

# Narratives of Pain: Trauma and the Healing Power of Writing<sup>1</sup>

Lisa Tyler

*If he wrote it he could get rid of it.  
He had gotten rid of many things  
by writing them.*

—Ernest Hemingway (491)

Anyone who has taught students to write personal experience narratives has read narratives of pain—dark, horrifying stories of deadly car accidents, miscarriages, suicides, domestic violence, sexual abuse, life-threatening illnesses, and the loss of family members. In an article poignantly titled “What My Students Know is Hurting Them,” Ann L. Clark contends that in her experience, we community college instructors are perhaps more likely than instructors at universities to read essays on these subjects; certainly we seem very willing to write about them (see for example Clark; Morgan; Tinberg; Valentino). But it is assuredly not *just* community college instructors who face this situation. When specifically prompted to write about trauma, students at Southern Methodist University (who might reasonably be described as a fairly privileged population) produced stories of “profound human tragedies” that “stunned and depressed” the researchers conducting the experiment (Pennebaker, *Opening Up* 43-44). Carole Deletiner, an adjunct lecturer at Hunter College, writes in *College English*:

It's only a few weeks into a new semester and I know who the recovering addicts and alcoholics are; I know who's been battered and sexually abused; I know who's ashamed of being Salvadoran or Russian, of being from a welfare family; who had a child when she

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was fifteen; who dropped out of high school and has never told her husband. (813)

As Deletiner herself acknowledges, “The line gets blurred between professional and personal when people open themselves up to you in this way. The departmental description of English 120 covers none of this” (811).

In response to Deletiner’s plea that her students “write the pain” (817), Cheryl Alton worries that it is irresponsible of instructors to request such writing: “Whether we wish to or not, we become personally involved with confidences and dilemmas that we have not been adequately trained to handle. . . . Could my comments unwittingly push that potentially suicidal student over the edge?” (667). The emotional nature of the papers can sometimes result in writing of poor quality, she contends, and she is reluctant to grade these emotional outpourings: “I vividly remember one student who came into my office very upset and yelled, ‘My baby is dead and you can only give that a C!’” (667). She goes on to recount an anecdote about a student writing about killing someone and serving jail time; a psychologist friend, “perturbed at [her naiveté],” points out that his choice of subject could have been a threat, that he could have been a psychopath, that she as his instructor could have been in danger (668). There is, she insists, “a very fine line we educators should be aware of, but never dare to cross” (669). A second response, from Kathleen Pfeiffer, echoes this one, only more vehemently, saying, “We are teachers, not therapists” and contending that “What [Deletiner] teaches in this weepy world of confessions and revelations is a fundamentally egocentric sort of self-absorption” (671).

Alton and Pfeiffer are not alone in their uneasiness about the morality of assigning autobiographical writing. Dan Morgan raises similar issues in an article in *College English*, mentioning another paper describing a murder as well as other papers describing students’ attitudes which disturb and horrify the instructor. “As a teacher, how do I negotiate my written responses?” he asks, elaborating later, “So . . . do I work to help this student write a *better* paper about how a person should continue staying in a relationship with an abusive crack addict?” (320).

In an essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled “The Ethics of Requiring Students to Write about their Personal Lives,” Susan Swartzlander, Diana Pace, and Virginia Lee Stamler express grave concerns about this practice of asking students to write personal experience narratives. They argue that students feel pressured to write about painful experiences in order to be eligible for the top grades and that writing about trauma can cause further trauma. They are particularly concerned that “students who have been sexually abused often have difficulty understanding appropriate limits in relationships” and fear that “[s]uch students might respond to a writing assignment by making themselves completely vulnerable or else being extremely distant” (Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler B1). They go on to propose a chilling theory: “Unscrupulous faculty members could use students’ stories as a way of identifying the most vulnerable female students; this is a legitimate concern when we consider that, as some research suggests, about 2 out of 10 women report being harassed by their male professors” (Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler B2).

These charges are admittedly serious, but not unanswerable. Writing about trauma does *not* cause further trauma. As I explain later in this essay, psychologists have conducted several studies in which student subjects were specifically asked to write about upsetting events—and sometimes about upsetting events which they had not discussed with others. *None* of the studies indicated that students who wrote about traumatic events sustained lasting damage. If psychologists, with all of their training in the workings of the human psyche, do not feel unethical or irresponsible in asking students to write about traumatic events, why should English teachers feel unethical or irresponsible if students do so voluntarily in response to a neutral prompt?

Students make *fewer* mechanical mistakes when writing about trauma than they do when writing about trivial topics (perhaps because they are more engaged?) and typically produce writing samples marked by their “quality, organization, and depth” (Pennebaker, “Self-Expressive Writing” 161), so Alton’s concern that the quality of the writing will suffer when students write about upsetting events seems unfounded.

As for Alton’s other concern, confessions of criminal behavior are rare and psychopaths even rarer. Surely most schools have counselors (and perhaps other resources) for instructors to call upon when faced with such a student and such a paper. Morgan offers a simpler alternative: “I have . . . begun to specify to students that I prefer not to see papers dealing with past or present illegal activities” (322).

And while I, too, am concerned about the possibility of instructors preying upon students who write of sexual abuse, it seems to me that there are better avenues for combating sexual abuse than letting it impinge upon academic freedom and letting our fear of its perpetrators limit the kinds of assignments we can make.

Part of what concerns me about these counterarguments is their blatant paternalism. Perhaps this approach plays better in a traditional university with 18-year-old freshmen, a setting in which administrators and faculty are *in loco parentis*; it seems ludicrous in a community college like mine, where the average age of the students is over 30. It seems to me odd that none of these faculty members had thought to ask students for their opinions.

I put some of these materials (Deletiner’s article, the responses to it, and the Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler article) in a folder on reserve in the library and offered students extra credit for writing a position paper on this subject. The papers I received were often remarkably thoughtful and serious (if, alas, not as carefully proofread as I might like), and they presented a spectrum of opinions. One student who was asked to write an autobiography in his freshman year in high school confesses that as the son of a sharecropper he was too ashamed to write the paper. A straight A student until then, he abruptly dropped out of high school (Jones 2). Another student scoffs: “Personal papers aren’t evil or even a real threat to anyone’s life” (Ellinger 2). But the majority expressed opinions like these: “The writing subjects, first of all, should be up to the students. . . . Give students the freedom to choose and do not limit their creativity” (Murray 1, 3). Another writes, “Writing about personal situations shouldn’t be required nor should it be prohibited” (Wade 1). Another emphatically states,

"It should definitely be the choice of the writer as to what he or she wants to reveal" (Manzo 2). It is true that students are not always the best judges of what is good for them. But their voices are so insistent that I think it is necessary that we at least listen to them.

Although we may find students' narratives of pain difficult and depressing to read, there is mounting evidence that writing about traumatic events the way so many students do is good for them. Certainly it has proven meaningful to many professional writers: "Creative writers as diverse as D.H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, and William Styron have all remarked upon the mysterious healing power of self-expression. Writing cannot be reduced to therapy but it promotes both self-mastery and self-healing" (Berman 44). It can also be helpful for suicide survivors (relatives and friends of those who take their own lives) and for those who are themselves suicidal (Berman 48). Citing the work of a student as well as the writings of bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and Michael Dorris, Howard Tinberg contends that using writing to understand traumatic experiences is "liberatory" and "promotes healing and renewal" (284, 289).

After working with a community-outreach writing program for adults with multiple sclerosis, Jacqueline Rinaldi has concluded, "Though writing and revising narratives of disability could not restore the crippled bodies of these writers, the insights gleaned from the heuristics of writing did seem to have therapeutic value for those grappling with the darker issues of chronic illness" (831). In his book *Embracing Their Memory: Loss and the Social Psychology of Storytelling*, John H. Harvey writes that stories are "essential elements of effective grieving" (10) and argues for the development of college and high school courses specifically about writing about loss: "I believe that writing, teaching, and research on this topic will help people, including students, grow in their capacity to be empathic with others and give them greater strength in dealing with their own inevitable adversities" (207).

But in addition to these anecdotal and theoretical arguments, there are also quantitative experiments that prove that writing about trauma has lasting effects on the human immune system. James W. Pennebaker, a psychologist at Southern Methodist University, has conducted a series of experiments to identify and measure these effects. In what is perhaps the most startling of these studies, 50 undergraduates were assigned to write about either trivial topics (describing their plans for the day or the shoes they had on, for example) or "the most traumatic and upsetting experiences of your entire life" for 20-minute periods on each of four consecutive days (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, and Glaser 240). Students who wrote about traumatic events felt depressed immediately afterwards. Nonetheless, on the fourth day of the experiment, they showed a significantly improved immune response (based on the response of white blood cells to foreign substances). Six weeks later, they had visited the health center significantly less often than had students in the control group. And *three months* after the experiment, they reported feeling significantly happier than the subjects who had written about trivial topics (242).

A similar, preliminary study had suggested that students were particularly likely to experience health benefits when the writing they produced integrated a description of the objective facts of the event with a report of their emotional

response—in other words, when they produced a good personal experience narrative—than when they wrote only about their emotions or produced an objective report of the facts alone (Pennebaker and Beall 278). A follow-up study indicated that subjects who wrote about severe traumas (ones which the writer rated at a 6 or 7 on a 7-point severity scale) reported fewer physical symptoms and visited a doctor or the health center less frequently in the two months after the experiment than did students who wrote about less severe traumas (Greenberg and Stone 80).

At the University of Miami, subjects who disclosed more information about their emotions when asked to write about traumatic events for half an hour had more antibodies to latent Epstein-Barr virus, indicating that their immune systems had better control (Esterling et al. 397). A New Zealand study which followed the same procedure outlined earlier included a new step—the administering of a hepatitis B vaccine—and the experimenters then measured levels of hepatitis B antibodies in the blood of the 40 third-year medical students who took part in the study. Students who wrote about traumatic events had increasingly higher levels of hepatitis B antibodies after each writing session (Petrie et al. 790).

College students are not the only ones who stand to benefit from writing. University employees who wrote about traumatic events for 20 minutes once a week for four weeks had slightly healthier liver enzyme effects and significantly lower absenteeism than those who wrote about trivial topics (Francis and Pennebaker 284-85). In a study of professionals (median age: 54) unemployed after an average of 20 years with their former employers, those who wrote about their trauma for 20 minutes each day for five consecutive days were significantly more likely to have found a full-time job after eight months than were those who had written about neutral topics or not written at all (Spera, Buhrfeind, and Pennebaker 729).

Writing, then, has the power to heal: “‘Healing’ is rarely heard in academic discussions of writing and teaching, perhaps because it has become the province of those credentialized to heal: physicians, psychologists, perhaps ministers—but surely not writing teachers. Don’t we already have enough to do?” (Campbell 247). All too often, therapeutic writing is banished to specialized workshops or community writing groups. “Why can’t people write to heal or to develop spiritually *on campus*?” complains James Moffett (260). Charles Deutsch, director of the Harvard-based National Committee on Higher Education and the Health of Youth, echoes this plea. He concedes that “health remains at the margins in most educational institutions” but insists, “If your college is about learning, then it’s also about health. What is it doing to create an environment that encourages healthy practices among its own students?” (25).

Teaching students about the healing power of writing is consistent with the classical rhetorical tradition: “Since antiquity, rhetoric has aimed, ideally, at the emotional as well as the moral and political health of its audience” (Baumlin and Baumlin, “On the Psychology” 93). In a pair of closely related essays, James S. Baumlin and Tita French Baumlin contend that *mythos*, which they define as including narrative and other forms of literary discourse (“On the Psychology” 108), is—along with *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*—a fourth proof of rhetoric. Its aim is

iatrology, which they define as “therapy” (“On the Psychology” 109) or “an uttering of healing words” (“On the Psychology” 93). They point out that Plato and Aristotle recognized this kind of proof, Plato implicitly through his use of the myth of the cave, for example, and Aristotle in the *Poetica* (“Psyche/Logos” 257), and that it is fully consistent with Jungian psychology. They call for modern rhetorical theory to expand its definition of rhetoric to include iatrology and thus recognize the value of “a healing story, a means of participation in the rhythm of the universe, its contrasting joys and pains” (“Psyche/Logos” 257).

Healing is not, of course, our primary responsibility. But it *is* consistent with our commitment to learning: “I know, the university feels it shouldn’t play doctor or priest, dirty its hands with therapy and its mind with religion. But if it has real live students on its hands, its hands are already dirty” (Moffett 261).

Clark writes that a committee at her college has identified a “need to revise the topics for the placement and exit essays because the topics currently used resulted too often in material that was ‘too emotional’ or ‘too personal’ “ (249). Her brief essay is a moving plea that we *not* ask students to “write ‘nice’ “: “By requesting such writing, or designing questions that will produce it, we deepen the chasm students perceive between their own writings and their own lives” (250). “Our students write about violence and substance abuse and broken families because they’re writing about what they have lived and witnessed firsthand, what they care most deeply about,” agrees Morgan (324). Deletiner asks, “In whose interest would it be if I insulated myself from the feelings and the histories in the room?” (815). The majority of students do not want to be “protected” in this way.

Like the committee at Clark’s college, Swartzlander, Pace and Stamler offer suggestions for improved writing assignments; they do not particularly approve of compelling students to share their work, for example, and they recommend future-oriented writing assignments about goals and dreams rather than ones about past experiences (B2). But many of my students’ goals are common and prosaic (wanting to pass English, for example, or get a date for Saturday night) or, given students’ current situations, necessarily vague (hoping someday to marry and have children or start a business, for example). Without extensive development (not to mention fortunetelling skills), these topics seem unlikely to interest others. And peer review of papers is an established and valued practice in most college composition courses.

It would perhaps be better to ask students to write about a significant experience and then spell out that it can be either positive or negative. After all, students can disclose painful experiences even in response to “safe, ‘objective’ prompts” about literature (Valentino 274). We should warn students that they will be asked to show their writing to others so that they can choose topics they feel comfortable disclosing to their classmates. Students should know that they can get an “A” writing about *either* traumatic or non-traumatic topics—and that they can get an “F” regardless of the nature of their topic, as well. No one should be *required* to write about traumatic or intensely personal experiences.

In her article “Responding When a Life Depends on It: What to Write in the Margins When Students Self-Disclose,” Marilyn J. Valentino has created sensible, practical guidelines teachers can use to determine how to respond appropriately to students’ anguished self-disclosures. Beforehand, writing faculty should

learn what professional support is available on campus and perhaps in the local community as well, indicate in course syllabi the phone numbers and locations of campus support services, and offer alternatives so that students are not compelled to share their most personal journal entries, for example (278). When reading papers in which students self-disclose, Valentino suggests that faculty “[a]sk questions before rescuing” and notes that sometimes students simply want to express themselves and don’t require assistance (278). For those that do, she suggests that faculty consult appropriate professionals—mental health counselors at the college, for example, or a supervisor—for objective advice. She advocates that faculty members “[k]eep a professional distance and set limits,” cautioning against feeling a need to solve a student’s problems, and recommends adhering to a contract for schoolwork from those in the midst of traumas during the school term (279-80).

Berman describes how to respond responsibly to papers about suicidal impulses as well as those written by grieving suicide survivors. He recommends that teachers respond to discussions of suicide “as empathically and nonjudgmentally as possible” and emphasizes that teachers should notify a campus counselor whenever a student discloses “the possibility of an impending suicide attempt” (49).

In his anguished discussion of how to handle papers in which students disclose embarrassingly personal experiences, Morgan advocates emphasizing audience and purpose “more thoroughly than ever before” (322), encouraging and sometimes insisting that students revise, and selecting assigned readings that would come closer to the kinds of writing our students typically produce: “The students I work with do not write about multicultural encounters or issues of ethnicity; nor do they relate much to shooting elephants or going to the lake . . .” (323). Models that more closely “[reflect] the actual concerns in their lives” would perhaps enable students to produce better papers on personal topics, he believes. Collecting samples of strong and weak essays about painful experiences from past students and allowing students to critique those before writing their own might also be helpful; students find it easier to be critical about trauma narratives when they know the trauma survivor is not in the same room as they do so.

Assistant professor of religious and pastoral studies Alan DeCourcy suggests an ingenious alternative essay assignment that could perhaps be adapted for use in composition courses:

In one course I teach, students write a three-part paper, which begins with reflection on a personal experience of suffering. The word ‘reflection’ is emphasized to stress that they must not simply describe it; they must reflect on it, using a process that they have learned in the course. By stipulating that they will not be asked to share this first part of the paper in class, the importance of privacy is stressed, and the freedom to write what they want is maximized. The other parts of the paper involve taking a second experience of suffering, as presented in a novel or literary memoir, and processing it as they have processed their own; and, finally, reflecting on both experiences from the point of view of a contemporary theolo-

gian, whom they then critique. The academic integrity of this exercise lies in the degree to which it helps students attend to, but also move beyond, the personal, toward deeper levels of thinking, reflecting, comparing, and analyzing. (B12)

DeCourcy's assumption that writing about others is somehow deeper than writing about the self is arguable, however.

"In my day, none of this was covered in graduate school symposia," Morgan writes, a little plaintively (323). He suggests that Valentino's article "should be required reading in teacher-training programs" (319). Making a similar case that future writing teachers need to know more about "the personal, therapeutic, and affective aspects of our field," which she calls "the least talked about and least researched areas of writing," Wendy Bishop outlines the first steps writing program administrators can take to better prepare teachers they train and supervise, arguing, "We need to include these topics and this training in graduate curricula because we need to listen to and respect the affective needs of our writing students and our selves" (np).

Writing about painful experiences is too valuable—mentally, emotionally, and physically—to abandon. For readers, a well written essay about a traumatic personal experience can help us find meaning in human suffering and enrich our understanding of the human condition. Ideally, it can provide us with an aesthetic experience and help us better understand the pain we experience in our own lives. For the writer, it is an act of courage and responsibility, a way of trying to understand and come to terms with one's past. Writing about pain literally has the power to heal, and we should not discourage our students from engaging in such writing projects. The resulting writings are often deeply moving pieces in which the student writers are fully engaged, rather than the half-hearted, dashed-off responses they all too often produce to impersonal prompts.

In an article entitled "When the Classroom Becomes a Confessional," Lucia Perillo is clearly ambivalent about how teachers should handle confessional writings, but she ultimately contends that, if teachers can overcome students' automatic, Oprah-inspired "public support for confession," students *can* learn from their classmates' writings about pain: "The writing lesson offered here is 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" (A56). Her comment reminds me of Berman's essay in which he attributes his preoccupation with fictional suicides to his grief over the suicide of a beloved professor and friend more than 25 years earlier.

Her comment also reminds me of my own resume, which is haunted by papers about trauma—especially the traumas of girls and young women. I have written papers about a 16-year-old girl who falls asleep for nearly 30 years, a girl with an eating disorder, a young woman's date rape, a woman traumatized by her fiancé's sudden death in World War I, a young woman who is sexually abused by her father, women haunted by the voices of internalized demons, and an orphaned young English girl abruptly sent to an emotionally remote uncle whom she has never seen.

I suspect I am practicing what Lenore Terr calls "displacement"—"the trans-

position from one object to another” (210). In her informal analysis of mystery writer James Ellroy, she suggests that in his fascination with the famous unsolved Black Dahlia murder, he has displaced memories of his own mother’s murder when he was 10:

“If I suggested to you that it was too threatening to you as a child to stay obsessed with memories of your mother, so you picked the Black Dahlia instead, what would you say?” I asked.

Ellroy nodded and paused a moment before he spoke. “I’d say you were right,” he answered. (212)

I think I am displacing my father’s death when I was 13—only instead of focusing on dying fathers I am fascinated by the traumatized girl I once was (and probably somehow still am):

Of late, analysts are calling such a move “working through in the metaphor,” a displacement which allows the person to move the conflict from his [or her] current life into an arena which takes on a metaphorical function. Using the “distance of the metaphor,” he [or she] works through the conflict unconsciously without needing to confront in a direct, cognitive way the issues in his [or her] real life. (Allister 98)

I suspect I lack the courage my students have, the courage to write about my traumas without disguise. But all of us are trying, I suppose, to distance ourselves from our pain. Berman calls this idea of writing to save ourselves “writing as rescue” (44).

If we find writing about pain (however obliquely) useful, healing, or otherwise meaningful ourselves (and I suspect that many of us do), why would we deny such writing a place in the classroom, the only place where many of our students will be encouraged to write about their own experiences? We should nevertheless keep asking our students and ourselves the important questions. As Deletiner asks, “Do *I* elicit these personal revelations from students? Or is it something about the process of writing itself that unleashes the anger and the pain that appear in my students’ writing, as well as my own? Writing about our lives, writing in a personal voice, enables us to communicate, but not necessarily with one another. Writing lets us talk to ourselves” (814). ☺

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