

# Toward a Writing and Healing Approach in the Basic Writing Classroom: One Professor's Personal Odyssey

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*ABSTRACT: The author's therapeutic experience of writing a book about a personal tragedy led her to investigate the fledgling interdisciplinary field of Writing and Healing to see if it holds implications for the teaching of basic writing and also to revisit the debate about personal versus academic writing in the introductory composition class. The result was her redesigned basic writing course, in which students do extensive private writing on personal and sometimes painful issues. This private writing forms the basis for all their essays, beginning with personal narratives and moving toward more academic genres. The author's initial experiment with this approach suggests that it has the potential to improve students' attitudes toward and confidence in their writing and to help them develop a stronger prose style and more authentic voice.*

Six years ago I took a large professional risk: I decided to write a book about a personal tragedy, knowing that this project would be a full-scale commitment that would preclude time for research and publication in my professional field—basic writing—and hence would stall my progress towards promotion. But I had to do it; my emotional and creative energies were inexorably pushing me in this direction.

Three and a half years earlier I had experienced a nightmare that turned my world upside down. In August of 1994, my older sister disappeared after going to the home of her estranged husband, whom she was in the process of divorcing and with whom she had had a violent relationship. For the next two-plus years, until Susan's remains were discovered in November

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1996, I lived the surreal, limbo-like existence peculiar to those who have a loved one missing, vacillating between the certainty that Susan was dead and the tiny, nagging hope that she was alive and out there somewhere.

During this period, I kept finding myself shaping stories about the situation in my head; the idea that I could channel my pain into a narrative comforted me in a way I found hard to explain. It had something to do with my intuition that if I could frame the experience, I could thereby control it. It also had something to do with my sense that writing a story about a personal tragedy connects one with others who have gone through a similar trauma and thereby universalizes it. These thoughts soothed me. I also found myself surging with creative energy when fragmentary images and themes for a prospective story would flash through my mind. I hadn't written a personal narrative since grammar school; the books and articles I had published during my career had been conventional academic ones. Personal writing, I thought, was not supposed to be the domain of academics. But the prospect of tapping this long neglected creative spring and transmuting my suffering into art inspired me.

I didn't begin the book proper until 1998, however, because I couldn't decide what genre it should be. Then one night I experienced one of those moments that fascinates composition scholars who are interested in the domain beyond the cognitive (see Brand and Graves, eds.). I was taking a shower and not consciously contemplating the genre problem, when suddenly the title *Finding Susan* popped into my mind and I envisioned the form the book would take: it would be a true-crime memoir, encompassing the themes of both the literal finding of Susan—the search for and discovery of her body—and the figurative finding of her—my exploration of the forces in our family and in her childhood that caused her to end up in these tragic circumstances. The next day I began to write.

I wrote the book mainly during summers, because my heavy teaching load allows little time for writing during the academic year and because I thought of this project, at first, as something separate from my job-related activities. But then something unexpected began to happen: the line between my book and my profession, between the personal and the academic, began to blur. As I was working on the book, I found myself thinking more and more about my basic writing students and identifying with them. Much of the time that I was writing, I was struggling with feelings of inadequacy and foolishness, thinking that the personal things I was so interested in and so deeply engaged with writing about—my family, my love for my sister, my

guilt about not having saved her—were not appropriate for a book by an academic. Certainly, I thought, no university press would want to publish it. It struck me that many of my students feel a similar kind of conflict. In the beginning-of-term questionnaires or literacy biographies I usually have my students complete, time and again they indicate that they used to love to write in elementary school, when they were assigned personal narratives, but that they began to dislike it and to lose confidence in their writing ability in junior high and high school when they encountered teachers who eschewed personal writing and forbade the use of the pronoun “I.” Similarly, many say that they avidly wrote in a journal or diary during their high school years but had difficulty writing papers for English class. It occurred to me while I was experiencing my own insecurity concerning the significance of the personal matters I was writing about that perhaps the inflated style characteristic of some freshman writers, which I used to attribute to their attempt to pad their sentences so as to eke out a longer paper, may actually be an attempt to make their writing sound academic. The stiltedness of this style may be an indication of how hard they are straining to drive the personal underground.

These insights, coupled with the engagement and emotional healing I was undergoing while writing *Finding Susan*, caused me to begin to rethink my approach to teaching basic writing. I wanted to design a course that would allow my students to have the kind of meaningful, personal involvement with their writing that I was having. Consequently, in 2002, when my book was finished and accepted for publication (by a university press, to my gratification and encouragement), I turned my energies to investigating theories upon which to build such a course.

## **RESEARCH ON WRITING AND HEALING**

A creative-writing friend who runs writing workshops for cancer patients had told me about an exciting new interdisciplinary movement—encompassing the disciplines of psychology, neuroscience, and composition—known as Writing and Healing. I began my research by looking into the work of psychologists in this field, especially that of James Pennebaker, whom many consider the founder of the movement. In his pioneering 1990 book, *Opening Up*, Pennebaker describes a series of experiments he conducted at Southern Methodist University in the 1980s. In the first of these, he divided 46 student volunteers into four groups and had them each write continuously for 15 minutes a day for four consecutive days while alone in a

small cubicle. The control group was given a trivial topic to write about each day. The other three groups were all told to write about a traumatic, painful, or shameful experience. But one of these groups was instructed just to describe their emotions, then and now, about the experience, not to narrate the facts; the second group was instructed to describe only the facts of the experience, not the emotions; and the third group was instructed to narrate the facts *and* describe their emotions, then and now, concerning the experience. Immediately following the final day's writing session, Pennebaker and his assistant questioned the participants individually about how they were feeling. Then four months later the participants completed a questionnaire about their current outlook and state of mind. In addition, the students' visits to the student health center in the months before and after the experiment were tallied.

The immediate post-experiment questioning revealed that those who had written about trauma—all three groups—felt worse than they had before the writing experience, no doubt because the writing had recalled the original painful feelings, while there was no change in mood for those who had written on trivial topics. However, four months later, those in the group who had written about both their feelings and the facts concerning the painful experience revealed an overall improved mood and a more positive outlook than they had had before the experiment, while the reported feelings of those in the other three groups—those who had described only emotions, those who had described only facts, and those who had written on trivial topics—were virtually the same as before the experiment. The tallies of the health center visits showed that in the months before the experiment the students in all four groups went to the health center for illness at the same rate, but during the six months following the experiment there was a 50% drop in visits for those who had written about both feelings and facts, while the rates were the same as before for the other three groups (30-34).

In the years since this seminal experiment, Pennebaker and other psychologists have conducted refinements and variations of it, trying to determine exactly what is going on psychologically and physiologically when one practices what Pennebaker calls "disclosure" writing—so called because volunteers are usually instructed to select something that has been too painful or shameful for them to write or talk about before now (see Pennebaker; Lepore and Smyth, eds.). These psychologists have looked at such factors as heart rate, blood pressure, skin conductivity, left and right brain hemisphere activity, and immunological functioning. In addition, they have tried to

determine whether there are certain personality types that are more susceptible than others to the healing effects of this kind of writing. The overall findings strongly suggest that for most people, exploring in writing one's feelings and thoughts about a painful or shameful personal experience results in improved mental and physical health. The findings also suggest that, contrary to a widespread notion, it is not the catharsis of expressing pent-up emotion that is responsible for the healing—such venting at best gives only temporary relief, at worst exacerbates the distress. Rather, other factors appear to be responsible. These include 1) the habituation response, whereby confronting a fear or a painful memory habituates one to it and thus robs it of its power; 2) the fact that naming an emotion or a trauma legitimizes it—that is, if there is a word for it, it is something society has recognized and hence the sufferer is not alone; 3) the fact that the act of writing objectifies the trauma and makes one regard it from different perspectives, in effect helping one to resolve it; and 4) the fact that constructing a narrative about an event is a way of finding coherence and meaning in it.

### **Rethinking My Approach to Teaching Basic Writing**

This growing body of evidence pointing to the healing power of writing about personal issues holds strong implications, I began to think, for the teaching of basic writing, for I had long noticed that basic writing students seem inordinately burdened with emotional difficulties: not only the usual range of issues and post-traumatic stresses so many young adults arrive at college with today—divorced parents, death of a high school friend in a car accident, eating disorders, and so on—but the additional distress of having been stigmatized and marginalized because of academic failure or a learning disability. Further, a number of my basic writing students have grown up in violent or impoverished circumstances. If I could get my students to explore the way these experiences have affected them, I thought, they would gain control over their disabling feelings, enabling them to engage more fully in their academic life. As I contemplated such a pedagogical approach, I found myself thinking about how helpful it would have been for me to have been encouraged to write about personal issues in a university class my freshman year of college. Although not a basic writing student, I was hampered by personal problems—an alcoholic, unpredictable mother; an emotionally chaotic home life; a sense of inferiority about my Irish-Catholic background spawned by having attended a WASPy boarding school and now being at an Ivy League college where everyone, I thought,

was smarter than I was. To have been able to write about these issues in an academic setting would probably have helped me achieve a sense of coherence and control, an integration of my personal and academic identities.

The idea that I could help my students achieve this kind of psychological integration excited me. But one nagging question kept returning: Would writing about personal matters and painful experiences cause the students' writing to improve? I reminded myself that my profession is composition teacher, not therapist, and that my primary mission is to help my students become better writers. In search of an answer to this question, I decided to turn from the field of psychology to that of composition studies. Personal writing in the freshman English class, of course, has been largely out of favor since the 1970s, when the expressivist theories of Peter Elbow and Ken Macrorie enjoyed popularity,<sup>1</sup> and so for the past two decades I, like most composition teachers, had been emphasizing "academic" genres—exposition, analysis, and argument—over personal essays. Occasionally I would assign a personal narrative for the first paper of the term, under the assumption that it was an easier kind of writing, but then would quickly move on to the real business of the course: the presumably more rigorous, more mature academic modes. I didn't question these assumptions, even though I always secretly enjoyed reading my students' personal essays much more than their conventional academic ones. I guiltily attributed my enjoyment to some kind of voyeurism on my part, never bothering to consider that its cause might be the greater vividness and authenticity of such essays. But after my experience of writing *Finding Susan*, I found myself questioning my bias and was motivated to explore the arguments made by those in the field who still believe personal writing should play a role in freshman composition and basic writing.

### **The Personal vs. Academic Writing Debate**

Although social constructionist and cultural studies theories have increasingly dominated the field since the early 1980s, articles advocating personal writing appear sporadically in the major journals, with an occasional special issue devoted to revisiting the personal vs. academic debate. Most who defend personal writing argue not that it should replace academic writing but that it is an effective bridge to the latter kind of discourse for students new to the academy. In one of the first articles to challenge the backlash against 1970s expressivism, Jerrold Nudelman and Alvin H. Schlosser assert that personal writing can help inexperienced writers "over-

come the all-too-prevalent feeling that their ideas are not worthy of being included in a college essay” (23). The authors describe specific methods teachers can use to lead students from this kind of writing to abstract, academic discourse. A few years later, Robert Connors argues that while the proper goal of freshman composition is extrapersonal, academic writing, “[l]earning that one has a right to speak, that one’s voice and personality have validity, is an important step—an essential step. Personal writing, leaning on one’s own experience, is necessary for this step” (181). In a 1995 published exchange with social constructionist David Bartholomae, Peter Elbow says he agrees with the goal of having students master academic writing, but feels this should be put off until upper-level courses, with the freshman composition course being devoted to helping students find their own voice (“Response” 87).

Most scholars who argue for using personal writing to lay the groundwork for academic writing do so not because they feel the former is *easier*, however. Rather, it is because they believe that abstract thinking and writing are necessarily grounded in subjective experience. Irene Papoulis, for example, asserts, “Every college student, of course, must assimilate disciplinary conventions, but unless students learn to articulate their subjective responses to the thoughts they encounter, they will be crippled when it comes time to generate their own ideas” (133), a remark that echoes Robert Brooke’s view that “[l]earning to write meaningfully in our culture requires developing an understanding of the self as writer, as someone who uses writing to further personal thinking and to help solve problems. The development of such a role, such a self-understanding, is more important than developing any set of procedural competencies” (5).

Many personal-writing advocates contend that critics have set up a false bifurcation between academic and personal writing. Donald Murray, for example, argues that *all* writing, even “impersonal” writing such as reports and newsletters, is autobiographical in that it stems from “the questions that itch our lives” (214), the seeds of which obsessions were sown in our youths. Kathleen Dixon and Norbert Elliot, in separate essays published in the *Journal of Basic Writing*, argue that narrative and expository writing are really two sides of the same coin, for every piece of writing has a personal story behind it (the story of how the author came to be interested in the topic) and all knowledge is experiential. Elliot bolsters this argument by pointing out that many scholarly articles in our composition journals—ironically, even some that argue against expressivist pedagogy—use personal

anecdotes to show how the author arrived at his or her theory (just as I am doing here). This same point is driven home by Nancy Sommers and other scholars who contributed to a 1992 special issue of *College Composition and Communication* revisiting the question of personal writing: they self-consciously interweave personal anecdotes with theoretical discussion in essays arguing that the personal and concrete cannot be divorced from the abstract. This same basic argument is made in many of the contributions to a 2003 special issue of *College English*.<sup>2</sup> Amy Robillard, for example, points out that although many scholars do not allow their students to write personal narratives, they themselves use narrative in their journal articles, thereby tacitly acknowledging the integral relationship between personal experience and abstract thinking. Robillard feels we should openly acknowledge this relationship in our classes: rather than treat narrative as a transitional, “easy” step to the privileged forms of analysis and argument, we should show students how narrative and academic discourse interanimate (her term) one another.

Some scholars advocating personal writing attest to its efficaciousness at improving students’ overall writing. For example, Jim Cody describes a series of six-week writing workshops he ran for students having difficulty writing papers in other courses (they were referred to his workshops by professors in these courses). He noticed that students who had written stilted, clichéd academic papers often wrote rich, original expressive pieces in response to the exercises he gave them. One student had been referred by a legal studies professor because of the poor writing in the student’s draft of a paper about Malcolm X. During the course of the workshop this student did freewriting about his own experiences with racial injustice, linking these to Malcolm X’s, and as a result was able to write a much better developed, more engaging final draft of his legal studies paper.

Guy Allen has written about a series of experiments he conducted over several semesters using varying proportions of personal writing assignments in a course entitled Effective Writing. He found that students given extensive practice in writing personal essays before being assigned expository essays produced better expository writing—in terms of “technical quality, honesty, vividness, and originality”—than did students given little or no practice in personal essays but instructed in the principles of expository writing (255, 278). Furthermore, there was a correspondence between the amount of personal writing students did in Allen’s course and the extent to which their writing improved in other courses, including science, math,



philosophy, and survey law courses (255). Allen's findings made him conclude that "all writing roots somehow in experience and observation" (254) and personal writing makes students "search themselves and their experience for meaning" (281); therefore, "when students learn to take responsibility for meaning, they become better writers of standard-form writing, like research reports, business letters, or the academic expository essay" (281-82).

Lad Tobin arrived at similar insights to those of Cody and Allen. In his composition course he has students write about public issues but encourages them to do so in a personal way, using their own voice. One student wrote her final essay on the relationship between thought and language, with her thesis being that "a writer can only think clearly when she is allowed to use a voice and a style that she has mastered" (23). Tobin sums up her support for her argument:

She felt that in my course, she had been able to think through important issues in original ways; however, in her humanities class, she had trouble developing and organizing her ideas about Homer, Cicero, and the prophets. She accounts for the difference not by the difficulty of the material—she took on complicated problems in my course—but rather by the encouragement I gave her to explore the ideas that mattered to her in personal and informal language. Her humanities professor, she complains, had denied her this access by insisting on numerous references to the text and "impeccable English prose." (23-24)

This student's argument confirmed Tobin's sense that treating academic writing as though it is divorced from subjective experience causes students to be disconnected from their real thoughts and hence to produce empty, stilted papers.

The findings of these composition scholars mirror findings in another one of James Pennebaker's psychology experiments. Pennebaker arranged with the political science department at his university to conduct an experiment on students enrolled in a course entitled *Social and Political Institutions from 1854 to the Present*. This course had traditionally been disliked by students because of its heavy reading load and its large, impersonal lecture format. Weekly breakaway discussion groups that were intended to engage the students in lively debate about the course topics usually fell flat, with students having little to say. Pennebaker's experiment involved imple-

menting a new format for these discussion sessions for one semester: at the beginning of each session, the instructor would give a brief overview of the main ideas of the week's readings and lectures and then instruct the students to write continuously for ten minutes about their "deepest thoughts and feelings about the topic" (187); after ten minutes, the writings would be turned in (but not graded) and the discussion would begin.

The results were astonishing: the discussions became rich and vigorous, with students contributing insightful, intelligent comments on topics they previously would have found obscure. Pennebaker concludes, "Their writing had forced them to assimilate ideas from a variety of sources, as well as from their own experiences. All of a sudden, topics such as the British East India Tea Company or the plight of the Mosquito Indians in Guatemala became relevant to their own lives" (187). Further, not only did the students' discussion improve but their writing did as well, as attested by the higher grades on essay exams during the experimental semester.

I think Pennebaker's findings probably ring true to most of us who write. I have long noticed that the only way I can get into and sustain a writing project is to connect to it personally or to see its relevance to my own experience. I can remember how in graduate school when one of my friends or I was working on a paper, we would become obsessed with the topic, suddenly finding connections between it and everything else in our life—movies we saw, magazine articles we read, conversations we found ourselves in. So often what had begun as a dry, abstract assignment evolved into an exploration of deep personal engagement. But most college freshman writers—especially basic writers—have not had this experience. As Guy Allen observes, speaking about the attitude of his students before he began the personal-writing approach, "The students had no idea that writing could be part of life. Life for them resumed *after* they got their essays in" (251).

### **Possible "Academic" Benefits of Personal Writing**

The findings of Pennebaker coupled with those of the composition scholars surveyed above make a strong case for the academic benefits of having students new to the university—especially basic writers—do personal writing in their composition course. Additionally, work being done by writers and composition scholars associated with the Writing and Healing movement has special implications, I believe, for basic writers, because they often arrive at college with emotional scars. Many of these authors—especially Louise DeSalvo, Susan Zimmerman, and Gabriele Rico—describe how

through writing about a traumatic experience they were able to better understand it, gain control of their lives, and experience the joy of creativity. Some authors address the empowering effect expressive writing can have for particular populations of sufferers, such as victims of sexual abuse (Payne), domestic violence (Julier), AIDS (Nye), and multiple sclerosis (Rinaldi). Two articles make the case that this kind of writing leads not only to emotional health but also to improved prose style. Marian MacCurdy observes that “the methods which produce good writing are the very ones that facilitate healing: iconic image rather than voice-over narrative is the core of both processes” (159) and “[t]he same thing that helps us recover from traumatic experiences—describing images in detail to another—produces writing which is alive with sensory description” (167). She demonstrates how students in her upper-level writing course who had formerly written bland, generalized essays were able to produce vivid, engaging prose in their trauma narratives. Similarly, Jeffrey Berman, in an essay he co-authored with one of the students in his Literary Suicide course, which focused on literary works reflecting their authors’ preoccupation with self-inflicted death (Berman and Schiff), reports that students’ writing improved when he began requiring them to keep a diary recording their personal responses to the literature. Once a week, students could voluntarily and anonymously turn in diary entries to be read aloud by the professor. Although Berman had implemented this assignment mainly to help raise students’ consciousnesses about the problem of suicide, he discovered that it also helped students to write better: their diary entries, which tended to describe their own painful suicide-related experiences (suicides of friends, their own attempts, their contemplation of suicide) were usually more eloquent and detailed than the formal papers they turned in.

### **Redesigning My Basic Writing Course**

Convinced, then, by both my research and my own experience that if I were to focus on personal writing, including writing about trauma, this would have psychological and academic benefits for my basic writing students, I decided to re-design my course. In making this decision I knew I was taking a risk because my program is under pressure to ready students for English 1101, a conventional freshman composition course requiring strictly analytical and argumentative essays. Papers that contain a certain number of major errors are automatically failed. I feared that if I asked my students to do personal writing, they might feel I wasn’t preparing them for fresh-

man composition. After all, they enroll in a basic writing course<sup>3</sup> because they've been told their writing skills are weak and they need to catch up on what they didn't get in secondary school; they therefore expect a more rigorous version of their high school English class, that is, with a heavier focus on grammar and academic modes and a stronger injunction against using the pronoun "I." But I thought the risk was worth taking, for I had been growing dissatisfied with my teaching approach over the last few years. While my students' writing generally improved, it did so by becoming more correct and better organized, but the content usually remained uninspired or clichéd and the students didn't seem to like writing any better at the end of the semester than they did at the beginning; they still saw it only as something they had to do to get through school. I reminded myself of the richness of my experience of writing *Finding Susan*, and then went ahead and took the plunge: I re-designed my course during the summer of 2003 and offered the new version in my three sections that fall. What follows is first an overview and then a detailed description of my new approach.

Superficially the new course resembled the kind of basic writing course I'd always taught: students read and discussed essays in a reader, studied grammar rules from a handbook, and wrote several essays. But I made four important changes: I implemented a private writing component; I held off assigning grades on essays until the end of the semester; I did away with grammar quizzes; and I "came out": for the first time, I shared with my classes the personal trauma of my sister's murder.

The heart of the new course was the emphasis on private writing. For almost every homework assignment, students read an essay in the reader and then wrote for at least 15 minutes. They could either write a personal response to the reading selection or explore their thoughts and feelings concerning a personal issue. I gave them this choice because I didn't want to make this exclusively a writing-and-healing kind of exercise since not *all* basic writing students are dealing with personal crises or want to explore personal problems in writing. But I did want to offer the possibility for those who had been scarred by painful experiences to write about them. Of course, it's important for instructors to understand that writing may unleash painful feelings, and writers may find that they need the support of skilled professionals to handle these feelings. Instructors should be prepared to make appropriate referrals if the need arises. It's also important for writers to feel safe to explore these painful experiences in privacy. In my course, I assured students I would not read what they wrote but would just briefly glance at

their notebooks at the end of the semester to make sure they had done the private writing. The grade on their private writing—15% of their course grade—would be holistic and would be based on volume: if they wrote more than the minimum volume or wrote extra entries, they would receive a correspondingly higher grade.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the private writing done for homework, the students did 10 minutes of private writing at the beginning of each class in response to a prompt I put up on the overhead. This would be a word or phrase designed to elicit a memory or an emotion, for example, “first disappointment,” “first day of school,” “a time I felt jealous,” “loneliness,” “moment of pure happiness,” “snowfall.” They could begin writing right away, or if they felt stuck, they could do clustering until they reached what I called an “aha” moment—a moment when they suddenly felt compelled to begin writing. The students were familiar with clustering because it is a popular invention method taught by high school teachers today, but I explained that they would be using it to discover feelings and memories rather than to generate material for a paper. I demonstrated briefly, by clustering on the blackboard in response to the prompt “rainy day” that one class gave me (I used the same demonstration in the other sections): after a few dead-end initial associations—each summed up in a word or phrase, circled, and connected by a line to the circled prompt—I came up with a memory of joyfully “swimming” in a rain puddle as a tiny child, and that led to a swarm of related memories about that long-ago day, illustrated in my demonstration by branching-off clusterings. Just after I circled the phrase “in trouble,” I stopped and told my students I was having my “aha” moment and that if this were not just a demonstration, now is when I would begin writing. I explained that I was remembering that event so vividly—the exhilaration of “swimming” in the middle of winter followed by the stinging guilt when my mother subsequently punished me for getting my woolen clothes all wet—that I was itching to explore that memory in detail. A couple of weeks into the semester after I’d told them about my sister and my book (I decided to wait until after we’d gotten to know each other better to share this personal information), I gave them another example of an “aha” experience: the moment when the phrase “finding Susan” popped into my mind and inspired me to begin my book.

We who are seasoned writers are familiar with this kind of experience; we have learned to heed images, intuitions, and other emanations of what Sondra Perl, in a phrase she adapted from psychologist Eugene Gendlin, calls

“felt sense.” We know that these are often the seeds for our best writing. But beginning and inexperienced writers are unfamiliar with this experience; they don’t trust that their instincts and personal images can spawn meaningful writing. My approach, then, was designed to help my basic writing students develop this trust. It took a couple of weeks, however, before most of them began to experience the “aha” feeling and to engage with the in-class private writing. At first, they were resistant: they would take their time pulling out a sheet of paper and a pencil, fidgeting and looking at their watches during the 10 minutes, and stopping as soon as the time was up. But gradually their attitude began to change as they realized I wasn’t going to spring a surprise check on their writing folders and as they started seeing the writing as something they were doing for themselves, not me. Soon they were pulling out their folders the minute they arrived at class, and the fidgetiness was replaced by an atmosphere of deep absorption. Peter Elbow, in talking about freewriting, has noted how different this kind of silence is from the resistant, sullen silence of a group of students in an exam (“Silence” 15). I felt this difference palpably, and when I would announce that the ten minutes was up, usually at least half of the students would continue writing until I repeated the announcement.

The five essays required in the course grew out of the private writing. Although instructions were tailored for each assignment, in general each time the students went through the following process. At the start of each new essay cycle, they read through their recent private writing entries, putting a check mark at the top of any that particularly stirred them. They then selected one of these and expanded upon it in freewriting. Then over a period of two weeks they drafted the essay and revised it several times, with the help of feedback from me in conference and from peers in their small groups. They turned their final draft in to me, and I returned it a week later with comments but no grade. Following the fifth essay assignment, they each selected their three favorite essays, spent two weeks revising and polishing them, and turned them in the last week of class to be graded. I graded the essays on the basis of their substance, development, support, coherence, clarity, and grammatical correctness. The average of each student’s three essay grades constituted 60% of his or her course grade (the final exam, a three-hour in-class essay with a choice of general-interest and readings-related topics, counted 25%, and the private writing, as mentioned earlier, counted 15%).

Before I explain about the essay assignments in greater detail, let me

say a few words about the small groups and about how grammar instruction was handled. Approximately every three weeks students were arranged into new groups, each consisting of three or four members. Within groups they discussed the readings and gave each other feedback on their drafts. Because students sometimes wrote about sensitive personal topics, they were always given the option of bypassing their group during feedback sessions and instead receiving their feedback from me or joining an *ad hoc* group of students who had all written on sensitive topics. Only one student ever took this option, choosing to receive feedback from me on the drafts of his first essay. The reason more didn't take the option, I believe, is that group members tended to be very respectful of one another and sensitive to each other's feelings when they gave feedback. And so fears about disclosure were not a problem.<sup>5</sup>

The small-group sharing of drafts helped students not only with development and audience awareness but also with surface features of their papers. Much of the grammar and mechanics editing occurred when students read their next-to-final drafts to their group, for they would often catch errors and stylistic infelicities when they read aloud, and their peers would often point out sentences or words that didn't "sound right." When the latter happened, the group would usually put their heads together to try to figure out what was wrong with the sentence or word, and this kind of analysis was much more fruitful than my lecturing on grammar rules would have been. (I would, though, circulate during these discussions and make myself available for questions.) I encouraged students to develop individualized error logs based on the types of errors they discovered in these sessions as well as errors I pointed out in their returned papers, and in conferences I showed them how to consult the handbook for grammar help. Very little formal grammar instruction was given; it was limited to the two classes following the return of each essay, and was focused only on the types of errors that had prevailed in the current batch of essays.

The essay assignments were designed to move students from exclusively personal writing to more academic writing. The first two were personal narratives. Although my interest in Writing and Healing made me want to encourage students to narrate traumatic experiences, I was wary of pressuring them to do this. I didn't want them to get the impression that papers about trauma would be more highly valued or would receive higher grades than those describing less extreme experiences. Nor did I want to encourage sensationalist writing, in the vein of television talk-show confes-

sions. My instructions, therefore, were to select from their private writing a personal experience they'd touched on, possibly a painful one, that they would like to explore so as to understand it more deeply. The result was narratives ranging from extreme experiences, such as a relative's suicide, to more common ones, such as parents' divorce or not making a sports team.

The third and fourth assignments were thesis-support essays, in which students connected a personal issue or experience to a generalization about life or about American society. I pointed out to them that most of the essays we'd been reading in our reader presented theses that grew out of personal experience. For example, we looked at Barbara Ascher's essay "On Compassion" and noted how her close observation of and visceral response to the homeless people she encountered every day on the streets of New York caused her to develop a theory about the nature of human compassion. Again, students perused their private writing entries, this time for the seeds of an extrapersonal generalization.<sup>6</sup> For example, one student, an African-American male who had written about being treated suspiciously by clerks in a department store, developed a thesis about the harmfulness of racial profiling.

The fifth essay was an argument. First students read sample arguments in the reader (Kennedy, Kennedy, and Aaron, eds.), such as Gore Vidal's argument for legalizing drugs and H. L. Mencken's argument against abolishing the death penalty, and discussed the rhetorical strategies the authors used. Then students looked for a private writing entry of their own that could be developed into an argument concerning a controversial issue. For example, one student who had written about the experience of having her parents go through a bitter divorce when she was young wrote an essay arguing that couples considering divorce should be required to first attend counseling if they have young children.

When the students turned in their three revised essays at the end of the semester, they could indicate if they wanted one of these to be "published" in the class magazine. I compiled a separate magazine for each of the three classes. Students gave me their submissions on disk, and I had the magazine available online for them a couple of days after the last class. I had tried class magazines in the past, but hadn't had much luck. Usually only a handful of students submitted essays, and these were usually limited to A-range essays. In the fall semester, however, virtually all of my students submitted a piece for the magazine. I attribute this change partly to the fact that the essays grew out of private writing and so the students were person-



ally invested in what they had written; they wanted to publish their essays not because they'd received A's on them (they didn't know any of their grades at this point) but because they had written about things that truly mattered to them.

But I think the bigger reason students were inspired to publish their work is the example of my own writing experience. The third week of the semester I had opened up to them about my sister's murder, my reaction to it, and my need to write about it. Although I had been nervous at first about revealing my personal life—I feared I might risk losing authority with my students—doing so proved to enhance my teaching and my relationship with students: they trusted me more and took my feedback on their writing more seriously. I shared with them what I had learned about writing and healing, from both my research and my personal experience, and when I would talk about the importance of writing, they really listened. Because I had discussed my own experience with the students, I wasn't like some adult telling children that broccoli is good for them although she doesn't eat it herself. Fortuitously, my book was published in the middle of the semester, providing students with tangible evidence that personal and painful experiences can give rise to successful public writing.<sup>7</sup> The result was that almost all of the students were motivated to publish their own work in the class magazine. Approximately half of the submissions were personal narratives and half thesis-support essays. Approximately a fourth of the total submissions grew out of private writing that focused on a traumatic experience or troubling circumstance in the student's personal life.

Many students stopped by my office during exam week and told me how much they liked the magazine or how much better their essay seemed when they saw it published. Some said they planned to print the magazine out, have it bound, and give it to their parents for Christmas or show it to their former high school English teachers. One student, a young man who had immigrated with his family from Mexico to the United States when he was eight years old, came back to see me at the beginning of the current semester and told me he had taken the magazine with him on his visit to relatives in Mexico over the holidays; they had all sat around his grandmother's kitchen while he read them his submission, a poignant essay about his terrifying first day of school in America. The pride on his face when he recounted to me the awed reaction of his relatives convinced me more than almost any other evidence that my new approach to basic writing was effective.

## **Results of This New Approach to Basic Writing**

As the previous remark suggests, my criteria for concluding that my fall course was a success are largely qualitative and impressionistic: the absorption I could feel when students were doing the in-class private writing, their seriousness and involvement when they were giving each other feedback in small groups, the fact that during the semester only one or two out of my 46 students ever asked me what grade an essay would have received if I'd been assigning grades, and the fact that at the end of each cycle when students turned in their essays, many volunteered to read theirs aloud to the class, whereas in the past students had been extremely reluctant to do this.

But I also have some quantitative criteria, although I didn't run a concurrent control group for comparison purposes. At the beginning of most semesters I have students fill out a questionnaire that includes an item asking them to rate their attitude toward writing on a scale of 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive) and then to briefly comment. My entering fall semester students' attitudes towards writing were similar to those of students in the past, with the preponderance of students circling 2 or 3 and with typical comments being that they didn't like writing because they weren't "good at it" or weren't "good at grammar." Fall semester I had students fill out another questionnaire at the end of the term containing the same item, and I asked them to comment about any change in attitude they had experienced. The majority indicated an attitude improvement: 56% circled a higher number than they had at the beginning of the term, most of them two points higher. Many attributed their improved attitude to having developed confidence in their ideas and their ability to generate writing topics, with some expressly linking this new ability to the private writing requirement. Some said that not being given grades on their essays during the semester decreased their anxiety. And some said the small-group feedback made them realize their writing was interesting to others and therefore increased their confidence.

The course grades revealed that not only the students' attitudes but also their writing had improved. Whereas the average grade in my basic writing course for the previous three academic years had been 80, the average for fall semester 2003 was 86.<sup>8</sup> Although the abolishment of mandatory placement into basic writing at my university may be part of the reason for this increase (since students now have the choice whether to enroll, those who do so might be more motivated), I attribute the improved grades mainly

to the fact that students were writing about issues that truly mattered to them and hence produced richer essays—essays containing more original content, more vivid prose, and a more authentic voice.

While more research needs to be done—using control groups, more precise quantitative measures, longitudinal studies, and perhaps different sub-sets of basic writing students—my findings are promising. They suggest that emphasizing personal writing in a basic writing course and encouraging students to explore painful personal issues can launch them on a journey toward psychological integration and academic success. My greatest hope is that my new pedagogical approach will make life-long writers of my students, that they will come to see how writing can help them make sense of their lives and can help to heal their emotional wounds—the very benefits I reaped from writing *Finding Susan*. What began, then, as a personal project, seemingly unconnected to my professional life, has proven to have profound implications for my teaching of basic writing.

### Notes

1. Ken Macrorie's *Uptaught* (1970) and Peter Elbow's *Writing without Teachers* (1973) launched the expressivist movement in composition in the United States. Throughout my essay I use the terms "expressivist writing" and "personal writing" interchangeably to refer to writing that gives significant attention to the writer's experiences and feelings.
2. I didn't actually read these articles until after I'd done my preliminary research for a theory to base my course on, since this issue didn't come out until fall 2003.
3. My university recently did away with mandated placement. Students with low scores on the writing placement test are now merely advised to enroll in basic writing.
4. Students kept their private writing in a folder, with each entry dated and indicated as "homework" or "in-class" at the top of the first page. In individual conferences in my office at the end of the semester, I checked each student's folder by glancing quickly at each entry and noting on a record sheet for each student the number of missing entries, the number of skimpy entries (less than a page), and the number of long entries (at

least two pages). A's on private writing were assigned to students with no missing entries and with a preponderance of long entries, B's to those with no more than three missing entries and no more than three skimpy entries, C's to those with four to eight missing entries and/or four to eight skimpy entries, and D's to those with more than eight missing entries and/or more than eight skimpy entries. F's would have been given to students who didn't do any of the private writing assignments. The majority of students received B's; a small number of students received D's; the remaining students were almost equally divided between A's and C's.

5. For a good discussion of the kinds of confidentiality and ethical issues that can arise in a classroom when students write about personal topics, see Dan Morgan, "Opinion: Ethical Issues Raised by Students' Personal Writing."

6. I did not read my students' private writing, but many of them would talk about it when they conferred with me about ways they were thinking of using this writing in an essay.

7. I did several campus and local readings and book signings during the month following publication, and several of my students attended these and purchased copies of my book. In addition, I was interviewed on national television (MSNBC Live) and was invited to give readings and speak before domestic violence, criminal justice, and literary groups in different states. I shared all these developments with my students, and many of them watched or taped my television interview.

8. I assign letter grades to essays, but when I compute the end-of-term averages, I convert letter grades to their numerical equivalents using the conversion table that is standard in my academic unit: A = 95, A- = 92, B+ = 88, B = 85, B- = 82, and so on down to F, which equals a 59 or lower (depending on the instructor's assessment of the severity of the essay's problems). An essay's grade is based on its content (i.e., substance, development, and support), coherence (organization and clarity), and adherence to grammar and mechanics conventions. I do not assign points or weights to these categories but rather grade holistically, with A-range grades indicating superior, B good, C adequate, D poor, and F unacceptable.

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