and situations), which he originally began telling me when I was a young writer similarly wed. I also immediately worked toward empowering the students by noting that the course assumed those taking it were interesting and had something to say, even if they did not know what it was yet. I also shared that I had taken a similar course when I was around their age and that at some point in the term, I would share that writing with them – this always

engages their curiosity. The second time I taught the course, I was also able to share some of the provocative topics tackled by students the first time. One of those was about a cutter who was intent on explaining why she had harmed herself, and why it was such an addictive behavior. These opening comments about criticism, process, expectations, sharing, and subject matter helped to set the tone of the class.

As the class progressed, several other “rules” were created in order to allow for trust and community to form. The first was that in order to create trust, students had to be regularly present. While one student may “disappear” from a typical lecture and discussion course, in the memoir class, students whose attendance is lacking pose a serious threat not only to themselves but to the whole class. In order for community to be created, students need to be equally vulnerable, and this cannot happen when someone is parachuting in and out of discussion, and more important, exposure. This rule was regularly enforced. One student commented that I had kept “the bond intact when a student or two threatened it by not attending as often as the rest.” The second rule is that the professor cannot be the doctor who administers the medicine but does not take any herself. While the students remained conscious that I was the teacher, in many ways, I became a student. I regularly did the creative writing exercises during class time, and shared the products of those exercises with the class, along with the students. Writing in the moment, sometimes my results were better and sometimes the students’ were. This demonstrated that I, too, meet with successes and failures as a writer. And most important, at the appropriate time, which seemed to be roughly halfway through the course (when a bond had been partially formed but before they had to fully expose themselves), I became the most vulnerable of the group by sharing that early memoir. These actions and disclosures placed me, if not on an equal level, at least closer to it. Several students reported that my reading my own memoir was a defining moment. As one said, “by sharing your own memoir written around a similar age that we were, you included yourself within the circle, and did not stay outside of it as an instructor.”

I was, of course, only one member of this community, and therefore did not solely foster it. Actually, as time went on, it was quite the opposite. While I officially led each class, the class eventually began to lead itself, and to challenge each other’s writing in various ways. One student reported that he “was hesitant to share certain stories with a group of strangers initially, but as the semester progressed, [he] bec[a]me more comfortable with others who were diving into themselves in a similar manner. We all shared private things, which inevitably resulted in a

trust that we would keep our stories inside the classroom.” The “all” here is not unintentional. Another recalled, “It was pretty amazing, shocking really that nobody felt the need to say: Let’s take an oath right now that nothing goes outside of this room, or circle of people. We never had to do that.” Again, the “nobody” includes the instructor. “There was a sense of respect and responsibility of information in class,” another concluded. That respect was created through my leadership; because I respected them and protected the integrity of the class, they respected each other as well as me.

Once the community was established, students became more and more engaged in the course; the work began to occupy students’ thoughts outside the classroom and at all hours – a shared hope among teachers that is rarely realized. One student reported, “I would reflect on my life while driving, listening to music, or right before falling asleep, picking the most pivotal moments in my life to discuss in my story.” Students reported that they had many discussions outside of class, in person, over the phone, and in Facebook chat sessions. Without prompting (although it was an approach discussed in class), students began interviewing family members and friends, seeking validation for their memories. Students also became concerned not only with what stories to tell, but more aware of how to tell them. A student said that being a part of a community of writers helped her to “delve into memories [...] and become deeply involved in what [she] was writing.” She also said that it “helped [her] maintain [her] honesty, sometimes brutal, because [she] knew it was expected of [her] since [she] expected it of others.” This brutal honesty is what came to bear importantly on the writing that was produced.

The Writing

The critical expectations of the course were born through the criticisms of the published authors read. Since we had begun by reading the writing of established memoirists, the students were at a safe distance when criticizing the style and content of the material. The published pieces also allowed us to begin with a discussion about memory’s strengths and weaknesses and about creative writing, fiction, and non-fiction. The students discovered that while memory is important in memoir writing, it is not nearly as important as good storytelling. No matter how truthful the prose, if it is not engaging, it will be not be powerful, meaningful, or memorable to others. If a person wants to tell her story, she must tell it well, otherwise no one will care to hear it. So while we may not be able to “fix” the relationships of our past, we can certainly “fix” our writing enough to make those relationships meaningfully understood and significant to others.

A discussion about truth inevitably led to the fluidity of memoir, its unreliability, and to the power of writing. Writing about our lives fixes our memories in our minds. In other words, once a writer drafts or graphs his memories in a particular way, it becomes difficult to undo, and those memories become fixed in the writing, which makes the past less fluid. One of the student's remarks about truth and memoir writing was inevitably born of a discussion about dialogue. Most memoirs include some form of dialogue, however minimal, and some include quite a bit of dialogue. When it comes to memory, students are most skeptical about whether writers can remember any conversations in their pasts word for word. This disbelief lends itself quickly to a discussion of good writing and honesty. One student who used dialogue reported:

I found that I couldn't recall every conversation with absolute certainty, so I chose to incorporate it as accurately as my memory would allow while making it as effective as possible. I was more concerned with telling my story in a powerful fashion than with being 100% accurate with every minute detail.

Writing a memoir requires more than writing about oneself, it requires one to employ the same literary techniques as a novelist or short story writer and to be as aware of one's reader. Emphasizing thematic as well as structural elements, voice and the engagement of readers over the content, focused writers on telling the story well. A student wrote, "Dr. Fagan shared her stories and commented on our paper's content, not on the validity of the story. She made it clear from the beginning that her criticisms were not a reflection of our lives and identity, but an effort to help us convey our stories in a more effective manner." Another student commented that I "pushed [them] to [their] limits, but only as writers" and that I "forced [them] to fill in the holes and if [they] couldn't to abandon it all together." Since I was not there to judge content, the other students were not either; instead the students themselves began to judge the content and validity of their own stories *only*, and to rely on others to remind them they were not writing for themselves. One student said, "I had other peer writers to count on." Another wrote that, she "wanted [her memoir] to be broad and touch many people for many reasons." Students chose their topics freely, and left the value of their writing and their chosen stylistic and structural elements up to the class to determine.

One student grew fond of the metaphors and similes in the published excerpts we read and felt that employing them would make her memoir "more tangible for others." Another reflected on how literature had influenced her life and chose to "incorporate bits and pieces of stories" she'd read. One attempted to include journal entries and song lyrics in her story but learned they did not work well, and instead chose a "subtle thread." That student's thread, as she wrote about

her first sexual experience, powerfully likened her to a blow up doll, and became less subtle near the end, as demonstrated in these two excerpted paragraphs. Note that the antagonist is referred to throughout by a pronoun employed as a proper noun:

Four years later, I still have times when I feel like that blowup doll. In every sexual experience that I have had since Him, I still liken myself to some blonde whore with her mouth wide open—the shape of an O pursed on my lips. In the midst of a man’s touch, I defeat myself and lie back and become whomever he wants me to be. It doesn’t matter whether I want the attention; I will let a man do whatever he wants with me because I don’t think that what I want matters anyway. I am truly broken, and I have no idea how to fix it. I am not sure if it was Him who broke me, or if this all comes from something from long ago—deep inside. But, I can’t seem to stand up for what I want. I just want to give everyone else whatever they want, because I hate to disappoint.

No, I certainly do not think about Him every day anymore, but in a way, I still carry Him with me. I am reminded of Him each time another man reaches over and pulls me closer to him, whispering lies into my ear. He will kiss my lips, but I will never kiss back. His mouth seems to be drawn down my neck, and his hands slip down to touch me and too often up to grab at my breasts—and I say nothing. It is all familiar, it is all the same. But one thing is different: my friends have never left me behind again. They drag me from these situations or prevent me from getting into them at all. I am the inflatable blow up doll; I can easily be carried from place to place, but when it comes time for me to use my legs—get up and walk away, I know that I am merely plastic.

This student’s first sexual experience was, in her mind, akin to date rape. But when she first started sharing her writing about it with the class, it was unclear to the rest of us exactly what had happened. With a subject as powerful as date rape, where society often finds the lines drawn quite blurry even when they are not, often to the victimization of one party or the other, the class knew it was treading on tenuous ground when discussing the writing. But as the story was unfolding, it was unclear whether the male perpetrator had been at fault in quite the way the writer believed, because the details emerging from the text did not appear to support her own perspective. Through our criticisms of the text, a painful reality for the writer surfaced: her passivity in the situation had actually contributed to the outcome, even if it should not have. This painful realization led to further realizations about her personality and behavior. The day she arrived at the analogy of a blow up doll, the class and I were astounded. The amount of self-reflection, self-discovery, and self-deprecation involved in the conclusion, as well as the written power of such a comparison, demonstrated a great journey, personally and in writing, had taken place. The student was also aware that her journey was incomplete. She reveals her uncertainty: “I am not sure if it was Him who broke me, or if this all comes from something from long ago—deep inside.” She demonstrated an understanding that neither the event nor her life could be treated as tidy and complete. This honest recognition is often part of what is appreciated in a successful memoirist.

This excerpt, written by another student, demonstrates attention to detail and mature insight seldom associated with college writing:

There's no such thing as marital bliss. It's a myth created from Hollywood movies, romance novels, and church officials trying to con people into marrying in order to save them from committing the ultimate sin of sex before marriage, of having sex before God says it's okay to do so. To claw through the myth is to reveal the reality that married couples face once they cross the threshold, and enter the transitional period of sharing a household. Marriage is messy. Married couples do not live under the pretense of bliss. And if they go into it expecting it to be that way, the illusion is quickly broken when they find themselves awkwardly adjusting to a life together rather than the life of frequent intervals of separation and integration that they experienced when dating. They find the idiosyncrasies that they never knew the other possessed: Leaving wet towels upon the floor, not cleaning the sink after shaving, leaving dirty dishes to sit in the sink until somebody takes the time to wash them. But it's not just that. Reality lies in the disgusting portion of humanity that is so conveniently left out of fiction: bowel movements, vomiting, scratching, nose-picking, q-tip swabs, tampon wrappers, toe nail clippings found in the waste basket, and toothpaste build-up that's been forgotten in the sink during the rush of the day. These do more to stimulate disgust than any form of romantic intimacy found in books. But you learn to maneuver around these things, to not let them interfere with your marriage, like I learned to do.

This student was in her early twenties, yet the insights evident and details selected demonstrate not only maturity, but a sense of humor about the ordeal of marriage that one would expect from a much older person. The development of her sense of humor about her experience and her ability to convey it were a supreme accomplishment. When her writing began, she was depicting her ex-husband as someone entirely unlikable, loathsome even, as a divorcee is likely to do, but when confronted with such writing about a marriage and a divorce, a primary question of the class quickly turned to the writer: then why did you marry him in the first place? If readers were going to find the text believable and be invested in it, they had to understand the narrator. In the end, this student had to not only recognize the painful fact that she had once loved her ex-husband, but to acknowledge and convey those emotions and her ex husband's positive qualities to her audience. She then had to attempt to figure out exactly when the "marital bliss" became a marital reality, and then a marital dissolution. The analysis of her own life was difficult but fruitful, because she was eventually actually able to not only see, but to convey the humor inherent in the banalities of a shared daily life to her readers.

The process of writing was challenging for many, but it was not only the process of writing, but of memory:

Remembering is not something I enjoy. Remembering only makes me furious all over again. The disgust and bitter hatred I have poisons my veins still. You might wonder how one can be so dense, but I believe that we all become blind to venomous

engagements, continuously rationalizing our actions to ourselves and others. It usually takes a life-altering, shattering event to smack us awake. For those of you who have the ability to see clearly through your emotions, I admire you. For those of you who actually listen to the valid advice of others, I commend you. You have once found yourself in the situation of abuse, neglect, despair, but rejected it before it consumed you. For the rest of you like me, you have my empathy.

Great storytelling involves honesty, even when the piece is fictional. It involves even more honesty when it's a memoir, but whether fiction or non-, part of what connects readers to the authors they love is recognizing their own flaws and foibles in someone else. While the above excerpt may not demonstrate the same sort of resolution as the first two, it does reveal the reality of the places we are willing to go and the weaknesses that take us there, and those sorts of admissions have the ability to profoundly connect authors to their readers. The best memoirs are no more tidy than the best fiction. Creative writing not only allows authors and their readers to imagine themselves as better people, but it also allows them to embrace their flaws, if not to understand them, then at least to wholly recognize them.

Conclusion

The community created in this creative writing memoir course had a profound effect on student writing. It freed the students to create stories that were important to them, but it also brought them closer to an understanding of the power of writing and the importance of artistry in the development of literature. The genre of memoir was certainly a significant aspect of the course, but so was the approach, which could be adopted in other creative writing classrooms. When the instructor participates as an equal, while at the same time demonstrating what sorts of criticisms are not only acceptable but expected, the class rises to the occasion. Students want to be led, but they also want to lead. If a teacher can lead, but also allow herself to be led, the bond created and the results evidenced will be worth the sacrifice of classroom ownership. This class became a model example of what I hope to achieve in every class, and I not only saw it, others did as well.

The profound impact of the experience was still evident when the class agreed to give a presentation to our university community a semester later. Upon arriving in the presentation room, the students quickly seized control by rearranging the chairs that sat in a row at the front of the room into a semi-circle. After introducing the class, which now sat partly facing each other and a tiered audience of roughly twenty-five, I stepped aside in order to adopt the role of interjecting occasional questions to facilitate discussion (which had also become my position in

the class by the end of the previous semester). I asked questions such as: 1) What did you struggle with the most while writing?; 2) How did being a part of a community of writers impact your writing?; and 3) How do you think the unspoken oath or circle of trust was created? The students demonstrated for the audience what I had witnessed in the classroom: that creative writing when taught effectively has the power to create the sort of learning environment and the sort of learning that as educators we dream of for every class, but only rarely realize. The remarks of audience members following the presentation revealed their amazement about the bond they had witnessed. The students' bond was not only evident, so was their knowledge of the subject matter, and of themselves; administrators, fellow faculty, parents, and other students responded in an equally positive manner about the students' engagement, learning, and, perhaps most of all, collegiality. One student shared that not only did her writing develop, but that she matured. She added that it "was the best course [she had] ever taken" and that it was an "experience that will never be forgotten." That enthusiasm was conveyed by each participant throughout the presentation. It also was evident the students had not only learned about writing and themselves, but about memory and memoirs generally: "I don't think people realize, myself included, how fallible memory is until they sit down to try to write a memoir," one student said. "I think there is always a margin of error in memoirs," said another. And, most profoundly, "I really think that by writing [my memories] down, I allowed myself to forget them."

Despite the evident unresolved nature of the writing sampled here, a number of students did describe the experience as "healing," but the emphasis in the course was not on such, and if healing did occur, that healing was not guided by the classroom or me. Like many English professors, I am not interested in group therapy or group think, I am interested in critical thinking, reasoning, sound analysis, and the powerful execution of all three in writing. If memoir is a source to that end, then the couch can stay, but I will not encourage anyone to lie down on it, any more than I would in any writing classroom. And if the students did not "make genuine art [...] out of life's most horrific subjects" then they at least "cultivat[ed] an artistic rigor that they [could] bring to all of their work" (Perillo 2). The pressure I place on student writers to get it right, to "fix" the poem, essay, or memoir will not be eased, even when the blow by me is shared by spreading it across a community of writers. Perhaps the question is one of physics. When force is exerted in one direction not by one source but by many, the result is even more powerful.

The most telling account of the classroom experience came from a student who explained, "Very rarely are you given an opportunity to experience a class that touches everyone taking part. It was an experience I never thought I would have encountered in my education...it was truly a magical journey for us all." I might add that for the teacher, the magic lies in the opportunity to not only witness an individual's journey in writing, but to be a part of the community which engendered it.

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