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Cover Page Footnote

Laura Milner is an assistant professor in the Department of Writing and Linguistics at Georgia Southern University, a Zen practitioner, and a candidate for a Ph.D. in composition studies at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Her dissertation explores the circumstances under which college students choose to write about loss and the consequences of such writing for the writer, his or her peers, and teachers.

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Laura Milner

Students use their writing to sort through what has happened to them, to make sense of their suffering within the discourses available, to argue for the choices they have made and hope others will make upon reading their essays.

—Michelle Payne, qtd. in Anderson and MacCurdy

Successful witnessing, then, leads to an acknowledgment of many losses: the loss of the experience, the loss of others through death, the loss of a life untouched by trauma, and the loss of the memories and histories of civilizations. Mourning these losses constructs us as individuals and as cultures.

—Cassie Premo

Many college students have suffered traumatic losses by age 18 that we, their teachers, may not have known: the death of a parent, sibling, or friend, or the severance of significant relationships through abuse or divorce. When they find themselves in a freshman composition course, some students choose to reconstruct their sorrow in the presence of peers and teachers, especially when allowed to select their own subjects for writing. They bring these stories to class, where we witness the seeds of change as we read their drafts about what was lost and what remains—about where and who they once were, are now, and may become. When these students honor us by keeping in touch after they leave our classes, we have much to learn from them about the transformative power of writing and its influence on identity. We begin to see, as editors David L. Eng and David Kazanjian acknowledge in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, that loss can be creative and meaningful, and that loss is “inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained” (2). Some students discover, in attempting to

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reconstruct their lives after catastrophic loss, that writing and being read can be essential to survival.¹

During her first semester of composition in fall 1999, Chanda wrote about the unexpected death of her grandfather who had encouraged her for years to continue her education. Seeing her scholarly potential, I recommended her for my honors section of Composition II, where she flourished as a first-generation college student. A few weeks into spring semester, her mother was killed by a hit-and-run driver. When Chanda returned to class, she wrote the following "You" poem and chose to publish it in our *Class Anthology* at semester's end:

You were born in Georgia August 7, 1981
 First and last daughter brought unto Jacquelyn and Robert
 Within the first year of your life you lost your father
 in the last year of your life you have lost your
 grandfather and your mother
 You do know and recognize the plans of God and
 You dare not question His will, but ask
 for infinite strength to carry His will out
 Through your trials you will become stronger
 and through all your loss, love will shine brighter
 You are never satisfied or content with where you are
 because you see vivid visions of where you could be
 With a few frowns and many smiles, you
 realize that you are a soldier
 a soldier trying to stay among the
 fittest and win the wars of life. (Spring 2000)

Within weeks of her mother's death, Chanda was attempting *to compose*—which Ann Berthoff defines as making meaning of the chaos of life—and *to compost* her losses: to contain and transform them into food for her own survival. While writing could not bring her parents or grandfather back to life, it enabled her to articulate and begin to accept her losses and to figure out who she now was and might become, and how.

Later that semester, I asked each student to select a song or poem to share with the class as an exercise in analysis, interpretation, cultural literacy, and connection with each other's lives. Chanda shared a song by R. Kelly that celebrates the mother-child relationship and wrote an essay comparing the singer's feelings to her own. In a reflection letter accompanying her portfolio, Chanda writes:

Losing my mother in the first weeks of second semester was a heavy trial for me, and it will be for the rest of my life. This essay offered me a lot of peace and relief [. . .] though painful to write, it stimulated a lot of growth for me as an individual. I do not want to blow my own horn, but it took a lot of courage and discipline for

¹ For a more detailed explication of the connections between personal and cultural healing, please see my article, "On Writing, Healing, and Wholeness: Personal and Cultural Benefits of Naming What Remains," forthcoming in the comparative journal *Intertexts*, a special issue on cultural memory edited by Meili Steele. Portions of the work of two students, Katie and Chanda, appear in *Intertexts*.

me to actually sit down and write about my mother's death which occurred less than a month before the assignment. It was something that I knew I had to face and deal with, and I chose to do it as a writer!

She concludes her letter this way: "I learned to use rhetoric to express pain, grief, and love at the same time. This changed my attitude toward writing because I have never had to use writing to 'get over' an experience. I realized when my friends and family are too busy, my pen and pad will always be available. I now see writing as a road to recovery."

Over the next few years, Chanda emailed me occasionally about her academic progress, her job tutoring athletes in English, and her struggles socially. In May 2003, she graduated magna cum laude and enrolled in a master's program in counseling. When I asked if she would reflect on the consequences of having written about her mother's death, she quickly obliged:

Writing through a trauma is always beneficial. Many people cannot express themselves orally, and writing is their only sense of relief. Writing helps you think about every aspect of the trauma, breaking your feelings down bit by bit, and that is the only true way to get over things. First we must recognize how we feel, then it is up to us to discover why and deal with it. (Email, April 29, 2003)

She added that sharing her "You" poem and song analysis with her class may have helped others to understand what she was going through and enabled them to support her through difficult times. While she "wasn't happy" to be writing about her mother's death, she found writing to be "a helpful medium that brought additional ears, as well as hearts into my life." She concludes that "writing in general helps me to understand who I am and what I want [. . .]. College was my opening experience to writing and healing, but since I discovered it, I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world."

Similar stories seep up and out every semester, often uninvited. While I avoid asking first-year composition students to write about traumatic memories, a handful each semester choose to do so, and I marvel at their courage. Under what circumstances do we choose to loosen the stories "caught in our throats," as Mary Rose O'Reilley describes the process of writing about memories that, if left untold, tend to block one's ability to learn? (*Radical* 25). What are the short- and long-term effects on the writer, the teacher, and the peer readers of releasing stories of loss into a college writing class? How might teachers move through their own resistance to death and respond to such writing in ways that lead to re-visioning and growth, serving as the busy red worm in the compost bin, facilitating the process of decomposition that turns garbage into flowers? How might we encourage our students to define what remains?

Zen and the Art of Compos(t)ing

Poets have cautioned for centuries that pleasure and pain are interwoven, love and loss inseparable, yet many of us pursue the flow and resist the ebb, hoping somehow to have one without the other. The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that we cannot have joy without sorrow, that the most fragrant rose contains elements of garbage, and the garbage has rose

elements. Likewise, even the happiest, healthiest human beings encounter sadness and despair: "In the way that a gardener knows how to transform compost into flowers, we can learn the art of transforming anger, depression, and racial discrimination into love and understanding. That is the work of meditation" (82). He defines meditation as the act of stopping and looking deeply—actions practiced routinely by writers and writing teachers as we attempt to compose/compost our experiences and re-envision ourselves in the presence of others.

Nhat Hanh has been writing, teaching, and living in exile from Vietnam for more than 40 years—exile being a condition that Rabbi David Wolpe calls "the prerequisite for growth" (36)—and has written dozens of books about mindfulness, anger, peace, and social justice. Instead of running away from the pain of loss, Nhat Hanh and other Buddhist writers encourage us to befriend it as natural and inevitable. Just as decay is essential to the rebirth of the flower, most spiritual traditions agree that suffering is essential to human growth. Zen master Jakusho Kwong says that most of us try to avoid suffering and loss at all costs, seeking instead to be happy and to gain that which we desire: "Even though we understand intellectually that loss is the very mud in our lives that the lotus needs in order to bloom, when it comes to our actual lives, most people still believe loss is the opposite of gain" (128). Like Nhat Hanh, Kwong reminds us that letting go and interpreting pain as gain can provide the impetus for waking up and enjoying the life we're living now.

After the death of his mother in the early 1960s, Nhat Hanh wrote his first book and discovered that "once we have experienced something deeply it is always there for us to touch again" (10). In a Zen sense, nothing is lost or gained, just as in physics nothing is created or destroyed, only transformed:

Separation from loved ones, disappointments, impatience with unpleasant things—all these are also constructive and wonderful. Who we are is, in part, a result of our unpleasant experiences. Deep looking allows us to see the wondrous elements contained in the weaknesses of others and ourselves, and these flowers of insight will never wilt. (49)

Writing is one way of looking deeply, an art that aids in the process of transformation. Using language to compose, decompose, and re-compose images and ideas provides avenues for composting loss; by naming, knowing, and re-framing our sorrows, we have a better chance of transforming them into something useful rather than being defined, reduced, or embittered by them. For both composting and composing, certain conditions may facilitate the transformation of decaying materials or memories into nutrients. Melon rinds and wilted irises will become mulch for next year's garden if contained, watered, wormed, turned, and tended.

Composting happens best when we add new ideas and experiences to the mix of what we already know. One night after reading Ellen Cushman's *The Struggle and the Tools*, I dreamed of my father's death and woke up at 5 a.m. to write the following poem, "Tool and Die":

Daddy worked midnights at the Ford Plant
30 years of tool and die
then Alzheimer's, confirmed by a Vanderbilt autopsy,
finished him before his 65th birthday.

I was one week away from 29,
 a medical writer for *The Tennessean*.
 Three years earlier
 I had recorded the neurologist's prognosis
 in my reporter's notebook
 flipping rectangular pages over their spiral coil
 absorbing the news of Daddy's demise
 as if just another story.
 "Your Dad won't get better," Dr. Petrie said.
 "In effect, he's gone."
 I used the only tools I had for processing this
 my pen and pad
 and like Daddy, my hands, my work ethic.

Now a college writing teacher
 and doctoral student in composition
 my job is composting
 using my pen as shovel, rake, plow
 to heap fresh wounds and words onto the pile
 to cover them with decaying leaves of ancient ruin
 then stir, watch, and wait until eventually
 as if by magic, the pile emits the heat and moisture needed
 to make mulch for daylilies, gardenias, tea olives.

Seduced by the promise of immortality
 even as I know the inevitability of death
 I employ my pen as chisel, scalpel, ax
 to excavate through tunnels of grief and longing
 my own and my students' memories
 wishing I had better tools or smarter hands
 praying my tears might be of some use
 as I attempt to compose, decompose, transform
 the garbage of my life, my Daddy's life
 into roses, orchids, magnolias
 while I'm still alive enough to breathe their fragrance
 still able to meet their fleeting, naked beauty

Contemplating the struggles that many of us encounter in coming to literacy has reinforced, for me, the educational value in attending to "what is," as J. Krishnamurti asserts in *Education and the Significance of Life* (14). Reading Cushman's ethnographic study of literacy along with Wolpe's *Making Loss Matter* has reinscribed, for me, the value in attending to rather than turning away from painful memories, even when the urge to turn is strong: "To make loss meaningful requires courage" (Wolpe 16). Regardless of age, race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or education, each of us lives "as a child of wilderness [. . .] enmeshed in loss, in search of home" (39), that imaginary place where we would feel welcomed and safe forever. Does such a place exist in the land of impermanence and change? As Georgia author Janisse Ray asks in *Wild Card*

Quilt: “What is it in us that wants to return to the dream of childhood, to reenact it or fix it? What is it in us that keeps coming back to that potent place?” (33).

This yearning for security in an insecure world appears often in the essays of first-year college students. In ten years of teaching composition at a public university in southeast Georgia, I have witnessed countless students wrestling with their grief for homes they have lost or their desire for homes that exist only in their imaginations. Every semester, several students choose to write personal narratives or poems about the death of a friend or family member, even when assignments do not call for such disclosure. In *Bequest and Betrayal*, scholar Nancy K. Miller acknowledges that a parent’s death, whether dreaded or desired, “is a trauma that causes an invisible tear in our self-identity. In the aftermath of a parent’s death, which forces the acknowledgment of our shared mortality, loss and mourning take complex paths, since our earliest acts of identity are intimately bound up with our relation to the dead parent” (x). Citing dozens of literary and personal examples, Miller concludes that “writing a parent’s death is a way to repair a broken connection” (xi). My students practice such writing and reconnecting almost intuitively, even (or especially?) when they know their stories will be read and revised.

Composting for Health, Personal and Cultural

Since the late 1970s, psychology professor James Pennebaker and other researchers have shown that most people are helped by speaking or writing to someone else about their experience, even if the “other” is not a trained therapist (Anderson and MacCurdy 197). In a series of studies, Pennebaker discovered that survivors of childhood sexual abuse and other traumas who don’t write or speak of the trauma tend to develop more major illnesses than survivors who do express their feelings (DeSalvo 22). Repressing traumatic narratives can be an ongoing stressor which gradually undermines the body’s defenses. On the other hand, Pennebaker found that “confronting the chaos of our most difficult memories and translating them into coherent language can have remarkable short-and long-term health benefits” (24). In his keynote address to the AEPL’s 2002 conference on writing and healing, Pennebaker explained that writers, whether college students or prison inmates or otherwise, tend to “self-dose” when writing about painful memories. Accordingly, they will stop when the pain becomes too great, and, even if they cry or feel upset temporarily, the long-term benefits are unmistakable (Pennebaker). How many composition teachers have had to rush a student to the hospital for over-dosing on writing?

Researchers agree that the key for writing and healing is twofold: writing detailed accounts, linking feelings with events, “so it’s not just writing as catharsis, writing to vent, but describing the feelings, then and now, associated with traumatic events” (DeSalvo 22), and sharing it with readers in a safe, hospitable space. Trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub agree that the role of a reader or listener is critical in the survivor’s recovery process, just as truth-telling is essential to personal and cultural recovery from trauma.

Many spiritual writers have pointed out that “we are the victims NOT of what happens to us, but of what we THINK about what happens to us” (O’Reilly, *Radical* 10). A college English teacher for 30 years and self-proclaimed Buddhist-

Quaker-Catholic, Mary Rose O'Reilley notes that if we can teach writing in ways that encourage students to tell their own stories, "maybe we can keep [them] from getting sick" (11). She continues:

If one is aware of storytelling as a way of being present in the world, one soon becomes aware of its opposite: not telling. If we can't tell our story, if it's caught in our throat, it seems to block our spirit's longing to participate in the world. At an extreme, we can't reach out at all. And everybody [. . .] has a story or two caught in the throat. (25)

We never know what students are holding or what we give them by paying attention. When someone shares a painful memory, we should "just listen hard and try to be present. It's very bad business to invite heartfelt speech and then not listen" (27-28). As writing teachers, we listen first and respond later to the text, remembering that the student and his or her text are not the same entity. A text is a representation of experience, and the experience is not equal to the writer himself or herself. Texts are relatively fixed and limited, whereas human life is fluid and evolving, always open to revision.

Consider the consequences of denying students the opportunity to write, revise, and share their experiences with readers. O'Reilley suggests that if we can't "pull the weight of these stories off people, it is very hard for them to learn. Such stories linger on the soul like the hungry ghosts of Buddhist legend [. . .]. We have to lift the weight before the student can learn anything. Fortunately, moving ghosts is a team effort" (28). Further, she insists that these are not isolated, solipsistic tales but are connected to cultural and societal trauma: "Personal pain is connected to ancient insult; the wounds of history, racism, war, homophobia, cruelty of all kinds fester unhealed" (38). In making such wounds explicit, bringing them up and out, we may begin to heal, individually and culturally; we may find a way, as O'Reilley posits in *The Peaceable Classroom*, to "teach English so that people stop killing each other" (9). When wounds fester, untended, we see tragedies and their aftermath.

Writing Loss: What Students Say They Gain

Several years ago, perhaps as a result of Chanda's writing, I began to notice a pattern among my students: their narratives of parental death would arise in response to being asked to draw a neighborhood map and to tell, then write, a story from it. In students' initial reflections about writing these stories, and their reflections ten weeks later as part of a portfolio project, students were finding the writing painful at first, but ultimately beneficial. I have collected several essays and reflections from students about the consequences of their writing about loss. The *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning* published my narrative about Steve, a student who wrote an essay about his father's death, then cried in class while telling the story. Weeks later, Steve withdrew from school, raising questions for me about the risks involved in allowing traumatic stories into the classroom. Steve later returned to college, graduated with honors with a double major in engineering and management, married, and is managing a large department store. When I saw him recently, he was beaming as he showed me a picture of his infant daughter: "I'm really happy now," he said.

Tearful classroom moments like the one with Steve are rare, but essays like his that grapple with the premature loss of a parent appear frequently. Although I do not ask students to write about traumatic experiences, a handful each semester choose to write their sorrows. Like ethnographer/teacher Elisabeth Chiseri-Strater, I have discovered that “our relationship also [gives students] an additional interested audience for overhearing their decisions about changing both their texts and their actual lives” (118). In her interviews with students who had benefitted from writing personal stories, Chiseri-Strater notes that one student had used her freshman writing course “to develop a better understanding toward the loss of her mother and her sense of being more adult than most of her peers,” and that their “researcher-informant discussions, which often touched on personal connections” between them, most likely had affected how students saw their own writing and revision processes (118). While my experience is anecdotal, theoretical, and inconclusive, I am interested in learning more about the extent to which writing and releasing stories of loss may facilitate a process of transformation for both writer and witness. Learning more about the conditions for such writing could prepare writing teachers to meet, more humanely and effectively, the traumatic stories our students choose to share.

KATIE: In her neighborhood narrative, Katie describes losing her mother at age 14 after a long struggle with breast cancer and the somber house after her death: “We ate out almost every night. Sometimes I would cook, but it was just too uncomfortable to eat at the table. It seemed so empty. Usually my dad and I would sit in silence, except for a few sentences of idle conversation.” In her initial reflection about the essay, Katie acknowledges that she “used this paper as an outlet for feelings I had held back since the death of my mother . . . if I had the time, there is a lot more that could be said. There is not a day that goes by that I don’t think about my mama. The effect my mom’s death had on me is an ongoing story. It will never have an ending.” Katie cautions her readers, in a comment that echoes Felman and Laub’s sentiment about the incomprehensibility and inaccessibility of trauma, that “the emotions described here differ for everyone when they deal with the death of someone. Also one should not try to relate to this paper because you don’t know how it feels until it happens to you” (71).

Six weeks later, in her portfolio cover letter, Katie says:

This was a hard paper to write. It stirred a barrel of emotions that I had locked away. Never before have I expressed the emotions I felt during that difficult time in my life the way I have in my paper. Not only is this paper one of my finest, it also helped me face a reality I had ignored. Reading my own words made me realize it is okay to say how I feel. I also want to thank you for your response. Your words reassured me that what I felt was normal and that I had done a good job on this paper.

A year later, I saw Katie on campus. All smiles, she said she had broken her engagement to a prison employee and had been accepted to a dental hygiene program in Florida. I asked if she would mind writing one last reflection for my research, and she was delighted. Here’s part of it: “Writing the paper about my mom really has had a lasting effect. Many of my friends have read the paper since then. Many of them cried because my paper told them the things I never could explain.” Her stepmother had asked to read her portfolio and had

complimented her on her work, but her dad “didn’t say a word. I don’t believe it’s because he was mad or anything. I just think we were back at the dinner table afraid to comment. I think about the paper I wrote for your class more than any other paper I have written. I suppose that’s because I think about my mother every day. Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to vent and for reassuring me I was normal.”

DONNIE: Like Chanda, Donnie is a first-generation college student. His mother died of cancer when he was in tenth grade. After drawing a map of his neighborhood and describing some of his memories to a classmate, he wrote an essay about his mother’s dying. Ten weeks later, he writes this reflection:

I must tell you while I was in high school I attempted to write [a similar essay], but I didn’t succeed in expressing my complete thoughts and feelings. I think that our class discussion helped me to uncover these feelings and thoughts that I was hiding in the back of my mind. Writing this paper was very therapeutic for me, and now my mind feels so clear and open. Sometimes sharing your problems through writing or discussion can help relieve pain and sadness.

A year later, he showed up for my composition II class and wrote and published a narrative about the pain of being separated from his own newborn son by the racism of the child’s white grandparents. Donnie sees his son sporadically and continues to work and go to school in hopes of supporting his child.

JANE: During a lively class discussion in her composition I class, Jane described how her alcoholic mother had pushed her down the steps and broken both ankles when Jane was 16, the last of a series of “accidents” that finally drove Jane away from home as a high school junior. In her essay about a neighborhood memory, Jane writes: “I cannot remember ever feeling safe, and that is why I cannot complete this assignment successfully: I feel that one cannot call any place ‘home’ unless she can exist freely there. I could never acquire an accurate self-concept; I was constantly worried that my words, actions, or emotions would catalyze my own demise.” Jane sees her home now as “entirely internal. Within the wreckage of my battered soul, the refuge I continually sought abides.” Ten weeks later in her portfolio cover letter, Jane reflects:

I love the thoroughly exhausting act of giving voice to my deepest fears and most capricious dreams . . . This was no ordinary writing course. I was forced not only to think, but also to feel. I was required to confront anger I didn’t know I possessed, and to discover joy I didn’t know I was capable of feeling. Each paper was a clumsily written epiphany.

She concludes that she is “not the same person that registered for your class. I’ve become a writer. I can’t explain when the transformation began, but I realize now how firmly my growth over the past four months is entrenched in the pieces I’ve written for this class . . . the writing process parallels my life more than I care to admit. Through the act of composition, I’ve learned that I am a work in progress, and that I can revise my story as many times as needed.”

The Writer is Not The Text

Whether invited or not, students bring their losses into class every day, mostly unarticulated. At least since the 1980s, when David Bartholomae challenged Peter Elbow's "expressivist" methods of teaching writing, compositionists have argued that we are not trained as therapists, that personal writing has no place in the college classroom, and that we must teach argument steering clear of the risky realm of personal narratives. Rather than repeat the tired binaries used in debating academic vs. personal writing, why not take the discussion to a new realm that acknowledges the inevitability of loss and the failure of our culture to embrace sorrow with equanimity and courage? Why not explore what happens when teachers and peer readers meet and respond to traumatic stories in ways that facilitate transformation and self-actualization, potentially for everyone involved in the process?

I've seen many first-year students discover a sense of agency after naming, in writing or speaking or both, that which they think has hurt them, saved them, or otherwise shaped their identities. Whether they're writing about loss, betrayal, abuse, or the joy of growing up in a safe, caring environment, many student writers seem to benefit from naming and revising their experiences and having them legitimized by a witness. In fact, "writing about an experience—any experience—inevitably changes it" (Hawkins 225). For years, Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, Ann Berthoff and others have promoted writing as a means of discovering what we think and know and want, as a process of creating knowledge that may remain inaccessible otherwise, knowledge that may change the way we treat ourselves and others. The act of revising a text often facilitates transformation because the text is only a representation of experience, not the writer himself or herself.

As Barbara Kamler says in *Relocating the Personal*, the text is "from you but is not the same as 'you'—it represents a particular way of telling your experience—a representation—a construct" (64). Likewise, in Buddhist terms, the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. In revising our own texts or working with students' texts, we encourage transformation when we ask what is missing, or what is not being said, because "what is omitted may be as important as what is included" (65), in texts and in life, composing and composting. Writing has the power "to transform the text and the way experience is viewed," for in the act of writing and revising narratives, writers "reconstruct and renegotiate their identities" using multiple literacies (54) such as writing, listening, speaking, reading, observing, and revising. This process of reconstructing and renegotiating identities is infinite because much is unknowable, indescribable, and unspeakable. Sometimes "words are an insult to the pain of much experience, or the complexity of it" (O'Reilly, *Radical* 28), yet human beings are compelled to create meaning via language. As Rabbi Wolpe reminds us: "We love, even though we know that the beloved cannot live forever. We create, although we realize that all creation will decay. To be fully human is to stand before death, not ignoring it but not allowing it to undermine the meaning of the time we are given" (213). And facing death, our own or its trajectory through our students' lives and writings, requires courage.

Courage for Tending the Heap

It is not simple or easy to engage ourselves or our students in writing that may lead to healing. It takes courage, hard work, mindfulness, and attention. It is not fun. Administrators and colleagues will not praise us for creating space for personal writing. Yet language lets us live. I opt for what Natalie Goldberg calls “writing down the bones [. . .] writing from our pain [which] eventually engenders compassion for our small and groping lives” (107). I encourage students to write for and from their own lives because the advantages for them and for their peers and teachers are becoming more apparent. Witnessing other human beings in the process of reconstructing their losses and their lives potentially creates empathy and understanding as it prepares the witness for meeting his or her own inevitable sorrows. Sharing our stories is important because, as Cassie Premo-Steele says,

As we witness to the past and as we serve as witnesses for others, we may begin to see how the cords of one story link to the cords of another. This recognition of how our histories are woven together enables a reconnection between people in the present. As we witness to our past, we open the possibility of allowing ourselves to be healed from the past through a healing relationship with another in the present. (9)

When we and our students feel safe enough to write and read aloud our stories, we increase our chances of knowing and valuing each other and of learning to treat ourselves and others well.

Knowing ourselves is the first step toward connecting with others and engaging constructively and compassionately in the world. As Marian MacCurdy says in *Writing and Healing*, “Personal essays begin with the individual but end with the universal, a process which itself creates connections that can heal” (197), a truth echoed by the Buddhist writer Pema Chodron in *When Things Fall Apart*: “Learning how to be kind to ourselves, learning how to respect ourselves, is important [. . .] it isn’t just ourselves that we’re discovering. We’re discovering the universe” (75). The benefits of stopping and looking deeply, as writers, teachers, and human beings, may be more than we can imagine. To practice sitting with sorrow, our own and our students’, may be part of our calling as teachers of writing, as human beings on a path toward the inevitable: death. What do we have to lose? And what might we and our students gain from creating space for compassion and truth-telling? British psychotherapist and Zen monk David Brazier describes the inter-relatedness of all pain: “The suffering in the world is not something for each of us to solve on our own. It is of concern to us all. It is by reaching out to one another that we can respond to our collective pain in a noble and constructive way” (135). When we find the courage to stop running away, the result may be “a profound relaxation in our heart” (135), an experience many of us seek but rarely find.

My pedagogy is driven by the belief that teachers should become the most attentive, compassionate human beings possible. As strong people committed to paying attention to *what is*, as opposed to only *what was* or *what will be*, we encourage our students to explore their own lives within a cultural framework, to bring their stories up and out for examination in the larger world—an often violent place where people wage war over religion, race, gender, sexual orientation, and

cultural differences. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks reminds us that holistic education or “engaged pedagogy” emphasizes well being: “Teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualizing that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (16). Students don’t want therapy, hooks says, but “they do want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit. They do want knowledge that is meaningful [. . .] addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences” (19). Most of our students have suffered significantly, whether they show it or not, and like the adults around them, they have learned to mask, repress, or do whatever is necessary to escape their pain. How can we hope to connect with our students or with each other, much less save the world, if we continue to turn away from suffering?

Reading and responding to students’ personal revelations may make us uncomfortable sometimes, but teaching and learning have long been risky, life-changing endeavors. James Moffett acknowledges that most university faculty resist playing therapist and don’t see the mission of higher education as healing; however, when human beings are involved, personal pain is present, and “unhealed wounds and undeveloped souls will thwart the smartest curriculum” (261). If we fear and resist our students’ written representations of their painful experiences, what are we teaching them? If not with their composition teachers, how and where will they learn the power they have in re-shaping their lives via language, via stories? Janisse Ray echoes Moffett and Pennebaker as she notes:

I know, too, the danger of silence, as well as of leaving things unnamed and unrecognized. By understanding what you feel as love, by naming love, you claim it. By claiming a thing, you give it life. Then when something happens to yank it away from you, you are prepared for the sorrow that befalls. You are prepared to create anew that which is beloved. (47)

The more violent our culture becomes, the more we need to acknowledge the effects of loss, whether individual or collective, on all of us.

In *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, Tom Newkirk addresses the criticisms of those who oppose narrative writing in introductory composition courses. Citing twenty years of reading thousands of anonymous student evaluations of composition faculty, he notes that he “cannot remember one” in which a student complained of being forced to disclose private information. To the contrary, “the overwhelming and consistent comments we see are those of appreciation for the opportunity to write and reflect on life experiences” (18). As for therapy, Newkirk says students do not want teachers to play a counseling role:

These [personal narrative] writing situations can be therapeutic precisely because we don’t act as therapists [. . .] the therapeutic power of such writing may be the experience of having it treated as ‘normal’—that is, writing that can be responded to, critiqued, even graded. Writing may have healing power because [. . .] it is an artifact, a construction, a relatively stable representation of experience. By asking many of the most basic conferencing questions—those that encourage elaboration, reflection, and the exploration of other

perspectives—I believe we can respond sympathetically and helpfully. Paradoxically, the writing can most effectively be therapeutic by not being *directly* therapeutic. (18-19)

New perspectives often arise as part of the process of reflecting and elaborating on loss in the company of teachers, peers, or others bearing witness to the writer's evolving story. Likewise in composting, when the conditions are right and the debris is turned over after a period of decay and integration, everything looks different: the garbage has been transformed by heat, water, and the composter's attention.

What Remains?

We do not need special training to respond humanely and compassionately to human suffering and loss. We do need to create safe spaces and pay close attention, ever mindful of our role as witness. As Goldberg says in *Writing Down the Bones*, "Writing is deeper than therapy. You write *through* your pain, and even your suffering must be written out and let go of" (114). Composing, like composting, enables us to take our emotions and "give them life, color, and a story. We can transform anger into steaming red tulips and sorrow into an old alley full of squirrels in the half light of November" (114). While writing is no panacea, no magic cure, *not* writing is worse. It aids and abets disease. It cripples and silences. It stunts our growth and prevents us from being fully present in *this* place, in *this* time, with *these* people. Writing about loss can lead to growth and empowerment, especially when the writing is voluntary and the readers are able to meet the writer's words and experience with equanimity, offering the intellectual light and emotional heat needed to facilitate the writer's composting effort, a process that works best when contained and attended.

Researchers, physicians, and therapists report that mental illness and suicidal despair are not caused by trauma itself but occur because the survivor can't verbalize what has happened and what has been suffered (DeSalvo 168). Through writing, we adjust our perspective: we move into "an acceptance as whole of what remains" (183). This movement could spell survival for those who have lost a parent or a sense of home, of belonging, in a sometimes savage world. Writing can change us because "through writing, we revisit our past and review and revise it [. . .] we use writing to shift our perspective" (DeSalvo 11). Writing cannot cure us, but it may prolong and enrich our lives. It may give us insights into who we are and how our identities have been shaped by our experiences, especially by loss and the stories we tell about it. Losing a loved one to death, divorce, or misunderstanding can be devastating, for "the more keenly we desire something—a person, a state of being, a piece of our own history—the more savage its loss" (Wolpe 145). While writing cannot return to us what is missing, it may lead us to a deeper understanding of love and an acceptance of the universal nature of impermanence: "Loss, a deep loss, is chaotic, cavernous; it resounds in the hollows of the soul. It rages, and nothing can tame it [. . .] Understanding what we have lost, we can find a place for the memory inside us" (194). In articulating memories that may have remained buried and therefore unknown, yet still a defining force in our lives, we begin the process of turning what was lost into what is found, and paradoxically begin to let go of that which, finally, we have begun to name and know intimately in the company of others.

The consequences of such naming and witnessing may be survival, individual and global. In her essay on the connections between memory and imagination, Patricia Hampl concludes: "There may be no more pressing intellectual need in our culture than for people to become sophisticated about the function of memory. The political implications of the loss of memory are obvious" (190). The memory that sits smothered under layers of denial, grief, and fear has less chance of being transformed into something useful, just as garbage that is not composted takes longer to become fertilizer. Becoming a non-judgmental container for all life experiences—joy and sorrow, birth and death and rebirth—means opening our hearts, for "what loss cries for is not to be fixed or to be explained, but to be shared and, eventually, to find its way to meaning [. . .] we cannot face loss without knowing that we can survive it and make it meaningful" (Wolpe 15). As writers and as teachers, we are called to find meaning in a violent world where meaning often eludes us. ☹

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