Finding the Inner Story in Memoirs and Personal Essays

Michael Steinberg

The comment I find myself making most frequently to my students and to many of the writers who submit personal narratives to *Fourth Genre* is, "The main thing that's missing in this piece is *your story.*" You're probably thinking, here comes another endorsement of those confessional narratives—the ones that give creative nonfiction a bad name. Actually, one of the reasons why I think we're seeing too many of those pieces is because a lot of nonfiction writers are narrating *only* the literal story of their experience, and leaving out the "inner story"; that is, the story of their thinking.

Let me give you a personal example. A while ago, I wrote a memoir called "Trading Off." It was about a four-year struggle I had with a high school coach who might or might not have been anti-Semitic. While I was writing it, I was trying to recall the shame I felt and the humiliation I allowed myself to put up with—both of which, I discovered, were the price I paid for wanting to play baseball for this punitive coach. At readings, whenever I introduce the piece as a baseball memoir, I watch the expressions on the faces of several of the women in the audience. Some roll their eyes, some cross their arms, some even grimace. To them, it's another baseball story, about some poor kid's bad experience with a mean-spirited coach—the kind of jock story their boyfriends or husbands may have told them over and over again.

It doesn't always happen that way, but often enough by the time I've finished reading the piece, the audience's body language has changed. Some people, men and women alike, have figured out that the memoir isn't really about

baseball. Baseball is the setting, the stage for the conflict between the young boy and the coach. The coach is the gatekeeper and the narrator wants more than anything else at 13 to pitch for the high school baseball team. But the more interesting and important story is what goes on in the mind of the narrator as he agonizes over how badly he wants this, at the same time as he's questioning his decision to put up with this coach's tactics.

What he repeatedly asks himself throughout the memoir is "Why am I doing this?" Indeed, why *is* he doing it? What makes him so determined, and so desperate? And how much humiliation is he willing to put up with in order to make the team? Quite a bit, it seems. That's why I titled the memoir "Trading Off."

Often, during the question-and-answer period, or after the reading, some of the same people who initially resisted the piece will tell me their own stories about humiliating experiences they've had with similar kinds of gatekeepers: punitive teachers, abusive parents, cruel childhood friends, and so on. A woman once volunteered that the memoir reminded her of her own teenage struggle with a harsh and demanding ballet teacher.

That's exactly the kind of response I hope for. I don't want the reader to come away from the memoir thinking that it's another "poor, poor, pitiful me" story. I want the reader to feel the humiliation and shame that I did, as well as to understand that I willingly chose to make this tradeoff in order to prove myself to this hard-nosed coach.

But, I doubt that readers—especially the skeptical ones—would have been able to make those personal connections had I written only the literal "here's what happened to me" story.

In her book *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, Vivian Gornick makes this same point when she writes, "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" (13).

When I teach workshops in personal narrative, most students bring memoirs. At *Fourth Genre*, over 75 percent of our submissions are memoirs. There are as many different reasons or impulses for writing a memoir as there are memoirists; some write to tell their story; some write to preserve a family history; some simply want to reminisce.

When I teach the form, I'm always urging my students to go beyond or probe beneath the literal story. My own editor for the memoir I'm currently writing is always challenging me to "dig deeper," to write, as she describes it, "more vertically."

I nudge my students, as well as myself, to examine why they're telling this particular story, and why it matters enough to write about it. How, I ask them, did this experience shape you? How did it change you? What were the costs? What was at stake? What, in other words, is compelling you to write the piece? Hopefully, these will all be discovered in the process of writing.

I also advise writers to think about memoir as having two stories: the story of the actual experience—the surface subject, the facts, the sequence of remembered

events (what Gornick calls "the situation"), and the story of their thinking—that is, what do those facts and events mean? What are you thinking and feeling as you write the specific scenes? What I'm really asking the writer is: How do *you* interpret the story of your own experience?

A memoir, then, can have more than one voice. Sometimes it must. There's the voice that tells the surface story, and another, more reflective voice that comments, digresses, analyzes, and speculates about the story's events—in other words, a voice or narrative persona that looks to find a human connection or larger meaning in his/her personal experience.

Everything I've said about finding the inner story in memoir comes from reading, writing, and reading about personal essays. Since one of the hallmarks of the personal essay is its intimacy, most personal essays are inner explorations that open a window to the writer's inner life.

Scott Russell Sanders says that the "essay is the closest thing we have, on paper, to a record of the individual mind at work and play . . . the spectacle of a single consciousness making sense of part of the chaos' of experience." (189–90). The essay works by "following the zigzag motions of the inquisitive mind. . . . The writing of an essay is like finding one's way through a forest, without being quite sure what game you are chasing, what landmark you are seeking."

Working in the essay form, according to Phillip Lopate, "allows you to ramble in a way that reflects the mind at work . . . [I]n an essay, the track of a person's thoughts struggling to achieve some kind of understanding of a problem is the plot, the adventure. The essayist must be willing to contradict himself . . . to digress, and even to end up in an opposite place from where he started. . . . The essay offers the chance to wrestle with one's own intellectual confusion" (qtd. in Heilker 93).

The late critic and memoirist Alfred Kazin says, "The genuine essayist . . . [i]s the writer who thinks his way through the essay—and so comes out where perhaps he did not wish to. . . . He uses the essay as an open form—as a way of thinking things out for himself, as a way of discovering what he thinks. . . . [A]n essay is not meant to be the 'whole truth'. . . . [I]t is an expression of the self thinking" (qtd. in Heilker 90). In an essay, it is not the thought that counts but the experience we get of the writer's thought; not the self, but the self thinking."

In "The End," an essay by Judith Kitchen, she suggests that Kazin's point is the purpose of writing creative nonfiction. "The building of a process of thought," Kitchen says, "is what interests the reader. In essays, we participate by paying attention to the attention that is paid. The intimacy of the essay is a sharing of thought. We look as much for how an author approaches a subject as for the subject itself" (228). Kitchen closes the essay with some useful teaching advice. She writes,

Here are five things my students deny themselves as their stories draw to a close:

1. Retrospection—a looking back, an assessment
2. Intrusion—a stepping in, a commentary
3. Meditation—a thinking through and around, finding a perspective

4. Introspection—a self-examination, honest appraisal and discovery
5. Imagination (as distinct from invention)—which allows for alternatives, projections, juxtapositions, whatever could provide a larger frame (228)

I agree with Kitchen when she says that these are things her students "deny themselves." It's a generous and, I think, accurate way to phrase it. I'll add these others:

- reflection: thinking things out, searching for meaning
- speculation: playing "what if"
- self-interrogation: asking the hard questions, the ones you don't always want to know the answers to
- digression: allowing the mind to wander away from the subject
- projection: trying to predict what might happen.

There are many other touchstones we could all add. But the point is that in any human situation or encounter, we can't get through 30 seconds without utilizing most or all of these things. We're *always* reacting internally.

The mind never stops searching for connections and asking questions. And that's the thinking/feeling self I'd like to see more of in the personal narratives I read, both as a teacher and as an editor.

Works Cited

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