

AFTERWORD



HEATHER TOSTESON

WRITING OURSELVES BACK INTO THE FLOW OF LIFE

Experiences of serious or chronic disease are traumatizing—meaning they exceed our capacity to absorb, integrate, make faithful meaning of life itself, *our* life, for some period of time. So, these experiences of illness also include, whether defined so or not, the distinctive experience of trauma, which is the shattering of our personal narrative. In both experiences of illness or trauma, people hunger for known and trusted ways of being in themselves and with others without any assurance that they can return to them—indeed a conviction that the world they knew, and the ways they knew of being in it—are forever lost to them.

None of us believe at the most basic physical level that life should include death. Our mortality shocks us repeatedly. Our physical vulnerability—to disease and assault—does the same. Deep down we just don't get it. It wakes us at night, our mouths dry and tasting of metal. Raw fear. Suddenly the light has gone out of everything. There is no echo, no shadow, no shiver of purpose to our world. We rebel. We cry out in protest. We use narrative for its most basic purpose—to draw us back into the flow of life, the human continuum. This happened! It really happened! And then this. And then this. We begin, almost without noticing it, to enter into the familiar, consoling, faithful rhythms of story.

Narrative writing is of particular use when we are trying to absorb certain dimensions of illness and trauma because it both bounds our experience and unites it with the experiences of others. If we write those narratives down, we do so because we are fed by the idea of lasting words—their meaningful flow, their shapeliness, their common nature. If we write, we can read ourselves, as we have read other authors, back into the flow of life. We can rebel against the deep inhuman quiet that has come to surround us, this place where we believe deeper than believing that no one knows the trouble we have seen. Absolutely no one at all. We begin to write ourselves

back by becoming our own first reader. Or perhaps we hear ourselves clearly at last only after our words have been absorbed by many other eyes and ears. We may be the very last to hear what we are really saying. But hearing is where it's at. For that we need to return. Written words allow us to do so.

Catharsis is one of the first benefits of creative writing. We write to know what happened to us, to bring feeling and sensation back together, to let those little strands of thought that the body is spinning—metaphors, symbolic certainties, old wives'/New Age tales of complicity with our disease—to untangle, furl out in a strong wind. *Why?*, that wind howls even when we whisper. *Why me? Why this? Why now?*

When we put our words down on paper, something happens to our experience of our experience. We realign with time even if our inner narrative feels chaotic, shifting, shattered. We create a point of return—the one where our pen first touched the page. A still point from which we can, once again, begin to move our world.

My comments here concern two dimensions of narrative writing that are helpful in integrating traumatic experience for anyone—professional writer or not. The first is the containment afforded by words put down on a page, separated from us, made concrete, manipulable. Other. The second is the role of craft in moving us beyond discharge to a deeper, more complex, mysterious and fluid understanding of our experience that allows us to accept it in all its uniqueness and also see it as part of the more general human condition. Both. Simultaneously.

CONTAINING WALLS

Illness and trauma bring into question the nature of life, the fragility of our physiology and psychology, our identity, the definition of our social value, causality, death. All the small stuff.

One of our first uses of writing is to *fix* the experience. Pin it down. We do this by putting the words outside ourselves—on the page. Something that can be read. Something that can be put aside. Bounded. Ordered. We try to make sure we have the particulars in place. Even if we don't dare see what they are adding up to. What really happened to us? Exactly? How many days were we in that bed? How many stitches close that incision in my belly? What color are the eyes of my elderly father who no longer knows me? What thought flashed through my mind just before that fist found my cheek?

Each genre is especially helpful with some part of our first effort to define our category-shattering experience. Poetry helps us, as Garcia Lorca says, become a professor of the five senses. Something especially important when we are reclaiming the body. Meaning can shiver around us, implicit but enfolded in perception, scent, sound, weight, texture. Until we can recall fully, safely, no interpretation is reliable. Simply by being as present as possible we are doing the essential groundwork needed for all that follows, sensory impression by sensory impression.

In addition, poetry helps us express that feeling of eternal present, a single moment of sensation, insight, that expands infinitely—a very distinctive dimension of traumatic experience. Time stops dead for us at these times. However the act of trying to describe these moments, to find the accurate image or metaphor, however surprising, apt but illogical, also invites us into relation with new, possibly more life-giving categories. For to describe these sensory impressions, we relate them to other sensations, other experiences. And these associations open up a whole metaphorical world for us; they both ground us and begin to shed light forward and back. (Think of Darlene Montonaro's description: "But today my heart/is straight backed, little nuns/lined one after the other/across the EKG sheet,/heads bowed,/penitent.") By simile and metaphor, we bring to consciousness the sense and nonsense our body is continuously spinning through us. We begin to use that thread. The very idea of death as a feral cat we are trying to bag opens up a new way of understanding the concept and the vividness of our response to it.

Memoir helps us weave the experience back into time and, more importantly, back into our own identity, our self-narrative. "I would take it all if I could have my old husband back," Joan Potter writes. But we can't. We can have the one we are seeing as if for the first time. We can have the new response that flows, if we can only know it, from everything that came before. We can review the steps—internal and external—that have brought us to this new mountain top, chemo ward, or sweet gesture. Step by step. Old self and new self become, once again, a continuum. We can begin to talk to others again out of a sense of inner coherence and narrative integrity. From where we are now, not who we were then. Memoirs, like essays, are about thinking our way into intellectual coherence again, firmly embedded in our biographical context. *Then* and *because* are equally potent terms.

Cinda Thompson captures this combination in the close of her

memoir:

The child in Room 210 awakening from the velvet dark of a coma, not-so-simply, and rather too suddenly, simply came "of age". However, at this point in her life, she had no words to express or describe the sudden deep river she felt sweeping through her. The might-be-meanings of my "diagnosis" seemed beyond me. Indeed, I began to toy with the concept of "meaning" altogether. Meanwhile, the whisper of elevator doors opening and closing to shafts of light, shafts of dark gave me a rhythm for "recovery," and one day I bolted from my bed to run through them. To be carried down to the outside world. The world as I'd known it, now on some other level.

Short stories, even when they are lightly disguised memoir or autobiography, can bring us more fully back into social focus. They link us with the continuity of story itself—which assumes abrupt breaks in our understanding of life are catalysts, the engine of narrative. Stories assume that life happens, to all of us, story-teller and reader. Whether we like it or not. And that it requires response. And that those responses differ, blessedly, from person to person, point of view to point of view. And that through the telling, event by event, a new creation comes into being, point of view by point of view, that isn't any one of those individual stories but something larger, stronger, more liberating and meaningful when they are all brought together. Story, as story, helps bring our own experience, however devastating, into relation to what we feel is life-like, essentially human, communicable. Cradled in time. Then and then and then a story goes, and we are securely within the envelope of circumstance. We feel solaced by the essential shapeliness of existence that story presumes, the sweet promise of meaning, as people have been since the beginning of once-upon-a-time.

Sara Lippman in her memoir, "The Dying Tradition", which has some of the expansiveness of story, captures this sense of continuum:

The ICU waiting room smells of apple juice and French fries; it is filled with married couples and families. They pace the linoleum and sink into chairs, they bury faces into necks, they blow noses, they have begun the long slow process of grieving. Children kick over towers of blocks. A woman sobs into her cell phone. All of them have been robbed, their loved ones stricken abruptly by accident or prematurely by disease. I stare up at the television monitor. The picture quality is poor but through the static I can still make out the soap opera I knew well in my childhood. My grandmother is ninety-four years old. she has seen me fall in love; she has seen me get married. I am the luckiest girl in the world.

FLOW

Our first use of writing is often to create a containing wall for experience—by what we choose to write about and the genre we choose. But creative writing can also expand our sense of the shifting meanings of experience, make it safe to see more, feel more, and, sometimes, know less. The structure of literary forms can make it safe to liberate new meanings, to bear the larger implications of these life transforming experiences that we have not voluntarily chosen. Writing can return voluntariness to us by moving us from involuntary reaction—discharge—to craft, where experience is not just contained but seen as in some way neutral, the *stuff* of life. Stuff that can be, unbelievably, graciously, shaped and shared as a gift of redeeming beauty.

Writing that remains only discharge, whose purpose is solely to reattach us to the very real, up close, and personal isn't taking full advantage of what writing can offer us. My assumption is that the more whole, rounded, and multivalent our experience *of* our experience is—the more we know it as irrevocably intimate and unique and simultaneously common, the more it enlarges our compassion for ourselves *and* for those around us. Focusing on the craft of writing can help bring us to this second stage of integration.

Intentionally shifting genre can help us expand our experience. What happens when we break out of a well-practiced story—either tragic or comic—and let the sensory details cast their own symbolic shadows, ones that we may not even recognize? What happens when we take a story that is concealed memoir and make it explicit memoir—change "he" or "she" to "I"? How do we know ourselves differently? What direct conversations in the real world are we now more open to? What connections are we invited to clarify? What literary conventions have we, perhaps, been misappropriating? Have we affected a neutrality toward our 'character' that we cannot afford toward ourselves? Have we sentimentally inflated the importance of the experience? Have we, worse, denied ourselves and those around us compassion?

What happens, on the other hand, when we open a memoir couched as story to the expectations of story—deepen that saving fiction and think about it in terms of narrative structure, the introduction of other characters and points of view? Know it as part of the continuum of human stories, not just our own self-narrative? Does our sense of identity falter or feel strengthened by the three-dimensionality we introduce by meeting

the expectations of story for multiplicity of perspective and meaning? What happens when we imagine a completely different person experiencing what we just have? What if we see ourselves and our experience and our meaning-making through the eyes, ears, and hearts of our children or spouses or a stranger on the street?

What genre we choose to write in has a powerful effect on how we understand and bring our experience into relation to ourselves and to others. We don't have to restrict ourselves. The same experience can be explored through poetry, memoir, essay, story. We learn something different each time. We can choose, through choosing a genre and respecting its expectations, different dimensions of our experience to explore—sensations, thinking, sense of identity, social embeddedness.

The social context in which we write and share our writing has a powerful effect on how we understand our experience as well. We don't have to restrict ourselves here either.

Often when we are trying to understand physical illness, we need to shut everyone else out—to give voice to an experience that is essentially mute, which does not yet know language. What *is* the word for this dark solace whose boundary is constantly expanding, collapsing? What *is* the word for the sweetness at the center of the most unbearable pressure? We need to hear this new language first ourselves before we can share it with anyone else because the essential ruptures are between our own mind, own imagination, own body. We can become our own first reader, at our own pace, and share with others only as we feel this new experience has been integrated in us. Knowing that there is something in us large enough to hold our own experience is sometimes the greatest hearing of all.

Other times, however, especially in cases of abuse and rape, the division of mind and body is socially created. Done to us by someone with a distinct name, a distinctive face. Essentially similar. Essentially different. In such circumstances, the question is finding the right words—*your* right words. Not the words you were originally given, words that tied you to the frames of belief, the affective relationships that justified this behavior—or the words that rejected those beliefs and relationships completely. Many of the writers in *Terror & Transformation* are looking for the language that moves them faithfully beyond the language of perpetrator and survivor. In such circumstances, sometimes the writing needs to develop in a more fluid, immediate dance with other writer/readers who share the same need

to explore, not just contain, the experience. People who honor your need to be accurate to your own experience, however ambiguous and ambivalent it is. Who can hold you in good faith as you explore the difficult dimensions of your own truth—today and tomorrow. A truth that changes as you do.

Writing groups or writing partnerships can, in our process, hold us in good faith at difficult times, provide the containing wall, the absorbing ear, while we find our first true sound and lose it, whether or not it forms into speech. They can walk with us through that first discharge to something that is shaped, communicable, beautiful. Knowing that there is a real live, present community that can hold your new, internally authenticated, difficult, ambiguous story can help you to bring that story to voice. Here the distinction between these two steps of containment and flow, catharsis and craft, are important. Craft should and can be used to increase the ambiguity and complexity and exactness of our experience. It is not enough just that life happened to us but that we responded to it in full, with all our distinctive gifts and our most common humanity. A wonderful writing teacher of mine, Jack Matthews, expressed this as the distinction between articulation (coming to language) and communication (coming into communion with others).

For writing about illness and trauma to be healing we need to end up honoring both how unique our experience is *and* how it unites us, in all its uniqueness, with what is most deeply human in others. If it doesn't reunite us with others—and with the constantly changing flow of meaning—it doesn't help us become larger, more resilient. For writing to do its healing we need to consciously embrace these essentially faithful assumptions of narrative: our experiences have meaning; that meaning can be shared; and we can, individually and together, bear to know what we know, return to it, learn again from what we have recorded as if it came from the mind and mouth of someone else. We can read ourselves back into the flow of life. We can be read back into the flow of life by others, as they can do the same for us. This is a more fluid, spacious form of containing. Craft helps us separate each expression of an experience, each coming to understanding, from our self identity so we can continue to change, our understanding of our experience can continue to change, the context in which that experience is held can continue to change. Life can continue to flow in and through us, provoking, assuaging, changing, changing, changing but never letting go.

