

Writing about Our Worst Experiences: Reshaping Memories



Max Ernst's *The Stolen Mirror* (1941)

As many artists have noted, memory underpins imagination. Creating new artistic and intellectual works depends critically on the reshaping of what has gone before.

—Charles Fernyhough. *Pieces of Light*

At our recent MFA residency, I gave a workshop on writing about your worst experience, using a number of examples to illustrate how writers confront personal crises like madness, divorce, stillbirth, and the death of an adult child. To emphasize the role of craft in the nature of the telling, I chose two examples for each subject to illustrate possible approaches. The point I hoped to make was that there is no

“natural” way to write about a traumatic event, no inevitable way of retelling. Choices and strategies can’t be avoided. Memory is only a starting point, and often not reliable. What results is, in effect, an inevitable reshaping that involves re-imagining and re-detailing.

My choices for stillbirth were passages from two memoirs, Elizabeth McCracken’s *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination* and Ariel Levy’s *The Rules Do Not Apply*. Although McCracken’s embryo had been declared dead, she still had to go through a delivery, in her retelling focusing on what other women had told her about stillbirth and on her concern that she might upset the pregnant woman outside in a waiting room. She doesn’t address her own feelings, at least not directly. Levy, on the other hand, uses a very different strategy. Hers was not a literal stillbirth. The premature baby lived briefly outside the womb. Her telling focuses on precise observation of the visual details of the child in her hands and, to a lesser degree, on her uncertainties about logistics, such as what to do about the umbilical cord. Contrasting approaches to the same harrowing experience, both avoiding explicit rendering of their emotions.

My choice of the worst experience topic was not merely academic, which is why I used examples about madness. Just a few weeks before, *Broad Street* magazine had published my essay “Commitment,” about the trials of coping with the extreme psychosis of my first wife, Judy. Living through the experience had been a hell. But writing and revising an essay about it had been a process of seeking an opening tactic, choosing and arranging incidents as best I could recall, finding words and images—essentially absorption into the strategies of a creative process, not unlike writing a completely fabricated short story.

Vivian Gornik, in *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, distinguishes the events that are the starting point for the act of writing from the representation

that results:

Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say.

But while fiction allows the writer's persona to exist in the background, memoir places the writer himself or herself in the foreground. Gornik calls it an "unsurrogated" persona and explains the demands on a writer of revelatory nonfiction: "The unsurrogated narrator has the monumental task of transforming low-level self-interest into the kind of detached empathy required of a piece of writing that is to be of value to the disinterested reader."

The Dilemma of Memoir

That certainly was my dilemma in writing "Commitment." How would I provide vivid descriptions to convey what I remembered experiencing and turn them into meaningful insights? Ironically, though I was hoping to give the reader an emotional frisson, I—while composing—was compartmentalizing, concentrating on finding effective words rather than reliving the decades-old agonies. Yet reading the magazine's proof months after completing the essay turned out to be an emotional experience, even though the events had taken place some forty years ago, and I was long remarried. But at this point I was just a reader, not the author.

This wasn't the first essay I had written about Judy; the earlier, called "Fade Far Away," was based on the intense presence of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* in our lives. The relationship and the title choice of another phrase from Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" had become the basis of my deliberate essay design. (When that work was selected as a "notable" in *Best American Essays*, I felt an unease about

exploiting pain for praise.) With "Commitment," a title I had long been contemplating before the actual writing, I worked with the ironic dichotomy of commitment to marriage vows and commitment to a mental institution. It became the basis of my strategy.

Living with the nightmare of Judy's madness had been, by far, the worst experience of my life. Yet, for me, writing about it was inevitable, just as many other writers find themselves drawn to creating poems, essays, stories, and novels about their most distressing times. An old saw among writers is, everything is material. Even, or perhaps especially, trauma. While non-writers often can't stop replaying the worst in their brains, writers use the page to recreate the awful, much like picking at a scab. Some have to do it immediately, while it's still raw, others—like me—decades later or on several occasions over the years.

During our MFA residency, for example, one colleague read the opening section of a book about her husband's dying at age forty. Another read the beginning of a memoir about being harassed by her graduate school mentor, and her anger at university officials who, unable to deny her evidence, badgered her into silence about it.

Other colleagues in the audience had published essays about topics such as their father's suicide and their own teenage indiscretions. Students I've worked with have also written about the painful deaths of spouses, about the abuse of a dead spouse's family, about post-traumatic stress from serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, about recovering from addictions. These are only the examples I'm aware of, certain many others exist.

Why Do We Do It?

Why do we dredge up emotional pain? Why do we spend so much time immersed in reliving the most terrible times of our lives, times most people strive to suppress? Why don't we just

cry and scream?

Regarding screaming, I recall what I had been told about a former faculty colleague, a clinical psychologist with a private practice. He was an adherent of Arthur Janov's primal scream therapy, treating a patient who had dropped her infant from an upper story apartment window. Every visit, she came into his office and just screamed and screamed and screamed.

Although some writers may have screamed their own distress, as I once did, that's not sufficient for individuals with a commitment to finding words for emotions. Rather than screaming, we seek the language and the craft strategies to present our greatest unhappiness. The process is not simply a matter of writing as therapy, a raw verbal outpouring, even though that might be a help to non-writers desperate for immediate psychic relief. Those writing for therapy are really just pouring feelings onto paper or screen, seeking a release rather than—like the serious writer—seeking to produce a creative work. The writer knows first and foremost that he or she is seeking methods to best convey the core of the experience, and make that core resonate with a reader.

Some writers certainly have deliberately written about worst experiences with a goal of emotional consolation or even healing from a trauma. And some may be unaware that such ends lay behind their creating. Whatever the writer's goal—relief, healing, or just a crafted memoir—the writing itself cannot avoid revision, embellishing, and reorganizing the materials evoked through acts of memory. While any person who relives a worst experience is involved in a similar process, that person is almost always unaware of the shaping. Writers do it consciously and deliberately as they employ literary techniques to turn life into art.

Remembering as a Creative Act

When we write about our worst experiences, we are, of course,

accessing memory; but memory is not a reliable tool. What we retrieve from the dark nights of our souls is some recollection of emotional anguish and some sense of the events behind that anguish. Such recollection is far from an exact replication of what actually took place.

The way we remember—as the psychologist and writer Charles Fernyhough explains in his book, *Pieces of Light*—belies the common notion of retrieving a literal reproduction stored whole in some mental file cabinet. Each remembering, in fact, is a recreation from the bits and pieces stored in different areas of our brain. Remembering itself is, in essence, a creative act. Fernyhough writes:

The truth is that autobiographical memories are not possessions that you either have or do not have. They are mental constructions, created in the present moment, according to the demands of the present. ... Memory is more like a *habit*, a process of constructing something from its parts, in similar but subtly changing ways each time, whenever the occasion arises. This reconstructive nature of memory can make it unreliable.

Daniel Schacter, a Harvard psychologist, in *The Seven Sins of Memory*, explains one aspect of this unreliability by noting the impossibility of separating the actual events of the past from all that has happened in one's life since then. In effect, memory is an interaction of past happenings and ongoing inputs derived from our later happenings:

We extract key elements from our experience rather than retrieve copies of them. Sometimes, in the process of reconstructing we add on feelings, beliefs, or even knowledge we obtained after the experience. In other words, we bias our memories of the past by attributing to them emotions or knowledge we acquired after the event.

In addition to the “intrusion” of new after-the-fact material,

even the roots of the original memory are not contained as a whole in some corner of our brains. Instead, they are scattered throughout a number of different cerebral areas, requiring a reassembly that in itself introduces uncertainties. Fernyhough calls them “close collaborations between the medial temporal lobe circuits.”

While Schacter addresses the “bias” that results from subsequent living, Fernyhough adds “distortion” from the workings of the brain. Fundamentally, it’s impossible for anyone to recall past events with anything like photographic accuracy and reliability (excluding the rare memory savants with hyperthymesia, the ability to recall most details of their lives.) But even a photograph from our past, while compete in itself, is seen through the eyes of our present.

While I suspect that few writers who find words to relate and contemplate their worst experience are experts in the psychology or memory and the functioning of the human brain, they know instinctively that their work will only be an approximation of what “really” happened, not unlike a movie that purports to be a retelling of historical events. But while the screenwriters’ fabrications are conscious choices for dramatic effect, the writer no matter how intent on avoiding falsifications cannot avoid creating something different from the actual events. Beyond matters of selection and organization, even the choice of a single word to describe an aspect of an experience brings connotations unlike those of a different word, and no “right” word exists.

Certainly, the primal-screaming mother who dropped her baby is accessing a raw, excruciating emotion. If she were forced to put what happened into language, the result would be only the shadow of a retelling, probably different each time she constructed sentences.

How Memoir Writers Remember

The novelist Jack Smith recently interviewed several memoir writers for a 2018 article in *The Writer*, “Is the Memoir Market Oversaturated?” Two of the writers address the reorganizations and limitations of memory.

Kate Braverman, author of *Frantic Transmissions to and from Los Angeles: An Accidental Memoir*, states:

Memoirs are not acts of journalism, either. The writer selects from the monumental possibilities, strategizes, omits, truncates, and then surprisingly expands. One examines and revises, denies and exaggerates, and in that active engagement with the page, the unexpected emerges. Memoir writing is about the illusion of truth.

Peter Selgin, author of *The Inventors*, emphasizes the role of imagination:

Among the memoirist’s greatest challenges is to rescue memory from imagination, and to do so with the understanding that the one can’t survive without the other. The trick in writing memoir as faithfully as possible is to be aware of the role imagination plays in shaping our memories, in making them cohere into scenes.

Both writers emphasize the central role of creative choices and the awareness that what will result is not a literal replication, but rather a shaped imaginative work based upon actual events and people.

At our MFA residency, when questioned about their essays and chapters about a worst experience, the authors all noted a detachment, a compartmentalizing, as they immersed in creative strategies to get a reader to share their distress. And they knew what they were producing was a literary approximation. Because the creation was—inevitably—separate from the actual experiences, the biases and distortions of memory were givens. The inevitable choices of vocabulary, selection, and organization made while writing produce additional

alterations.

A New Version of What Happened

Fernyhough goes further in distinguishing memoir from memory. As a conscious art form, memoir is much more detailed and specific, and “vividness does not guarantee authenticity.”

Writing about our worst experiences produces remade memories, which, as Fernyhough and Schacter demonstrate, is true for all remembering, but even more so for the writer aware of consciously manipulating his or her past for literary goals. In a real sense, finding words, images, and relationships results in a new imaginative version of that worst experience.

In light of Schacter’s explanation, any future remembering of that painful event will incorporate the “fabrications” of the written piece as one more influence when trying to reconstruct what has happened since the original. As hard as I tried to capture the “real experience” in my essay “Commitment,” I couldn’t avoid reshaping and, no doubt, recreating. Any of my future attempts to remember those painful long-ago events are now inseparable from the details of my reconstruction.

As much as a writer may strive to recapture the authenticity of how it was, an accurate depiction of awful events, no matter how painful, both the nature of memory and the consequences of craft choices will result in a variation of what actually happened, an echo of experience. The result is not a falsification. Beneath all literary remakings of worst experiences lies the core of something real that shook the writer’s life. When the result is successful literature, the writer has something to say that matters to readers, perhaps not discovered until the process of recreation.