


Articles

Telling the Truth: Some Thoughts on Memoir Writing

by Suzanne Nussey

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The writer's only responsibility is to his art. He will be completely ruthless if he is a good one.... If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is worth any number of old ladies.

—William Faulkner, *Paris Review*

This is...the spectrum of loyalty and betrayal. On the loyalty side is silence, and out toward this end of the spectrum is absolute silence, the poems not written, the thoughts not even thought, a kind of spiritual suicide of the writer.... On the other side of the spectrum is song, and out at the far end perhaps very little consideration for the other's privacy—even, at the extreme, a kind of destructiveness or spiritual murder. The way we learn our place on the spectrum seems to be the usual way of learning—by making mistakes.

—Sharon Olds, *Poets & Writers*

During a writers' conference at my alma mater several years ago, a student asked visiting author Wendell Berry if there was anything he would never write about. Berry, a respected American poet, fiction writer, essayist, and environmental activist, replied, "I would never write something that would shame someone I love."

I recently quoted Berry in a workshop on memoir writing, responding to a fellow participant's question about the advisability of publishing a creative non-fiction piece that depicted her mother-in-law in a negative light. She feared not only her in-laws' reaction but also the attendant fallout in her marriage. I was not prepared for the facilitator's swift rebuttal: "But that's why people write memoirs: to shame the people who harmed them!"

After a brief discussion, it was clear that most participants agreed with the facilitator.

Well of course, I thought, many authors of successful memoirs expose the deceptions, tragedies, dysfunctions, criminal behaviours, and physical and emotional suffering they experienced in close relationships. Jeannette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, Geoffrey Wolfe's *The Duke of Deception*, Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, and Susan Olding's *Pathologies* came to mind. After all, nothing is taboo for an artist; what happens, what exists, is paint in our palettes. And—just as Susan Olding was challenged by her father, a medical pathologist, to correctly identify a preserved human organ—when confronted with the raw material of living and dying, the writer's task is to "name it."

Yet something in the Berry quote resonated with me, though perhaps I made the mistake of blithely offering it up as advice in the workshop. The issue of shaming, the public revelations of private events that happen within the intimacy of a close relationship, and

the collateral damage these might inflict cannot be easily dismissed. Writing about traumatic experiences involving close family members and friends is more complex than calling out a wrongdoer. Not that the latter is inappropriate, or unjust. (After Richard Hoffman's disclosure in *Half the House* that his trusted coach, Tom Feifel, molested him at the age of 10, Feifel was tried and convicted for assaulting more than 400 boys over four decades.) Describing the physical and emotional details involved in everyday family life—your aunt's unedited rants against your uncle's infidelities, your sister's eating disorder, your mother's obsessive spying on a neighbour, your child's bizarre bathroom habits—is not a simple matter of effective writing. These are complicated in the ways all close relationships are complicated: my story—what belongs to me—is also shared by the people who participated in, and shaped, that story; my feelings about these people and events are fluid and change over time; my silence or my witness, my action or inaction, inevitably affect other people's lives.

I have experienced the tension involved in telling family stories. Over the years, I have written poetry that deals with events and issues in the life of my family. The poems do not name names or recount abuse. But they do reveal the sort of suffering one endures in close relationships where misunderstandings, betrayal, disappointment, sickness, and tragedy occur. For six years, I worked on an essay connecting my mother's final illness and my young daughter's insomnia. I had intended to treat the intergenerational theme with compassion; only after the piece was published did I realize that my sharing intimate details about my mother's death as well as my daughter's struggle could be considered invasive. Now I am jotting down ideas for a memoir about my family of origin and the close-knit rural community where I grew up. People I trusted angered and hurt me, but I don't despise them. A person who is culpable is not necessarily the devil incarnate.

I know that telling the truth is risky—for me and for those I write about. What if a family member or someone from my hometown loses a job because of what my memoir reveals? What other relationships—theirs and mine—might sour as a result of my honesty? What repercussions might I face? Rejection by people I love? Personal harm? A lawsuit? Where do I draw the line between my friends' or family's privacy, my own fears, and my desire to tell my story?

As is my habit, I turn to books for insight. Other memoirs and handbooks about creative non-fiction present numerous examples and an overwhelming variety of opinions about what material to explore and what to leave out. I find a helpful starting point in National Book Award finalist Beth Kephart's *Handling the Truth: On the Writing of Memoir*. Kephart discusses what memoir is not: "Exhibitionism for exhibitionism's sake; ... [a]n accusation, a retaliation, a big take that! in type; ... a self-administered therapy session"; a justification "of behaviors, decisions, moods; ... an unwillingness to recognize ... that memory is neither machine nor incontestable."

These provide a handy checklist as I review my reasons for writing and what I have already committed to print. As with all good writing sessions that feel freeing and cathartic, I can't deny the ego-gratification I experience when my prose or poetry skillfully skewers an adversary or someone who has hurt me. This motivation may well be the beginning of a piece, but the sword could be exchanged for a scalpel that has the potential to get to the heart of things and to heal.

The memoirists I read universally agree that intention or motivation in writing is key. "Intention matters," states Jill Christman in her essay "Chewing Band-Aids." "If you set out to bring your family down, they will know it.... If you set out to answer a question for yourself, something that's important to you, to them, to art—they will know that, too." The second part of Christman's observation offers a balance to the items in Kephart's list and an antidote to inadequate motivation. What do I hope to find in revisiting the suffering I have experienced in my family or community? What might I find out about myself, about my family? How do the pieces fit together?

Heather Sellers, author of *You Don't Look Like Anyone I Know*, advises her students, "Do not do this work in order to be seen, to be right. Do it in order to see." Whether I am writing

a poem or a memoir, the creative process that brings to light what I did not know I knew, the unfolding of an image, where the connection of words leads me: these are journeys of exploration and discovery. Even when I know how a particular story ends, it is the journey that compels me.

So can I avoid throwing Faulkner's old ladies under a bus and still write my truth? An abundance of awardwinning memoirs attests to the possibility. What prevents these stories from reading like a litany of harms suffered at the hands of malevolent perpetrators or a series of curious anecdotes that exploit intimate moments among family or community?

Many successful writers of memoir have persisted despite struggling with the potential fallout from telling their truth. Faith Adiele, in "Writing the Black Family Home," considered the harm her memoir might cause by compounding the "insidious misinformation about Deepest Darkest Africa" and "about the black family" and whether she would hurt the Nigerian family who had sheltered her. Her safeguard against these concerns was to revise for years, to weave in historical context and to "force [her]self to love every character."

In a 2009 interview with the *Paris Review*, Mary Karr, acclaimed author of the memoirs *The Liars' Club*, *Cherry*, and *Lit*, maintained that the writer must establish herself as a reliable narrator; the reader must be able to trust the memoirist's judgment. Perhaps it is trust then that diminishes the possibility that family and friends, who are also readers, will be alienated.

How does a writer earn such trust?

Just as memoirists agree that the writer's motivation is key, Karr believes that memoirists face a "moral danger" in interpreting the motivation of their actors incorrectly. Her memoir does not omit what motivated her parents' actions: "More important than remembering the facts, I [had] to poke at my own innards.... The trauma of my mother losing her first children doesn't mean it's no big deal that she tried to stab my sister and me with a butcher knife, but it in some way clarifies the action."

Reading *Lit*, I was impressed by Karr's ability to describe, without exaggeration or self-pity, what she suffered at the hands of her parents. Throughout the book, Karr treats her mother and father as flawed human beings, capable of terrorizing her as a child and inflicting emotional scars that contributed to her own alcoholism and depression. She nevertheless avoids caricaturing her family; as *New York Times* reviewer Sheila Ballantyne observed, Karr allows their own "voices to emerge, creating a welcome counterpoint" to the narrative of their negligence and abuse. Karr's tone is not bitter but "elegiac and searching." Her nuanced writing and her refusal to portray her parents as one-dimensional figures make her a trustworthy truth-teller rather than a narrator of the grotesque.

And family does not dominate the spotlight; her own truth is what she's after. Karr says,

People had way worse childhoods than I did and they didn't sell as many books. How it's written counts for something. ...[When] the book got traction...I found out what it was about...having to leave home to find home; it's about making peace with Mother to become a mother. My own bitterness and cynicism had to be pried away for the light to get in. The fury that I thought protected me from harm actually sealed me off from joy. ... It's a journey from complaint to praise. ...We lean into love, even in the most hideous circumstances.

How friends or family react to my memoir is not in my hands. Memoirists in the anthology *Family Troubles* record a range of family responses: a brother whose identity is disguised

in initial drafts of his sister's memoir demands she use his real name after all. Family shuns an author who affectionately uses the word "godfather" in depicting her great-uncle. An aunt is offended that she shows up only as a minor character in her nephew's book. A husband complains not about his wife's description of his struggles with monogamy but about her revelation that he puts chocolate syrup on his cornflakes at night. Who could possibly predict such reactions?

And what if your literary peers tell you that your memoir is "ethically wrong," a violation of confidentiality, potentially damaging to your relationship with your child, "limelighting," as did author Susan Olding's instructors at a famous writers' conference?

To protect themselves and the people they write about, memoirists will sometimes hide the identities of persons mentioned in their work, add disclaimers, or offer friends and family the opportunity to vet their manuscripts before publication. These tactics may well mitigate potential misunderstanding and harm. But as Joy Castro reminds me in her introduction to *Family Troubles*, the only thing I actually control is the narrative itself: "its fidelity to facts as you recall them, its fair-mindedness, its compassion for the straits your family members found themselves in, its sincere quest to understand what happened."

Susan Olding's instructors did not finally prevent her from publishing "Mama's Voices," the respectful, eloquent, agonized account of the complicated choices she faces as a writer and as the mother of a challenging child. Her narrative succeeds in all of Castro's categories.

My attention fixes on these writers' diction—"fairmindedness," "compassion," "trust," "love"—bringing me back to Berry's quote and that afternoon in the memoir workshop. I wonder, am I writing this piece on memoir "in order to be seen, to be right"? Perhaps my memory of what happened is flawed or incomplete. Did I accurately represent what Berry said? Have I considered why the facilitator reacted so strongly? Maybe what the participants remember best is not what I said but the child's yellow and blue metal sippy cup I kept beside me.

This is what I learned about myself and about memoir that I did not fully understand when I quoted Berry's advice.

On Sharon Olds' spectrum of loyalty and betrayal, the needle may rest at "song." I want to believe that it is possible to effectively tell my story about troubling events that involve my friends and family—or about an uncomfortable moment in a workshop—without minimizing my suffering, without violating their subjectivity, and with compassion for all of us. I've got some work to do. I need to find the question that will guide me. I risk making mistakes. The promise of discovery fuels my efforts to seek my truth and tell it.

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