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THE LANGUAGE OF LOSS: TRANSFORMATION IN THE TELLING,
IN AND BEYOND THE WRITING CLASSROOM

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Laura Alicia Milner

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August 2005

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Countless students enter college suffering from traumatic losses such as the death of a parent, and many choose to write about their grief in composition classes. Many orphaned students compose their sorrow in order to find hope, without which their chances of thriving are limited. Some feel ill-equipped to meet academic and other challenges as they are preoccupied with feelings of homelessness and abandonment. Because the loss of a parent irrevocably alters one's home—and the yearning for home and security lives in all of us—the need for naming, knowing, and revising grief is crucial in the process of figuring out who and what remains after a parent dies.

This study incorporates multiple genres and disciplines: personal narratives, mini case studies, poetry, literature, and theories drawn from composition, medicine, trauma studies, sociology, anthropology, psychology, literature, and feminist research. To illuminate the consequences of bringing painful stories onto the page and into the classroom, I explore what happens when students *choose* to write about the death of a parent and share their embodied writing with teachers and/or classmates. To understand the long-term effects of such disclosure, I interviewed and reviewed the writings of three former students who wrote about a parent dying.

Writing and telling their traumatic losses to a caring audience enables many

survivors to transform their suffering into compassion for themselves and others.

Articulating their grief gives students a chance to integrate their losses and revise their stories in ways that lead to re-envisioning their homes and identities.

Considering the paradoxical presence and denial of death in our culture, educators should acknowledge grief and related emotions in curricula and graduate programs.

Instead of resisting students' grief by claiming that "we're not therapists," writing teachers should prepare to meet students' sorrows and fears, for in so doing, we offer them a path forward. Because grief writing has proven beneficial for orphaned students and other trauma survivors, composition teachers should study the interdisciplinary field of writing, telling, and healing in order to respond better to students' voluntary disclosures of significant loss.

For Walt and Carter Wray,
the sons of Betty-Ware Watson Wray, 1960-2005
and
April and Amy Scogin,
the daughters of Lynn Whitesell Scogin Keenum, 1959 - 2001
and
In memory of my student, Brittany “Ally” Harbuck
Dec. 11, 1985 - April 25, 2005

Haiku on Loss

Unfinished business

A chronic case of yearning:

Human condition

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Grief is a language that goes straight through all the barriers to the heart and soul of anyone who hears it. We are afraid of people who grieve because we don’t want to feel that. We have so many kinds of grief buried inside of us that we don’t want to open that door. If we open it the dam might break, and if the dam breaks then all hell might break loose.”

Sobonfu Some, Falling Out of Grace, 137

Whose Suffering Matters?

As human beings in a culture that denies pain and death and celebrates youth and beauty, we routinely make decisions about whose suffering matters and to what extent. We applaud, resist, or are disturbed by political advertisements that exploit the traumatic losses of September 11, 2001, as a means of gaining votes. We tune out or change the channel to avoid connecting with victims of violence or illness; we walk the other way to avoid a homeless person or a colleague diagnosed with cancer. Perhaps we turn away because we fear what Carl Jung calls our “shadow” side or because we grow anxious in the presence of pain. In refusing to look and listen to sorrow, we avoid acknowledging our own or another’s mortality.

We academics, especially, tend to use language as a cushion against the realities of sickness, aging, and death: “We know how to use words to theorize ‘realities,’ conceptualize embodiment, rhetoricize loss, and set aside grief. Doing so, we tend, as a whole, to become more and more impatient not just with the intrusion of our own losses on our professional lives, but also, by default, student renditions of loss” (Hallet 77). We stay busy in hopes of distancing ourselves from pain and grief, and when we succeed, we wonder why we feel isolated. Mary Hallet, a writing program administrator and author of Grief (W)rites, cautions teachers that “transforming the stuff of the body and spirit into a

kind of stone is something all academics risk when they undertake the study of language and the people who produce it” (79). Most writing teachers, however, cannot hide from students or from the sorrow that seeps into their texts. In fact, paying attention to the person writing and to his or her emotions—and to ours as readers and teachers—may prevent us from alienating ourselves and others. As we attempt to make sense of and respond to our students’ suffering, we “implicitly and explicitly sort out, measure, and give shape to it” (Spelman 1), consciously or not.

In Fruits of Sorrow: Framing Our Attention to Suffering, feminist philosopher Elizabeth Spelman identifies three ways in which people, historically, respond to the traumatic pain of others: “as the subjects of tragedy; as the objects of compassion; and as spiritual bellhops, carriers of experience from which others can benefit” (1). Spelman traces these three responses to Plato and finds some of them, at times, “morally and politically problematic” (2) because they deny compassion and decent treatment to certain groups of people deemed unworthy, such as slaves in Aristotle’s day, African-Americans in Harriet Jacobs’ day, or people with AIDS in our time. Perhaps we should examine more closely our reactions to suffering—our own and our students’—to discover who and what we are ruling in or out, and why. Each of us carries traces of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of resistance and aversion that influence the way we treat students; until we recognize and articulate our biases, we risk reacting in harmful ways to the stories of sorrow our students bring to class. We also should remember our potential for counter-transference: over- or under-reacting to a student’s tale of woe because of our own personal pain or loss (Bracher, Bishop, Brooke, and Tobin). Becoming aware of our tendencies to judge and react from our own unattended sorrow—

which most of us have, whether we own up to it or not—is key to becoming more mindful of how we treat students and their texts.

Many modern attitudes toward suffering are rooted in Plato's Republic, in which Socrates dismisses the tragic poets for failing to understand “the proper place of grief” (Spelman 16). Plato wanted his readers to learn that “tantalizing spectacles of humans sabotaging themselves or doing in their loved ones are bound to trigger grief, for which there is little place in the well-ordered soul and the well-ordered state.” Instead of wailing in the streets, a “good and reasonable man” will be “moderate in his grief” and will “keep quiet as far as possible” (Plato qtd. in Spelman 20). The same prescription applies to the 21st century academy, where “good and reasonable” teachers, administrators, and students are expected to muzzle their mourning and leave their lamentations at home. Spelman summarizes Plato's approach to grief: “The unity of a community depends on all the members of the community grieving and rejoicing over the same things. In that sense there appears to be some place for grief in the best city. However, the community must grieve and rejoice in the right way over the right things” (29). And who determines what is “the right way” to grieve in the academy today, if we grieve at all? Do we respond to the murders of gang members with the same empathy and respect as the cancer deaths of middle-class children?

Grieving is often equated with womanly behavior, which carries negative implications and shame for men and for academics, generally. Plato suggests that “there might be less grieving if people could develop a sense of shame at giving in to grief” (Spelman 30), shame we have perfected, unfortunately, through history. Ultimately, Spelman reads Plato as saying that “suffering need not be the human condition” and that

grief “threatens the control of the rational over the irrational” (33), attitudes firmly entrenched in 21st century academic and public life. We resist the Eastern notion that suffering is inevitable, that much suffering is caused by clinging, and that looking deeply into our pain to find its roots will show us the way to contain suffering within the permeable boundaries of grace and faith, through compassion and forgiveness.

Considering the Platonic tradition, it’s no wonder that we and our students associate grief with shame and therefore suffer quietly until someone breaks silence and brings mourning to the surface in a writing class.

Spelman cites Hannah Arendt’s work on the relationship between compassion and political action. According to Arendt, public professions of concern about the suffering of others often degenerate into pity, which highlights the distance between those in pain and those showing feeling for them (Spelman 61). Because intense physical pain is difficult to communicate and to interpret, it is vulnerable to being coopted for unethical political purposes, as in presidential campaign ads that portray the ruins of the Twin Towers. For Arendt, “the solution is not to prohibit discussions of the meaning of the suffering of particular people, but, if possible, to make sure that those who are suffering participate in the discussion” (Spelman 88). She asks us to acknowledge the sufferer’s status as a moral and political agent as we “recognize and respond to their condition of suffering.”

Discussions with those who are wounded as individuals or groups remind us of the political nature of our emotional lives, “when we struggle over whose pain counts, what such pain means, and who gets to provide answers to those questions” (88). Herein lies one reason to study the long-term effects of students writing grief and to encourage class discussion and peer response to students’ poems and narratives of parental loss: when

student writers are allowed equal time and space for airing and bearing witness to each other's stories, an equalizing begins to occur among them as they recognize the resilience, pain, and courage in classmates whose suffering may have gone unnoticed otherwise. They begin to see the indiscriminating nature of sorrow, a recognition that renders them equally vulnerable to its lessons and, ideally, more open to the transformative potential inherent in embracing it.

Reading Spelman reinforces, for me, the importance of interviewing students about their grief writing so that they are participating fully in the discussion of the implications of pedagogies that foster such composing and disclosing. We should invite reflective writing and reading aloud so that grief writers have more than one opportunity to make their thoughts and feelings known to classmates or teachers who might objectify or distance themselves from the survivor or her pain. As one student told her classmates in my Writing and Healing class before work-shopping her narrative about her father's death: "Just listen to my story and help me find ways to make it stronger. Don't pity me. I'm not just the-girl-whose-daddy-died. I'm still a person. Even though I miss him terribly, I'm okay." Such sharing facilitates the understanding and connecting that leads to knowledge, for "whatever the form knowledge may take, it always emerges from a process we might call *connecting*" (Miller and Spellmeyer xi, italics theirs)—connecting ideas, images, and histories in order to understand the human condition. The more we understand the invisible sorrows of others, the greater our chances of connecting with them and the less likely we are to dismiss or mistreat them.

Losing a Surrogate, Finding a Subject

"Grief is like a stream running through our life, and it's important to

understand that it doesn't go away. Our grief lasts a lifetime, but our relationship to it changes . . . If we follow the path through grief to wholeness, we may discover an undying love."

Frank Ostaseski, founder of Zen Hospice Project of San Francisco
qtd. in Tricycle: The Buddhist Review, Fall 2003, 80

I remember the moment my dissertation subject descended: I was stepping into a steaming bathtub one morning in January 2002, halfway through my doctoral coursework, when a title, "The Language of Loss: Transformation in the Telling," flashed across my mind and flooded me with goosebumps. I began to name, easily, a dozen first-year composition students from the past decade who had written about losing a parent. Why did they choose to disclose such stories about their orphan status to their peers and teacher when the assignment didn't call for it? Where are they today, and what has happened to them since our class? Would their reflections on writing and sharing their grief reinforce any of the theories of composition, trauma, narrative, and identity that I had been studying? Would these mother- or father-less students be willing to reestablish a relationship with me now, a childless teacher whose life resonates with theirs on many levels? Would multiple positive purposes be served in such a project?

It is no coincidence that several months earlier, I had lost my childhood friend, Lynn, to cancer. She was a nurse who did not fear death but was concerned about leaving her two teen-age daughters. We had been friends since kindergarten; we grew up in the same neighborhood, and I served as her maid of honor when she married after college. She had survived a near-fatal car accident while pregnant with her first daughter and undergone several surgeries to rebuild her face. We had lost touch in our 30s but rekindled our relationship six months before she died, spending as much time together as possible despite our geographical distance. The intimacy she shared with her daughters

made it difficult for me to imagine their lives without her.

And it is no coincidence that the topic appeared after weeks of paralyzing grief over the loss of a teacher friend I had adored for nearly 30 years. She and her husband (also a retired teacher) had served as surrogate parents for me in high school and beyond, through my years of rebellion and attempts at individuation. Because their log cabin in the woods had served as a site of respite and inspiration, losing her now felt debilitating; and because she was not actually dead, there was nowhere to go with my grief. Through Christmas and New Year's, I sat at home beside a roaring fire, lamenting in my journal about what had happened and wondering how I could forgive myself and her and move on.

The rupture occurred during our December visit at their cabin in north Alabama. After a full day of walking and talking, I was lying on their wood floor with my feet propped against the stone fireplace as I had done for decades. My friend shocked me by referring to the “nigger butt” of someone in her extended family. I scrambled upright and turned to face her and her husband, both sitting in chairs behind me; bristling and blushing, I asked why she had chosen to use the N-word and reminded her of how hurtful it was to me. Weren't we committed, as educators and as white southerners, to eradicating stereotypes and the language that reinforces them?

We argued late into the night over her casual use of the word, our relationships with black people, our differing views on the concept of “white trash” and the contributions of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and what she called my “ivory-tower theories” of social justice. Hours after they went to bed, I sat at their butcher block table, crying and scribbling in my notebook. How could I have been so blind to our

differences? How could I have said such hateful words to the teachers I had so revered?

As they slept upstairs, I sketched a picture of myself free-falling, umbilical cord dangling.

I stayed an extra day in hopes of resting and restoring order before the eight-hour drive home, but I knew the relationship had changed irrevocably. Our harsh words could not be unsaid. I suspected, even then, what the subsequent three and a half years have confirmed: my phone calls, cards, and letters would remain unanswered. Letting go had not been part of my plan for this relationship, even though compositionist David Bleich insists that “teachers and parents need, eventually, to separate from those we nurture” (239). I had expected death to separate us, not a misunderstanding in life.

As a result of my fall from grace and my desire to understand both my fear of abandonment and the complex trajectory of mourning, I have immersed myself in the study of loss and the role of language in its healing. I have become aware of the insidious nature of grief and of the potential for survival via conscious acts of faith, forgiveness, self-examination and home-building. I have survived multiple losses—am surviving—by writing, reading, teaching writing, walking beaches and creeks, practicing meditation with a Zen group, working with a therapist, and being with friends who know the transformative power of “listening someone into existence” as we loosen the stories “caught in our throats” (O’Reilly, Radical Presence 21, 26). When we suffer in silent invisibility or bury our emotional baggage in a busy schedule or addictive behaviors, our grief only grows. As our sorrows multiply, we feel more isolated and less alive, a condition that eventually causes us to lose touch.

Grief does not dissolve on its own. It accumulates in our bodies and psyches if not

tended and shared, as grief expert Stephen Levine explains in his 2005 book, Unattended Sorrow: “Loss is the absence of something we were once attached to. Grief is the rope burns left behind, when that which is held is pulled beyond our grasp” (9). The author of ten books on death and healing, Levine has spent 25 years working with people who are dying or grieving, from concentration camp survivors and their children to Vietnam veterans and victims of sexual abuse. Levine says he knows “very few people who are not grieving at some level. Feelings of loss don’t go away; they go deeper. When we lose or never exercise what we need or love, we call the hard contraction in the mind and body ‘suffering.’ This is our unattended sorrow” (9). He says grief lingers as a result of life’s major, unexpected losses as well as the everyday variety: “the loss of dignity due to racial and religious prejudice, or the multitude of finely wrought cultural humiliations suffered by women, the aged, children, the infirm, and the less than ‘beautiful.’” If ignored, these underlying sorrows encircle our hearts and beg for mercy as they harden our shoulders and bellies and leave us with a “dull ache that defines our body” (17). Unknowingly, we carry many “ungrieved losses” with us:

. . . losses of love betrayed, of trusts broken, of lies sent and received, of words spoken that can never be retrieved, and of the repeated bruises left by unkindness. It is the long-delayed grief of miscarriages and betrayals, lost opportunities, a thousand and one insults, and clutching misgivings that ricochet in the mind and instill restlessness and depression. It’s the unfinished business, the self-healing yet to be undertaken, the apathy and angst that inform our lives. (10)

Levine suggests ways to transform our sorrows through journaling, talking,

singing, and paying attention to our habits of repressing or turning away from grief. By having compassion for ourselves and practicing forgiveness, we begin to “decompose the armoring over our heart” and “release the grief that’s been held hard in the body” (8). By allowing our sadness to surface and seep out, we remove some of its power over us and gradually transform it.

Significantly, losing my surrogates initiated a period of soul-searching and conversations with my *real* mother that enabled me to see, anew, the benefits of my birth family. I began to recognize the roots of my commitment to social equality and sensitivity to human suffering related to race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. And I began to understand that although my mother was emotionally absent in my early years, her actions imprinted on me the importance of education and vocation, of speaking out against injustice and working creatively for change. Memories of her courage and candor foreground for me, now, a lifetime of yearning for her presence in my childhood, for “we can’t let go of our family stories, even if we want to. Those stories are in us, to the bone” (Pagnucci 104). The loss of my teachers and my subsequent research into grief and theories of composition, narrative and trauma have led to a gradual realization of the gifts I received from my parents, especially my mother.

Through my elementary and middle school years, my dad worked as a tool and dye maker at Ford Motor Co. while my mother worked as a secretary for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers union office. Mother enrolled in night classes at the local college, where she earned three degrees before transferring to Memphis State University and finishing all but her dissertation on a doctorate in American history. She put me on the school bus in the summer of 1965 to attend Head Start, an unpopular move

among her peers as I was one of few white children to participate in the program in Colbert County, Alabama—the birthplace of my revered teachers and Helen Keller and an active chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. By the time I entered high school, Mother was teaching history in a nearby town where she gained a reputation for standing up against racism: she sided with a black teacher, a black assistant principal, and black cheerleaders in various controversies, choices which resulted in our house being “watched” by the KKK for awhile. When I left home for college in 1978, my parents separated and my mother moved to Memphis for graduate school.

As the youngest child of an active, working class family living in town, I sought solace in the natural setting of my teachers’ quiet home in a wooded hillside, miles outside of town. I was inspired by their choices to live without church or children, their tendency to treasure sheep, geese, dogs, and cats. They taught me the value of hammered dulcimers, home-spun wool, hand-woven baskets, and Navajo rugs. They sat with me through many painful transitions when I so needed to be heard: through finding myself gay, Buddhist, alcoholic, a journalist, a teacher, through losing my father to Alzheimer’s, one childhood friend to AIDS and another to cancer, and almost losing my brother, now quadriplegic, to drunk driving. For their attention all those years I am grateful, just as I am to have rediscovered the depth of my connection to my mother and to my students, whose suffering takes them on similar journeys.

The Pervasiveness of Grief and the Rituals that Heal

“As for your class and crying students: you know, this well does not dry up. There are tears that bubble up from springs that started generations ago.”

Michael Blitz to Mark Hurlbert in Letters to the Living, 40

Grief is a natural emotion like fear, anger, jealousy, and love, an emotion that “allows people to come to grips with the thousand little deaths that we experience” daily and throughout our lives, according to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the late psychiatrist credited with starting the conscious death and dying movement in America in the late 1960s (47). We suffer such deaths daily because life is impermanent and because sickness, old age, and death are inevitable, and with them often comes grief, a pervasive but often invisible presence in our lives. If ignored or denied, grief may turn survivors into bitter, depressed souls who dwell in the past or fret about the future, people who feel misunderstood and look for others to fulfill their needs instead of taking responsibility for their own lives and pleasure (47). Unresolved grief “inhibits intuition” as we trust ourselves less and “cannot ‘feel’ the world around us as we once did” (Levine 4). Sometimes it lies dormant like a low-grade fever, and other times it spikes into overwhelming emotions or leads to addictions and self-destructive behaviors. Grief “weakens the body and compartmentalizes the mind . . . disturbs sleep and infects our dreams; unable to find our way ‘home’ all night, we feel lost all day . . . caught in cycles of self-condemnation, our sorrow saps our energy with fantasies and reveries” (Levine 4). When a child loses a parent prematurely or an adult loses a loved one suddenly, unprocessed sorrow settles in the stomach, shoulders, and chest of the bereaved person. Crying, writing, and talking enable survivors to discharge their grief which lessens its grip on the body, mind, and spirit and opens the door for learning and connecting with others in the present.

Tears are one of many responses to grief, defined by sociologists as “the psychological reaction to loss, particularly through [but not limited to] death” (Leming

and Dickinson 197). In adjusting to loss, survivors often feel disruptive emotions and mood swings as they cope with a “radically changed present and future reality.” Healthy mourning involves expressing one’s inner and outer realities of grief, both the ways we deal, personally, with important changes in ourselves and our world, and the socially relevant patterns of coping that guide public behavior. Although weeping carries different meanings in different cultures, anthropologists found in a survey of 78 cultural groups that weeping at a death is almost universal (Seale 200). Sociologists Leming and Dickinson conclude that “crying in front of others in expressing one’s grief should be as natural as laughing in front of others” (334), yet many of us feel uncomfortable with tears. In studying grief patterns among college students in the early 1980s, Leming found that many had been punished or reprimanded at home for weeping in response to death, and many others found it “scary” and “upsetting” to see their parents cry for the first time at funerals of family members (334).

We tend to underestimate the residual effects of loss on children and on college students, whose youthful faces sometimes mask multiple sorrows. In Terrestrials, winner of the 2003 X.J. Kennedy Poetry Prize, Georgia poet Eric Nelson describes teaching Girl Scouts to write for their creative composition badges: “They’re six, seven — what do they know/ of loss, writing’s source and subject?” (74). He explains that we lose things as we age and poems help us save them. The girls stare at him with blank expressions until slowly, they raise their hands and name their losses: “gloves, teeth, bicycles, charms,/ dogs, friends, houses, parents—/ a roll-call of hurts until all have spoken. We take up our pencils and begin.” Like Nelson, we cannot imagine the extent of our students’ “hurts” or the extent to which we are tossing them a life-rope by inviting them

to record, in poetry or prose, their losses. They may resist, initially, naming what they have been told to hide, and they may respond “blankly” to a teacher’s inquiries, but eventually they volunteer to speak or write what ails them; before long, a tide of pain and yearning rolls forth as they bear witness to what has passed and begin to notice what remains.

Instead of leaving students stranded with their grief, writing teachers offer them a path back to the community through what sociologist Clive Seale calls “resurrective practices” or “micro-rituals:” talking, listening, and writing about grief in ways that often restore the survivor’s sense of security and hope. Seale places “narrative reconstruction” of the self and/or the deceased into a larger theory of social life in which everyday talk becomes a healing ritual. Anthropologically speaking, participating in such rituals—whether conversations with counselors, support groups, or classmates, letters to the deceased, or funeral laments—affirms the survivor’s membership in the community and places his or her life within a “much broader, sometimes cosmic, interpretive framework” (29). These rituals emphasize not just the words but the person speaking or writing them from his or her own body and emotions. Through writing and telling, many survivors “seek to preserve social membership in the face of the fall from culture caused by death” (33), a fall that occurs when death comes suddenly, unexpectedly, or under controversial circumstances. As Susan Griffin suggests in her cultural autobiography, A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War, “words, gestures, the small rituals of daily life . . . connect us to others, both the living and the dead” (77). Such connections become life-sustaining or life-saving, especially for the bereaved.

Extending the definitions offered by Levine, Leming and Dickinson, Seale

suggests that “the problem of grief cannot be confined to those who have recently experienced a major loss” (193). Though its residual effects often remain unspoken, grief tends to be insidious and tenacious as its presence influences almost everything we do. Our everyday interactions offer countless opportunities for ““small psychic losses, exclusions and humiliations, alternating with moments of repair and optimism”” (Goffman qtd. in Seale 193). Each day, we cycle through moments of shame and pride as our social bonds are damaged and repaired, making the experience of loss and recovery commonplace. Rather than an isolated, individual problem, Seale defines grief as “a reaction to extreme damage to the social bond” and to a person’s sense of security in the world. Various mourning practices, from funerary rites to bereavement counseling to writing groups, help survivors resurrect their sense of security and hope for continuing life (193), especially when the loss is traumatic: “People are offered the opportunity to write themselves into a dominant cultural script, resulting in the reward of secure membership of an imagined community” (196). The community may be both real and imagined, depending on how and where the group is structured and for what purposes, from a therapist-led group to a lay-oriented support group such as Alcoholics Anonymous to a writing group, in or out of an educational setting.

In Unattended Sorrow, Levine documents two forms of grief, acute and chronic, and describes how we embody them differently. Acute grief accompanies an immediate loss or inconceivable tragedy: “It can feel like a stabbing sensation in the body and mind. It slams shut the heart and . . . leaves very little space for anything but the sorrow, anger, fear, and doubt that attend to it. Acute grief is a thunderstorm, a monsoonal downpour, a sudden flood that submerges almost everything in its path” (11). Acute grief may trigger

repeated images of previous losses, inundating the survivor with “all the unfinished business of life” (12), feelings of abandonment and lost love. Chronic grief accumulates over a lifetime and becomes the “persistent ache in the heart—the phantom pain at the irreducible absence of a loved one or of ourselves . . . the slowly receding waters and the damage revealed when the tsunami of acute grief subsides. It is the reservoirs caught in the depressions left by one unintegrated loss after another” (13). Chronic grief falls into two categories: the unresolved, incomplete grief from earlier major loss, and the inherent grief resulting from unsatisfied desire, unfulfilled ambitions and lost loves, “a subtle nausea that undulates just beneath our ordinary, well-composed exterior” (13). We suffer from the “traumas long sequestered in our flesh and bones” as the “hurt burrows into the tissues of our body,” turning grief into physical ailments. If we can “touch our pain with mercy, even with forgiveness,” we can begin to transform it and find balance again, something embodied writing fosters (see Chapter 4, Embodied Loss).

Kubler-Ross’ well-documented stages of dying—denial, anger, inner bargaining, depression, and acceptance—resemble the phases sociologists and psychologists have noted among people who are grieving: “shock, numbness and denial . . . followed by a period of pining, in which the reality of the loss is faced, involving a range of emotions, including anger and despair. Eventual recovery involves acceptance and adjustment” (Seale 105). Based on a Freudian model of attachment in which the survivor moves quickly to replace the lost relationship, both dying and grieving are seen as “a progressive unfolding of inner essence to an eventual resolution”—a move some researchers now challenge as limiting (Gropman, Seale). A modern model of grief promoted by Lofland includes finding a new place in one’s psyche for the deceased

through communal sharing of memories (Seale 200)—something a writing class allows and encourages. Unlike tribal or pre-modern cultures, many Americans maintain only a few intense, close relationships, and therefore losing one person may be a tragic experience that leaves the survivor feeling isolated. Just as illness narratives restore a sense of order for those whose lives are fractured by chronic illness, grief narratives restore a sense of community and hope for those who feel bereft (202). People who are ill or grieving tend to use discourse, written and spoken, to create secure narratives of self-identity, sometimes locating themselves with others who have survived similar losses. Such narratives may then serve other sufferers in search of hope for their own futures.

Even as we notice the declining capacities of our joints, bones, muscles, and minds, most humans have an ongoing, internal defense against disorder and decay. Therefore, Seale concludes that “the phenomenon conventionally referred to as ‘grief’ is an extreme version of an everyday experience of ‘grief’ which is routinely worked upon in order to turn the psyche away from awareness of mortality and towards continuation in life” (211). For most of us, “death sits on the divide between nature and culture, a continual reminder of our embodied human nature,” and it is this divide that I am advocating we bridge with embodied teaching and writing. Remembering that we could die at any moment should enhance our awareness of the needs of others and make us more compassionate, knowing our bodies and lives are finite.

What Makes Grief Writing Academic?

I chose to study student writing about the death of a parent because so many students have lost their parents in one way or another when they enter college, and many feel a kind of homelessness—a condition that may be heightened for those who have lost

a parent prematurely. Finding or recreating a home, both internally and externally, can be crucial to a student's success in college and beyond. Students who lack a sense of belonging or a safe haven to which to retreat may find it impossible to focus on intellectual pursuits and decide to drop out of college. When allowed to reflect, in writing and/or speech, on their past and present living conditions, orphaned students may discover that they are not the only ones struggling to stay grounded. By articulating what they feel, want, and need in terms of a home, they move closer to creating it for themselves, regardless of their parental situation.

Faculty often serve as pseudo parents for college students who are living away from their families for the first time, whether or not we embrace these roles (Grumet). I agree with Berthoff and Bleich that we should know our students—strive to hear and relate to them—in order to reach and teach them. Yet, many composition teachers emphasize pre-packaged texts, topics, and ideas that leave little room for students' actual experiences; for complex reasons, many teachers feel unprepared and ill-equipped to respond to students' disclosures of traumatic loss. Those who oppose students writing personal narratives tend to resist for three reasons: they perceive students as not having lived long enough to have much worth saying; they view students' experiences as "insubstantial," and they think student narratives contribute little to academic knowledge (Hallet 158). Furthermore, teachers' responses to student grief narratives "are underscored by the personal effects of our *own* losses," and it is "only through the acknowledging of these effects, by striving to bring them into conscious life and light, that we may respond more fully, effectively, and humanely to student writing" (4). As we unearth and attend to our own sorrows, we make room for those of others.

Given the reality of our students' (largely invisible) suffering and their attempts to work through their subconscious desires and conflicts through writing and speaking, I think students should have the opportunity to write their stories when they are ready. We should be careful not to offer prize-winning authors as models and then punish students who don't measure up or who divulge information about themselves that we then refuse to receive (Milner, "Response to Disclosure"). If we're doing it right, teaching and learning should be as edgy and life-changing for us as for our students. What are *we* risking in our classrooms? How are *we* vulnerable?

Every day, writing teachers enter classrooms not knowing what will arise: stories of abuse, neglect, rape, incest, and death, the near-clichéd moments of happy celebrations and significant losses. We prepare logical lesson plans and contingencies, knowing that anything can happen at any moment. Every time we enter a class, as Marian MacCurdy reminds us in Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice, we should remember that "every pair of eyes facing you may have endured something you could not bear" (Lucille Clifton qtd. in MacCurdy 197). In meeting students' grief with equanimity and allowing them to write from their experiences and share their writing with other student writers, we may be saving their lives. Yet, for varied and complex reasons, many teachers resist students' traumatic stories and prefer to engage so-called "academic" topics because we (Westerners and professors) are more secure with reason and rationality. Because the language of loss arises from both the intellect and the emotions, the work of mourning is stymied when one aspect is diminished or ignored. Psychologists who study writing and healing agree that both cognitive and emotional processes are involved in mediating the health effects of writing about stressful experiences (Lepore and Smyth 4).

Cognition and emotion, like creativity and logic, cannot be separated (Berthoff, Groopman).

It is not uncommon for psychologists to prescribe “the writing cure” to those who suffer from grief, anxiety, and fear (Bracher, Lepore and Smyth, Pennebaker, van der Kolk and Saporta). So why should writing teachers shy away from students who choose to narrate or conduct research on issues related to their particular grief or wounds? In The Writing Cure: Psychoanalysis, Composition, and the Aims of Education, compositionist Mark Bracher offers three potentially wide-ranging benefits to encouraging students to write about what ails them. Theoretically, such an approach enhances the writer’s education by reducing the psychological conflicts that tend to interfere with learning; it enhances the student writer’s capacity for learning by enabling him or her to assimilate information in personally meaningful ways; and it empowers student writers to live more productively by reducing their previously unexplored self-destructive attitudes and behaviors (2). While he promotes a psychoanalytic approach to teaching writing, Bracher acknowledges that any model for writing instruction may work well in one location and fail in another, for students’ needs and teachers’ styles vary widely from school to school and region to region, and the most effective pedagogies arise from a multitude of voices and experiences, not from a single source (17). While grief is universal, the expression of it and response to it must remain open to individual circumstances of teaching and learning.

Inevitably, because they are human and have suffered in ways we do not recognize at first or second glance, our students bring pain and joy, rage and delight to the writing table. On our good days, we respond to them and their stories with

compassion and an eye toward revision. But sometimes we feel unprepared to meet what comes; we fear that our critiques will cripple our students, emotionally and intellectually, and that they will withdraw from us or worse, from college, and never return. What's a teacher to do in the face of these fears? If we want to hook our students into learning what we have to teach about the benefits of composing, about the (potentially violent) power of literacy, we have to make room for what they bring to class. If we fail to engage them and the literacies they know, we risk losing them, anyway (Bleich, hooks, Hurlbert and Blitz, Mayher, Payne).

As college writing teachers, we must remain aware of the findings of Belenky et al regarding voice and self-development as we work with male and female students who may have been silenced and are now encouraged to write narratives, poems, and documented essays about subjects that interest them. Developing their own subjects may be more difficult—and more important—for students who have been shamed, silenced, or traumatized, and as writing teachers, we should be aware of how our assignments affect students differently, depending on their histories. Compositionist Louise Wetherbee Phelps has found that a writing class offers students, especially women, “an opportunity to compose their lives—reconstructing and recuperating them as experience that can ground insight and further action” (Phelps and Emig 411). Composing their lives may spell survival for some, particularly first-generation students.

I have witnessed such reconstructions repeatedly among women in writing classes. One non-traditional student, Teresa, had never told the story of being raped at age 8 until she wrote a poem and read it aloud in our Writing and Healing course. During the first few weeks, she could not speak at all without crying or choking up, and by the

final weeks, she was laughing and talking more easily. After watching the film A Rumor of Angels and free-writing about grief, she wrote an email thanking me for encouraging students to name and express their feelings: “I needed to hear grief verbalized. We have never really talked about such issues in my household. You just cry or whatever and get over it. No one stops to pay attention to what they are really feeling, pain, sadness, anger, guilt, a lot of mixed emotions.” For her, “putting a word to the feeling has given me a clearer understanding. And for this reason I am grateful for this class.”

I wonder how many other students yearn for understanding in an academic culture that dismisses their pain, tears, and rage. Few people want to witness another person’s loss or grief, aside from the genres of confessional talk shows and reality TV, which encourage voyeurism without the real-life connections that psychologists and physicians say can heal. In Western culture, we have a limited, private time and place for acknowledging death and then we’re expected to move on (Levine 3), ignoring the fact that grief “never fully disappears” (Simon and Drantell 17) and that ungrieved losses can lead to burnout and apathy (Remen 52). Our culture, particularly the academy, promotes clean, linear storylines with neat closures, not the messy, recursive outpouring of emotion that says grief is real, death is coming, and suffering is something to name and share.

Overview of the Interdisciplinary Study

In my dissertation, I explore what happens when a child loses a parent before age 18 and the short- and long-term consequences of choosing to write and share his or her story of loss with a college composition teacher and classmates. Rather than limit my research to composition pedagogy and case studies, I incorporate theories from multiple perspectives related to writing, healing, and grief, ranging from neurology and other

forms of medical research to theories of narrative and identity to psychology and trauma studies. Such interdisciplinary work occurs frequently in composition studies, a field whose strength emanates from its “borderline or mixed quality” (Mack and Zebroski 162) and one accustomed to mixing genres and disciplines (Bleich 35, Latterell and Selfe 48). I want my writing and research and my students’ reflections on grief writing to be read across borders and disciplines, for grief and its companion, yearning, are complicated and defy easy categorization.

In “Dissertation Writing and Advising in a Postmodern Age,” compositionists Latterell and Selfe define the goal of the interdisciplinary dissertation:

weaving together the threads of various disciplines to form new research approaches not necessarily attached to any one traditional disciplinary design, reading texts that resisted the boundaries of conventionally defined fields, acknowledging and combining standards from multiple disciplines, and avoiding false claims of mastery of any one field. (48)

By situating the subject of students’ grief narratives within a multi-voiced cultural context, I hope to illuminate the consequences of writing about loss and sharing the writing with empathetic readers, both in and outside the college classroom, and to illustrate the connections between individual and collective suffering and healing. As Bleich acknowledges in Know and Tell, the value of welcoming individual stories of struggle into the classroom is that once they are “recognized as collective, a collective approach to their solution may be sought, thus helping to bring the solution to more people” (14). When students realize they are not the only ones who have suffered loss, their chances to connect meaningfully with others increase, which in turn increases their

opportunities for success in college and beyond. Unfortunately for many in our classes, “isolation and absurdity, not connectedness and meaningfulness, are for our students the characterizing qualities of most experience” (Berthoff 72). Composition teachers are well-positioned to pierce the isolation by offering student writers a chance to revisit and become more conscious of their own life experiences, desires, and conflicts and the experiences of others (peers, teachers, and published authors)—and becoming more conscious of experiences beyond their own first-hand knowledge takes students one step closer to transformation, individually and culturally (Amy, Felman, Kelly Oliver).

Chapter One offers an overview of the dissertation and my position in relation to the subjects of grief and loss. It introduces the interdisciplinary study of student grief writing, defines grief, and explains the benefits of naming traumatic loss. Chapter Two takes a broad view of the powers of expressing and withholding grief, individually and culturally; it exposes the schizophrenic life of grief in American culture and its growing prominence since Sept. 11, 2001, from roadside memorials to books, movies, and television programs about death and illness. Chapter Three examines the resistance to grief, shame, and other emotions in the academy and in the discipline of composition studies and emphasizes the increasingly popular narrative modes of learning.

Chapter Four moves grief writing into the composition classroom to advocate embodied teaching and writing and to address common resistance among teachers who claim they are “not trained as therapists” and “cannot grade someone’s traumatic story.” This chapter also speaks to the role of the “witness” of traumatic loss and highlights the differences between listening to sorrow and fixing it. Chapter Five documents the long-term effects of losing a parent before age 18 and illuminates the situations of selected

students who lost a parent early and wrote about it in first-year composition. Based on recent interviews with three former students who wrote about a parent dying, I illustrate how writing and telling about their loss influenced their sense of identity, home, and career goals.

Chapter Six concludes that writing and telling about the loss of a parent often leads to a reconstruction of home and to the forgiveness researchers see as necessary for a healthy life. I suggest areas for additional research and offer recommendations for writing program administrators and teachers to consider as we prepare to deal with the inevitable expressions of students' grief. Interwoven in these chapters are stories, songs, and poems of loss and recovery, my students', my own and others', for I recognize how one person's grief mirrors and is mirrored by the community, nation, or world's grief (Chodron, Brazier, Bleich, Hanh). To establish the context for my research and as evidence for my recommendations for enhanced teaching and learning, I explicate the damage done by centuries of academic insistence on thinking alone and of teachers' and administrators' denial of emotions and bodies.

Assignments and Disclosure: A Disclaimer

As I begin my study, I am concerned that some readers may misunderstand, misinterpret, or misapply my research and become voyeuristic or overly involved in students' lives. As writing teachers, we must respect the boundaries between ourselves and our students and their texts; we must remain clear with ourselves and our students about our roles and goals as compositionists, not counselors. Topics that are appropriate for students in an elective course such as Writing and Healing or Writing the Body may be inappropriate in a mandatory composition course. Not everyone has suffered a major

loss or trauma by age 18 or 19, and even those who have may not be ready to process or disclose it as a college freshman.

Specifically, I do not require grief writing in first-year composition; I do not assign or even ask composition students to write about their traumatic experiences. Many of their grief narratives and poems arise in response to National Writing Project style assignments such as drawing a neighborhood map and writing a story from it, or writing a “You” poem about oneself without using “I.” Some are written in response to assignments of personalizing a documented essay or explicating a favorite song or poem, while others are written as practice essays for the state-mandated Board of Regents’ exam in response to topics such as: “If you could re-live one day of your life, what would it be and why?”

Reflecting years later on their writing choices as first-year students, my students’ stories enhance our understanding of how composing and sharing their sorrow often influence the writer’s process of grieving, healing, connecting with others, and reconstructing identity after loss. In a culture that denies death and pursues permanence (Bradbury 51), how do young people who feel emotionally and physically abandoned compose themselves in a way that enables them to succeed in college and beyond? To what extent and under what circumstances might writing about their loss and sharing it with witnesses enable students to create an identity they can live with, a sense of home after theirs has been annihilated?

I focus on orphaned students for three reasons: 1. such loss is universal among humans unless we die first; 2. many students enter college in some stage of mother- or father-loss and homelessness, whether permanent or temporary, and 3. additional forms

of student grief writing related to sexual and physical abuse, disability, divorce, and other traumas are equally complex and worthy of study on their own merits. To interview and accurately represent students who have survived diverse losses could be a life's work, too much for one dissertation. Further, I am inspired by the maturity and courage of students who bring their parental losses to the page and invite the rest of us to ponder similar possibilities in our own lives: the “terrifying insecurity,” “profound emptiness,” “unbearable longing” and struggle to survive after a parent's death (Harris 6, 19). I am compelled to note that while revealing sorrow can be healing, it can also be risky and temporarily disruptive in a college classroom. With Bleich, Hurlbert and Blitz, and other veteran teachers, I've seen the benefits outweigh the risks and the breakdowns lead to breakthroughs, over and over again.

I limited my participant pool to my former students because we already have a shared history, which should make it easier for them to disclose sensitive information about their ways of coping with the death of their mother or father. Like Katherine Sohn, whose dissertation tracks eight nontraditional female students from Appalachia, my research “is based on relationships and connectedness; I had been their teacher, so we had established relationships before the research” (Sohn 430). While Sohn interviewed her former students about their literacy habits since college, I asked my former students to reflect on the consequences of having written and talked about their parent's death. Both Sohn and I reconnected with students who are willing to continue the dialogue that began when they were college freshmen—a dialogue that could prove mutually beneficial and enlightening.

My students' reflections provide information and insights that are lacking in

composition research: the long-term effects of disclosing traumatic loss in a first-year writing class. Compositionists need to examine further the myth of grieving students “breaking down” in a composition class and then withdrawing from school, never to return. In her dissertation on student grief narratives, Hallet challenges writing teachers to consider the following questions, which her research did not answer: “What happens to the student six months, a year, ten years after the breakdown? Does the student get support and help? Is it possible that the student may in fact, or does indeed, return to school later? And how can/does writing function in the process of restoration and recovery, composition and re-composure?” (48). These are the kinds of questions I asked my former students about their processes of writing, grieving, and turning their losses into creative, constructive forces for their lives, in and beyond college.

The Need for Naming Traumatic Loss

My title, The Language of Loss: Transformation in the Telling, In and Beyond the Writing Classroom implies that suffering can be expressed in words, that traumatic loss can be articulated and thereby transformed if witnessed by an empathetic other. While my research and experience indicate that survival and growth are possible, I must acknowledge that some losses take a lifetime to grieve and some wounds never heal. Grief can be cavernous. Language falls short, for “language is not the optimal mode of expressing emotion. For most people, it is extremely difficult to express strong emotion verbally” (Bucci 103). Yet, in cases of grief resulting from traumatic loss, which the premature death of a parent is, a survivor’s quality of life may depend on her finding words—fragmented, poetic images or reconstructive narratives—and sharing them with caring readers and listeners (Felman and Laub, Lepore and Smyth, MacCurdy, van der

Kolk and Saporta). Loss of all kinds can be life-shattering, especially for children who lose a parent and lack the narrative tools—words, stories, and cultural myths—with which to process and share their sorrow. As they struggle to relocate a sense of self and home, many children find themselves shrouded in silence and isolation in a culture that resists aging, illness, and death: “One thing that is often overlooked in the West is the importance of collective grief. When a death is not grieved by the whole community together, it leaves the individuals who were closest to the deceased shattered and alone. They end up without a path back to the life of the group” (Some 137). Without language, listeners, or a pathway forward, a traumatic loss among children may feel catastrophic, “the defining event of their lives” (Harris 13), unless they are able to name and reconstruct it in the presence of caring witnesses who see them as subjects, not as objects (Kelly Oliver).

My dissertation title is ironic because catastrophic loss—a calamity that causes violent, abrupt and absolute change—often resists articulation. Language comes slowly, and sometimes its failure leads to crisis, as language is often inadequate for composing death. Poet laureate Maya Angelou, who was orphaned young, was mute for seven years after being raped as a child and hearing that her rapist had been murdered (Caged Bird 73), but eventually she began speaking and writing and hasn’t stopped since. Nobel Peace laureate Elie Wiesel remained silent on his Holocaust experiences for ten years after his liberation from a Nazi concentration camp at age 16, where he was orphaned. He finally began to record his memories in Night and subsequent memoirs because, he said, “to remain silent and indifferent is the greatest sin of all” (“Elie Wiesel Biography” 1). Now prolific writers and revered speakers, Angelou and Wiesel reach millions of readers

around the world with their stories and inspire other survivors to reach for language and an audience for individual and cultural healing.

As Angelou and Wiesel discovered, trauma and recovery are complex physiological and psychological processes, not easily defined or undertaken. In the years spent reading, writing, teaching, and listening for my dissertation, I have learned that words won't always come, that we can't always "drop the story" or "put it down in words." Trauma tends to be fragmented, inaccessible, and unexplainable because the brain's survival mechanisms cause the victim to miss the moment of trauma—to leave her body so that she never fully experiences it—and therefore she can't remember it and remains stuck in its physiological after-effects, unable to know it fully or let it go (Caruth, Culbertson, Laub). Many survivors of violence and traumatic loss become silent about their victimization, even as the traumatic experience "remains somehow fundamental to [their] existence, and to [their] unfolding or enfolded conception of [themselves]" (Culbertson 169). The victim "does not tell what she recalls, in part because others do not seem to hear what is said, partly out of a conviction that she will not be believed, and more basically because she simply cannot make the leap to words." The writings of Wiesel and other survivors make it clear that surviving parental loss and personal violation means living with "the paradox of silence and the present but unreachable force of memory, and a concomitant need to tell what seems untellable" (170). Surviving and thriving involve telling and being believed, a lifetime process for many who experience traumatic loss or violation as children or young adults. Writing teachers need to be more aware of and attuned to orphaned students' need to tell so we may facilitate the process.

When a trauma survivor manages to find words and a caring audience, her written or spoken testimony tends to be fragmented and non-linear. Such testimony is “composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference” (Felman 5). In the case of survivor testimony, no telling or writing is ever complete, according to sociologist Arthur Frank, and knowing this does not diminish the force or power of testimony to heal the survivor or those who receive it (Frank 138). The implications for writing teachers are clear: While students may not produce a fully coherent narrative about traumatic loss, their attempts to do so in a writing class may set into motion a process of testifying for themselves and others—a process with healing potential, individually and culturally. The more we understand trauma, grief, and recovery, the better prepared we are to listen and respond to students’ writing and telling. My research suggests the paradoxical importance and near impossibility of naming, knowing, and transforming that which hurts us, especially for those who have felt alienated and silenced by history, gender, race, family, culture, or schooling.

As human beings we seem hardwired to communicate, to articulate both pain and pleasure and to connect with others in our effort to survive. We are language users driven to name, know and tell (Griffin 77, Berthoff 36, Allison 72). In our healthier moments, we are more inclined to build than to tear down, though both composing and decomposing happen simultaneously and constantly. Inadequate as language may be, experts across disciplines agree that articulating what is lost and discovering what remains is necessary to restoring the balance that is disrupted by intense sorrow. When

the balance tilts too far in one direction for too long because one person or group's suffering is denied or discounted, or because one person or group's pleasure is enjoyed at the expense of another's, more pain and violence erupt and the cycle continues, locally and globally.

The Restorative Function of Writing and Teaching Across Boundaries

One way to restore balance after loss is through writing, particularly through narrative and poetic genres. Grief dwells in the spaces between violence and nurturing, between being ignored and being attended to and in the boundary between personal and academic writing. Grief writing tends to cross borders, genres, and disciplines as it resists closure and containment (Hallet 110-111). Only in "straddling boundaries" or engaging in "cross-boundary discourse" do we begin to hear, understand, and respect the voices of others (Royster 34)—a practice that paves the way for peace and creativity as people from different backgrounds begin to find common ground.

It is not surprising that many composition teachers and students experience discomfort when we teach and write to the edge of our comfort zones, a move that is both frightening and necessary. Fostering written and verbal dialogue in institutional spaces sometimes feels dangerous but may become what Lad Tobin calls the most productive place for students and writing teachers to meet, an edge that is "somewhere between boredom and anxiety" (Writing Relationships 16). This space is described by anthropologist Victor Turner as "liminal tension" or a "state of in-betweenness," a period of time between one context of meaning and action and another, often marked by ambiguity and inconsistency (Turner qtd. in Sunstein 178). Shoshana Felman, a professor, literary theorist, and expert on trauma theory suggests that "in a post-traumatic

age . . . teaching should take position at the edge of itself, at the edge of its conventional conception” so that we enable students to experience the disruptions and cognitive dissonance that lead to learning (Felman 54). Developmental theorists agree that people move to more mature levels of understanding and behavior only after they experience discomfort where they are and when another person or group encourages their growth and learning.

Transformation happens in these liminal or groundless spaces which Tibetan nun Pema Chodron advocates as the middle way, “an open state of mind that can relax with paradox and ambiguity” (54)—not something most academics do easily. We live and work within a masculinist culture that wants control, clarity, precision, and closure—that which grief refuses as it stops and starts and spills over, unexpectedly. Rather than resisting loss as the dreaded down side of gain, Chodron asks us to reconsider loss and “things falling apart [as] a kind of testing and also a kind of healing” (8). Similarly, Sondra Perl asks us to write and teach to “the edge where meaning can be made, where ideas unfold naturally” so that we take any situation, especially the uncomfortable, murky ones, and carry them further to be “explicated, understood, thought freshly and newly, by speaking it or thinking it from within the body” (56). In embodied knowing, the person’s body, language, and situation are inextricably linked (54), and when we are at a loss, paying attention to all three may guide us and our writing to transformative, life-sustaining spaces.

Isn’t this naming, knowing, and improving our world what education is all about, for us and our students? A dialectic, non-linear series of moments in which we discover that we don’t know what we thought we knew, that we are more connected and less

isolated than we thought we were, and that life and learning resist being contained in controlled categories? Composition scholars such as Kurt Spellmeyer and Hurlbert and Blitz want us to teach students to deal with not knowing—a reality of life—rather than rushing to closure and reinforcing forms and genres that only pretend to provide answers and solve unsolvable problems. As Hurlbert says to Blitz in an email about the difficulty in responding to students' stories of violence and loss: "Even in the face of our tremendous felt need to articulate answers, we need to begin and even stay in the questions we raise," to keep things open and resist the myths and conclusions of the discipline (Blitz and Hurlbert 47). Understandably, then, the most effective grief writing is open-ended and dialogic as it refuses to settle for simple endings, just as memories of the dead return to haunt and/or comfort the living.

Grief, like writing, is recursive. Both emanate from feelings registered in the body and the unconscious—memories stored in pieces that wield power over our lives, especially if left untold or unexamined. For centuries, reading, writing, telling, and listening to stories has connected us to ourselves, our ancestors, our children's children, and each other. From carving hieroglyphic images on cave walls to communicating through telephones and electronic mail, human beings historically have reached for each other through narrative and poetry, story and song in an attempt to make meaning. Gian Pagnucci and other narrative theorists agree that "we need to exchange stories with each other in order to make sense of our worlds" (3), because "stories give us time to pause, to think, to breathe. Stories keep us alive. Or at least, they can, if we will let them" (150). When words fail, our bodies and emotions allow us to attend each other in a quiet but active presence that can be restorative. When bodies and emotions also fail to meet grief,

the results can be toxic, individually and culturally. Sooner or later, as the poet Marge Piercy cautions in “Right to Life,” survivors of catastrophic loss demand to be heard, as their anger “must find a target” and their pain “will beget pain” (387). Piercy predicts that some children who grow up feeling unloved will torch a synagogue, summon a firing squad, or push a button and burn down the world. More than a few abandoned or orphaned children find their way into college writing classes; what life-affirming opportunities or creative outlets are we offering them? What damage are we doing when we don’t allow room for students’ stories, “the narratives students actually need to tell in order to grow” (Pagnucci 29)?

With depression, violence, poverty, and fear escalating in the so-called civilized world, the academy can no longer afford to address only one-third of the person—the rational, Aristotelian male mind—while ignoring the body and spirit. We and our students bring histories, bodies, memories, desires, and stories that long to be integrated into the learning environment, sorrows imbedded deep that need to be sung (Griffin 8). The personal and cultural price of not singing our histories is too high: “What is hidden, kept secret, cannot be loved. It exists in a place of exile, outside the realm of response” (98). And for many of us who teach, education becomes an act of love (hooks, Grumet, Bleich, Mayher). How can we respond constructively to the painful stories of our students—stories that threaten to block their learning and success if left untold—if we don’t welcome their stories into the light? Learning to pay attention takes years of concentration and practice but is worth the effort for us and our students, some of whom have not felt heard until now.

I add my voice to the growing chorus of scholars asking us to notice what

happens in bodies and emotions as well as minds—our own and our students’—as we attempt to reconstruct life after loss and to teach English so that people stop hating and hurting each other. What happens when we and our students can no longer listen? No longer write? No longer tell? Is anyone home? These questions hover at the edges of my dissertation. In the face of grief, are we there? Are we able to stop judging and meet our students and ourselves in anguish as well as joy? Are we aware of and willing to pay the consequences of not stopping, not listening, not making room for body, mind, and spirit? Like Pagnucci, I am “scared to criticize [the academy’s entrenched, anti-narrative forces], but even more scared by what happens when we stay silent” (29). The work of transforming grief may, indeed, be interminable, but we who are called to teach writing are compelled to pursue this work, now that we have identified composing and the composition classroom as sites for coming to terms with grief and loss.

CHAPTER 2: THE PLACE OF GRIEF IN OUR CULTURE

“Jesus said, ‘If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.’”

Gospel of Thomas 45: 30-33, qtd. in Elaine Pagels’ The Gnostic Gospels, xv

The Power of Grief (Un)Expressed

If we took to heart Jesus’ cautionary words that what we express will save us and what we repress will kill us, we would live radically different lives, individually and collectively, in the academy and in the world. But these particular words are little known as they are part of the Gnostic Gospels, found in upper Egypt in the 1890s and believed to contain “the secret words which the living Jesus spoke” and which Judas Thomas recorded on papyrus scrolls (Pagels xv). The Greek word “gnostic” means knowing or knowledge, and “gnosis” refers to intuitive insights or the process of knowing oneself (xix). The Gnostic Gospels suggest that self-knowledge is knowledge of God and that the living Jesus speaks of illusion and enlightenment more than sin and repentance (xx). Similarly, Buddha instructs us to look deeply into our grief to find both the source of suffering and the way to work through it—ideas contrary to the academic mode of pursuing knowledge elsewhere, in words written and delivered by some all-knowing other, and filling students’ minds with pre-packaged information (Freire’s “banking concept of education”) rather than inviting them to “bring forth what is inside” and to listen to what their lives and peers are bringing forth.

This chapter explores the growing body of interdisciplinary research that illustrates the power of grief—the health benefits of expressing it and the toxic consequences of repressing it—in our culture. As poets and artists have shown us for

centuries, grief will not be denied. Its consequences can be life-enhancing or life-shattering, depending on what we do with it, how, when, and with whom. As grief wants most to “find its way to meaning” (Wolpe), it seeps into art, music, dance, literature, sports, and other verbal or nonverbal forms of self-expression, public and private. Sometimes it goes underground and expresses itself in chronic illnesses or war with self or others: “the expression or nonexpression of emotion has long been implicated in chronic illnesses, such as heart disease and cancer, and in the quality of life of people living with or recovering from these illnesses and their treatments” (Lepore and Smyth 7). Considering the health benefits of expressive writing, what do we have to lose by inviting students to write from their experiences and to place them in a context that reflects the multiple influences of culture?

In addition to healing the body, dozens of scientific experiments conducted in the last decade indicate that writing and/or telling about traumatic memories or grief helps the survivor to reconstruct and to understand the residual effects and work through them (Bracher, Caruth, DeSalvo, Laub, Lepore and Smyth, Pennebaker). The popularity of twelve-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous, and Overeaters Anonymous suggests that telling and listening to stories of illness—in groups without trained therapists—helps sufferers deal with their addictions one day at a time (Daniell, Beatty, Knapp, Burroughs, Frank). In her 2003 dissertation at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Composition and Recovery, Jamie Beatty interviewed ten women who were active members of AA to determine the role writing had played in their sobriety and spirituality. In maintaining their 10 to 27 years of sobriety, all ten women “use writing to explore and express feelings, to write letters of amends, and to write

inventories for the purpose of healing, making changes in their lives, and enhancing their spiritual growth” (Beatty iv). Along with rhetorician Beth Daniell in A Communion of Friendship: Literacy, Spiritual Practice, and Women in Recovery, Beatty urges compositionists to teach life-long writing practices that will help students practice writing “for their health and spiritual growth” (iv-v). The success of the recovery movement “reinforces the cultural importance of testimony” (Frank 139) and the healing power of telling and hearing stories.

There is nowhere to hide from suffering and death, and writing and story-telling are becoming common prescriptions for surviving and connecting in our culture. Suffering of all sorts can function as a “doorway to transformation” for those who refuse to dwell in the isolation that illness brings and are willing to talk and listen: “Telling stories can be healing,” says physician Dean Ornish in his introduction to Remen’s Kitchen Table Wisdom. “We all have within us access to a greater wisdom, and we may not even know that until we speak out loud. Listening to stories also can be healing. A deep trust of life often emerges when you listen to other people’s stories” (xix). While the act of telling is disruptive at times, it can be healing, as well, especially for those who have a history of being silenced. In Talking Back, feminist scholar bell hooks asserts that ““moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible”” (hooks qtd. in Glenn 74), and I would add orphaned children to the list. Not speaking may leave a person paralyzed and fearful, especially those who have been violated or traumatized because they belong to certain groups or nations (based on gender, race, religion, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, or other

factors).

After seeing their loved ones murdered and their villages flattened by bombs, the survivors of war in Mozambique forged new ways of life through naming what was lost and joining together with artists, doctors, lawyers, and educators to create peaceful communities (Nordstrom 219). In The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics, sociologist Arthur Frank illustrates how disease disrupts the stories people hold true about themselves and how the wounded or ill body itself “sets in motion the need for new stories”—a personal and social need for stories that give voice to the body as it changes, grows weaker, and/or recovers (2). Students who have suffered traumatic injury or loss benefit from writing, hearing, and revising embodied stories, especially those who come from families where silence and denial are the norm and naming and knowing are discouraged.

Clinical psychologists often encourage grieving clients to write letters and/or poems to the deceased in an effort to help them articulate feelings and desires related to their loss (Leick and Davidsen-Nielsen 136). Therapists who invite clients to rewrite painful childhood scripts often take the role of “helpful editor” in the identity reconstruction process (Bruner 113). Two staff psychologists at Georgia Southern University, Ellen Emerson and Chuck Zanone, often ask students who are grieving to write about their loss and about what remains, and to bring their writing to therapy sessions as they begin to heal and to construct new identities. Upon hearing the nature of my research, a massage therapist confided that writing had saved her life after she lost everything in one season: her health (cancer diagnosis), her lover, her house, and her ability to work and support herself. Her psychotherapist urged her to keep a journal,

which she did, and she discovered that the act of writing through her feelings and sharing it with her therapist prevented her from committing suicide when the urge was strong. She experienced the truth of Natalie Goldberg's philosophy that "writing is deeper than therapy. You write *through* your pain, and even your suffering must be written out and let go of" (114). A few years after the massage therapist recovered from cancer and was able to work again, she re-read her journals and destroyed them because they had served their purpose; she was ready to release them and the pain they chronicled. She was ready to re-enter the land of the living.

Memorializing Loss: Grief Goes Public

"The term 'grief' scares most people in the modern world. They just see the tears and hear the crying. They don't see that grieving is necessary to heal at all the different levels of spirit and emotion."

Sobonfu Some, Falling Out of Grace, 137

Public memorials are proliferating as survivors move their grief out of the closet and into the streets, locally and globally, literally and electronically. I have witnessed notes and photos left at the Vietnam Memorial Wall, a multi-acre AIDS Names Quilt spread across the Washington mall, poems posted on a Vietnam survivors' website, apologies and forgiveness exchanged between survivors and perpetrators of apartheid via South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's web page, and roadside shrines marking the site of someone who died in an automobile accident. When words fail or witnesses refuse to hear, bereaved survivors find ways to communicate their sorrow to public officials who are in a position to make changes.

Grief works its way out of the body and into the marketplace, even when the pressure to squelch it is strong. In May 2004, families and friends who had lost loved

ones to the war in Iraq lined up 800 pairs of combat boots near the White House as a living “Boot War Memorial” to the soldiers who died. Another common memorial involves lowering the American flag to half-mast, something families, schools, businesses, and government agencies do to honor those who have died violently or unexpectedly. Websites such as poetryhealing.com and the National Poetry Therapy Association invite consumers to publish their pain online and to participate in workshops for writing and healing, away from the academy and outside the therapist’s office. One such workshop available through poetryhealing.com is led by Cassie Premo Steele, poet and author of We Heal From Memory. After earning her Ph.D. in English from Emory University, Steele taught writing and literature for a few years before opening her poetry therapy business in Columbia, South Carolina, teaching poetry writing as a method of healing.

Alongside canonical literature that tends to glorify war and minimize its traumatic effects on survivors, we have books that illuminate the grief and gore of war: Elie Wiesel’s Night, Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse Five, Gunter Grass’s Tin Drum, Semezdin Mehmedinovic’s Sarajevo Blues, Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony, and Bobbie Ann Mason’s In Country, which tells the story of an 18-year-old woman on a quest for information about her father, who died in Vietnam.

Mason’s novel is one of three texts-as-grief-sites featured in Mary Marwitz’s essay, “Writing for Wholeness: Personal and Cultural,” presented at CCCC in 2002. Marwitz uses Mason’s fictional In Country and autobiographical Clear Springs, along with images of the Vietnam Memorial Wall, to illustrate that breaking silence and telling/writing stories is potentially healing: “Telling each other and ourselves stories is a

way of finding our place in history, both private and personal. It is a way of locating ourselves in the larger dialogue. The narrative act is an act of creation as the teller orders the past and imposes meaning on the events of his or her experience” (5). Thousands of people visit the Wall each year and make rubbings of one or more names etched into the black granite; in etching the name from the wall, visitors become writers who “inscribe themselves symbolically on the wall” (7). Others leave letters, poems, confessions, apologies, gratitude, and angry questions taped or propped against the wall, making the wall “a fluid text, an ever-changing story.” A similar fluidity exists online, as hundreds of poets and writers leave artifacts on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall homepage. Marwitz argues that the act of writing and telling stories can “break the silences that deepen our wounds . . . and in the process, begin to heal them” (1)—a claim supported by dozens of studies in recent decades (Lepore and Smyth, Pennebaker). Knowing what we know about the healing effects of speaking and writing, it seems wrong to deny our students the opportunity to speak and write of what troubles them.

At least two other books feature stories and letters from Vietnam as told by survivors who witnessed, fought, or lost loved ones there. In Shrapnel in the Heart: Letters and Remembrances from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Laura Palmer interviews the authors of letters and poetry left at the wall in 1986 in remembrance of 30 soldiers who died. All artifacts left at the memorial are collected daily by the National Park Service, then catalogued and preserved for a possible museum exhibit (Palmer xii). Palmer searched the memorabilia and visited the soldiers’ siblings, parents, and friends in more than a dozen states: “I wanted to know what motivated people to express their private thoughts in a public place, and how the loss of someone they loved altered their

lives, relationships, and aspirations” (xiii). When friends asked repeatedly if her work was depressing, Palmer said emphatically no, “because people were grateful for a chance to tell their stories. Sequestered so long with grief, each survivor seemed to think he or she was the only one who continued to mourn so deeply.” Instead of just wanting to talk, she found that “they need to talk. It is a deep yearning in many, suppressed because of the wildly erroneous notion that by now they should be ‘over it.’” The controversy over Vietnam “stifled a lot of grief” and led to societal shame that delayed any national recognition for those who served there. While the nation’s shame did not diminish the pride and pain the survivors felt, Palmer found that “it did lessen the likelihood of their talking about it” (xiv)—and countless studies have shown that when grief is stalled or silenced by shame, it takes longer to recover or transform it (Pennebaker, Wegner and Lane, Bucci).

Palmer’s purpose in writing Shrapnel in the Heart, like mine in encouraging students to write from their lives, is “breaking the silence. Nothing I can write, no story I can tell, will erase anyone’s pain, but it can, I hope, crack the isolation which is the tyranny of grief” (xiii). If applied appropriately in schools and colleges, writing allows students to express their own grief and longing and to share it with others who have similar feelings, leaving them less alone: “Writing is already part of the core curriculum at any school. However, it is mostly viewed as a tool for assessing learning rather than promoting it” (Lepore and Smyth 8). Researchers have found that “written narratives influence children’s social identity and conflict negotiation strategies in a positive way, thus protecting them from dangerous situations.” Studies involving the use of narratives for violence prevention in New York City schools illustrate how “writing can reduce

health risks by promoting social-cognitive and social-emotional development,” development that enhances the life of children and their families through college and beyond.

Vietnam was not new territory for Palmer, a news reporter in her 20s when she witnessed the fall of Saigon. She wrote a chapter for War Torn: Stories of War from the Women Reporters Who Covered Vietnam, the 2002 anthology which includes essays by nine women journalists reflecting on the life-long consequences of covering the Vietnam War between 1966 and 1975. These women wrote the book “to keep those agonizing yet strangely exhilarating days alive, those dark days that changed us in ways we are still trying to understand” (Bartimus et al, viii). Unlike other books about the war, War Torn collects “intensely personal memoirs from women writing about the Vietnam War as they lived it” (vii). In this case, writing about what they learned and lost in the war serves at least two rhetorical purposes: to rekindle and develop deeper understandings of their memories of war and to bear witness with other women to their transformative experiences. Writing, then, becomes a way in and out of grief, an embodied practice of immersion and emergence that connects writers to each other, to those who died, and to the broader community.

Similar purposes appear repeatedly across verbal and nonverbal eulogistic genres, whether personally-constructed roadside shrines, government-funded memorials, or movies such as The Guys, a 2003 film adaptation of the post-September 11 play by Anne Nelson. The film features a series of scenes in which a Brooklyn fire captain (Anthony LaPaglia) works closely with an upper-middle-class New York journalist (Sigourney Weaver) in crafting eulogies for eight firefighters who died in the collapse of the Twin

Towers. The captain visits the journalist in her home after his massage therapist diagnoses him with writer's block—another embodied response to traumatic loss; as the captain describes each man he lost and she records his words and reads them back to him, his physical posture softens as his grief finds a coherent outlet. When he apologizes for taking too much of her time, the journalist assures him that words are her tools and that writing eulogies for him to read at each funeral enables her to work through her own grief and fear related to the attack.

Like Palmer's interviews with people who lost brothers, fathers, and sons in Vietnam, The Guys personalizes the tragedy and leaves viewers with a visceral sense of what has been sacrificed and what may be redeemed in the aftermath. The common key for health in Shrapnel and The Guys is the combination of telling and witnessing, of speaking and being heard. Both the person telling and the person listening—plus the readers and viewers who witness the conversation—are changed by the survivor's testimony, for as Lori Amy notes, ““under the right conditions, *saying* something about a traumatic memory *does* something to it”” (Brinson qtd. in Amy 1). While the exact something may not be named or measured fully, we see that transformation often begins with the act of articulating grief.

A sampling of research into the phenomenon of roadside memorials offers analyses from three disciplinary perspectives: rhetoric, drama, and literature. In her 2003 dissertation at the University of Illinois, Standing at the End of a Road: Death and the Construction of Cyborg Relationships, rhetorician Joyce R. Walker explores the connections between bereavement rituals such as roadside memorials and the new digital media. Similarly, dramatist Rebecca M. Kennerly explores roadside shrines marking sites

of death in “Getting Messy: In the Field and at the Crossroads with Roadside Shrines,” an article in the October 2002 issue of Text and Performance Quarterly. Stemming from Kennerly’s dissertation research at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, the article includes her series of ink sketches of roadside shrines, interviews with people who built them, and critical and performance theories to help readers understand “our complex fragmented, and often agonistic relationships with death and living memory” (Kennerly 229). Likewise in “Roadside Memorials: Driving, Death, and Narrative,” literature professor David L. Dudley asserts that roadside memorial markers provoke passersby to speculate on the tragic event they commemorate and may even cause some people to create narratives for themselves—despite the unavailability of the facts—in an effort to answer the question, “What happened here?” These scholarly explorations of the public nature of private grief reinforce the academic relevance of mourning and remind us that loss must be expressed, even when its language is a nonverbal bouquet of plastic roses pinned to a wooden cross and planted, anonymously, beside the highway.

Healing the Body: “Story” as Medicine

“If loneliness is the disease, the story is the cure.”
Pulitzer Prize winner Richard Ford, qtd. in Keillor 3

In Emotions, Disclosure, and Health edited by psychologist James Pennebaker, 36 researchers from various disciplines report on studies they conducted in the 1980s and 1990s exploring the relationships between improved health and immune function and telling and/or writing about traumatic events. They also examine the reverse: illness and not telling or writing about one’s feelings. Each chapter explores a different aspect of confession, silence, and physical or psychological health issues. Pennebaker

acknowledges in another book, Opening Up, that “as many as half of all people cope well with major traumas,” and they may not be helped significantly by writing or talking about crises (83). The other half, however, reports having major depression, anxiety, or other signs of grief following trauma, and for most of them, “writing or talking about the experience is likely to help” (87). Repeated studies have shown that writing or speaking about death, divorce, rape, incest, war, or other traumatic events is both physiologically and psychologically beneficial for survivors, whether the event happened decades, weeks, or days earlier. Pennebaker concludes that while writing is no panacea for dealing with upsetting memories or events, it can, for many people, “reduce the grieving time” (83) or the intensity of grief—benefits composition teachers and students should be aware of as we consider assigning subjects for 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 the writing with readers in a safe, hospitable space. Trauma and literary theorists such as Caruth, Felman and 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. As we ponder if and how hard to push students to write and revise their stories of personal pain or grief, we should allow them to choose their subjects for writing; we should let them know up-front that their work will be read and responded to by their peers and teacher, which reduces the chances of psychological harm being done in a writing class.

I find it ironic that physicians, psychologists, and other professionals outside our

discipline are embracing the therapeutic power of writing and story-telling in ways that many in English studies continue to deny. Too often we ignore the findings of scholars such as psychologist Laura King, who asserts in the opening lines of her essay: “Two strong conclusions can be made with regard to the benefits of writing. First, expressive writing has health benefits. Second, no one really knows why” (119). We know that from as far back as 5,000 years ago, when Sumerians used clay tablets and cuneiform signs for communication or measuring, human beings have used writing for expressing meaning. Since then, “writing has permeated and shaped every sphere of private and public life, be it spiritual, commercial, political, educational, artistic, or vocational” (Lepore and Smyth 3). Early theories about the benefits of writing arose from the assumption that unexpressed emotion leads to illness, so researchers today hypothesize that writing is therapeutic because it leads to emotional catharsis and insight through articulating and sharing one’s pain with others.

King’s essay, like others in Lepore and Smyth’s The Writing Cure, references dozens of scholarly studies touting the health benefits of composing, especially for people writing about traumatic or painful experiences. Such studies have been conducted over the past 20 years in colleges, prisons, nursing homes, community centers, cancer wards, and other settings by a variety of researchers in psychology, sociology, health, and other social sciences. Typically, researchers ask participants to write in detail about a traumatic experience and to express any and all emotions about it; most studies are conducted in a controlled laboratory setting over a period of three or four days and for 20 or 30 minutes each time (King 120). Initially, many participants find the writing painful, but later they report health benefits such as “enhanced immune function, reduced health

problems, and better adjustment to college” (121). One study of bereaved persons, conducted by Pennebaker and O’Heeron in 1984, reported that differences in health status one year after the loss were related to the degree of confiding, suggesting that expressing grief verbally or in writing tends to improve a person’s health.

Since the late 1970s, 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 at the University of Texas at Austin, Pennebaker discovered that survivors of childhood sexual abuse, parents dying, and other traumas who don't write or speak about their feelings related to the event tend to develop more major illnesses than survivors who do express their feelings (Opening Up 2 and DeSalvo 22). Repressing traumatic narratives can be an ongoing stressor which gradually undermines the body's defenses. DeSalvo credits Pennebaker with discovering that "confronting the chaos of our most difficult memories and translating them into coherent language can have remarkable short-and long-term health benefits" (DeSalvo 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. Composition teachers rarely rush a student to the hospital for over-dosing on writing.

The connections between writing and healing gained credibility nationally in 1999 after the Journal of the American Medical Association reported that writing about what ails us physically, spiritually, or emotionally can help alleviate symptoms of

arthritis, asthma, and migraines as well as depression and anxiety. JAMA's report was featured in the April 26, 1999 issue of Newsweek, in an article titled "Pen, Paper, Power!" by Claudia Kalb, and since then, books and articles on the healing effects of confessional writing have become commonplace. The same year, National Geographic reported that writing has the power to "alleviate depression, boost the immune system, and lower blood pressure" (Wolinsky 122). Similar stories have graced the covers of popular magazines for men and women, touting the multi-faceted power of writing for curing everything from obesity to asthma to grief. Two books from different academic disciplines share the same title: Bracher's The Writing Cure: Psychoanalysis, Composition, and the Aims of Education in 1999 was followed by Lepore and Smyth's The Writing Cure: How Expressive Writing Promotes Health and Emotional Well-Being in 2002. The paradigm seems to be shifting, slowly, in the direction of embracing personal writing as a means of working through grief and other traumas, in and out of school.

Some medical schools such as the University of Texas Health Science Center, Harvard Medical School, and New York City's Columbia University have incorporated "narrative medicine" into their physician training programs. Dr. Rita Charon, professor of internal medicine at Columbia, initiated the program after she realized that "sickness unfolds in stories" and that much of her work involved "absorbing people's stories, deciphering them and then taking action" ("Stories in Medicine" 1). As part of their training in listening and responding to patients' narratives, medical students are asked to write regularly, "in ordinary language," about their emotional reactions to patients, and to write and read their journals alongside their scientific charts. Students also attend lectures

on medical ethics and guest lectures by writers such as the late Susan Sontag as part of the immersion in narrative medicine (1).

Most physicians need but rarely receive training in dealing with their own and their patients' emotions, according to Rachel Naomi Remen, a pediatrician and cancer therapist known for her bestselling book, Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal. In an extended narrative, Remen weaves her personal and professional insights into how stories can be healing, both in the telling and the hearing. Like Charon, Remen noticed that loss and disappointment are among the most common experiences of those who practice medicine, "yet most of this loss remains unacknowledged and ungrieved" (51). Remen teaches courses and seminars to first- and second-year medical students, inviting them to explore their attitudes, family beliefs, and habitual strategies for coping with loss: "The way we deal with loss shapes our capacity to be present to life . . . Protecting ourselves from loss rather than grieving and healing our losses is one of the major causes of burnout" among physicians and others in helping professions (52), to which I would add teachers. We burn out because our hearts become so full of loss that we have no room left to care, and the best antidote to burnout is healthy grieving (53), grieving which involves other people rather than shutting everyone out and denying the realities of loss. Instead of resisting our students' pain, we and they may be more likely to heal if we welcome personal narratives and meet grief with an open heart and mind when it arises.

Remen describes her struggle with Crohn's disease from age 15, her medical school experiences in her early 20s and teaching medicine at Stanford in the 1960s, one of few women on the faculty. She became fascinated, moved, and inspired in the process of listening to the complex and varied stories her patients told: "Eventually, these stories

would become far more compelling to me than the disease process. I would come to feel more personally enriched by them than by making the correct diagnosis . . . In time, the truth in them began to heal me” (xxvi-xxvii). She recalls sitting around kitchen tables as a child where adults were telling and listening to stories, a practice many families and communities have lost:

Real stories take time. We stopped telling stories when we started to lose that sort of time, pausing time, reflecting time, wondering time. Life rushes us along and few people are strong enough to stop on their own. Most often, something unforeseen stops us and it is only then we have the time to take a seat at life’s kitchen table. To know our own story and tell it. To listen to other people’s stories. (xxvii).

It is only in pausing, in stopping, that we realize certain stories and issues cannot be denied. She worries that people have forgotten how to listen and have stopped learning how to recognize meaning in life (xxviii). Stories are powerful because they “allow us to see something familiar through new eyes” (xxx), something many students will benefit from practicing.

Knowing ourselves and our stories, especially the repressed ones, is crucial to healing. Remen says: “Parts of ourselves which we may have hidden all of our lives out of shame are often the source of our healing” (36). Instead of continuing to hide the parts of ourselves that were deemed unacceptable to our parents and teachers when we were children, Remen encourages readers to realize we are no longer living in the “hostile terrain of our childhood . . . we may have forgotten what it is like to be whole. What it is like to feel and to cry, what it is like to take initiative and have a viewpoint” (37).

Writing or telling stories brings us back to the present moment, a trip we should take more often so that we don't miss what's left of our lives.

Another medical school professor, Dr. Jerome Groopman, echoes the concerns of Charon and Remen when he says that his medical training prepared him well for working with the science of medicine but not for dealing with patients' spirits ("Interview: Dr. Jerome Groopman" 1). Groopman now teaches physicians to sit down and "get close" to their patients in order to learn about their "beliefs and needs and the sources of hope that each person can draw upon" ("Interview" 2). Together, the doctor and patient then "carve a path through all those difficulties" and design a plan of action and treatment, for "unless I really partner with someone and I know who that person is, I can fall so far short of finding hope with him." A similar dynamic occurs when composition instructors fail to encounter students as they are and fall short of finding ways to facilitate their writing and thinking. Just as Harvard Medical School overhauled its curriculum in the 1980s to include a more holistic approach to treating patients' spirits as well as bodies (Groopman 93), programs that train teachers should incorporate research on the healing aspects of narrative. We should follow the lead of Groopman, Remen, and Charon who are advocating storytelling and listening as a means of improving a person's quality of life.

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). Hahn 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.

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, Hanh and other Buddhist writers encourage us to befriend it as natural. Just as decay is essential to the flower’s rebirth, 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 Hanh, Kwong reminds us that letting go and welcoming what sorrow teaches us 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, Hanh wrote his first book, *A Rose for Your Pocket*, a slim volume about letting mothers know we appreciate them before it’s too late. Hahn discovered in writing it 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” (Hanh 49).

Writing is one way of looking deeply, an art that aids in the process of transformation. 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.

Death and Dying in Books, Film, and Television

While many television dramas deal routinely with violence and murder, none made grief the central focus until Home Box Office premiered “Six Feet Under” in 2001. Now an award-winning series “without peer,” this program offers a “quirky meditation on attachment, mortality, and—as series creator and Executive Producer Alan Ball puts it—‘life, in the constant presence of death’” (Greenwald 43). In a review published in Tricycle, Jeff Greenwald notes that most of the show’s 12 million viewers will never attend a Zen retreat or treat dying as a path to liberation, but the show is not about teaching: “it simply lifts the veil from a subject too often viewed, in our culture, through filters of fear and ignorance.” The series features an up-close look at the Fisher family as they manage the family-owned funeral home and struggle with their own issues of anger, sexuality, ignorance, and loss. Every episode “opens with a death, and with each death the Fishers, managing the burial, are given a lesson in transformation . . . Some deaths are peaceful, some sudden, some the result of a long illness” (43), but all remind us that we

never know when we will draw our last breath. The show's popularity suggests that the public is beginning to incorporate death into life rather than denying its power. That a program driven by Eastern religious undertones could gain momentum in America's capitalistic, protestant society suggests that cable television viewers, like meditation groups popping up in cities and towns across the nation, are hungry for something more, for something that acknowledges the reality of impermanence in our lives rather than repressing it.

The late Elisabeth Kubler-Ross led hundreds of workshops on life, death, and transition worldwide and published several books on the subject of loss. She had worked for several years with terminally ill patients in hospitals before moving into community settings to lead five-day group sessions for people who were ill, bereft, or in professions that deal with sick and dying patients (Working it Through ix). Eventually, she expanded the workshops to include special sessions for children, teens, and women who had suffered from incest, abuse, divorce, or related traumas and for people with AIDS and their caregivers (ix-x). Participants talk about "their feelings of fear, anger, grief, and above all, love"—sharing that enables most to overcome their inhibitions and begin to understand and overcome their suffering (x). Her purpose in the five-day sessions was "to help our participants get in touch with their deepest and long-repressed pains, guilt, fears and shame—and thus their unfinished business" (53). She discovered, working with both healthy and terminally ill patients, that "our only enemies are guilt, fear and shame. Such unresolved negativities prevent us from living fully and deplete us of so much energy that even a fight with cancer is a losing battle when we have a sense of punishment, a sense of hopelessness or a feeling of unworthiness to get well" (54). She watched many patients

confront, in the company of safe witnesses, their own self-destructive tendencies which often contributed to the onset of cancer.

The field of thanatology has exploded since 1982 when I first bought Kubler-Ross' Working it Through. As I began my dissertation research 20 years later, I'm not sure what surprised me more: discovering a journal called Death Studies at the university library or finding dozens of books and workbooks in the "death and dying" section of a suburban Atlanta bookstore, most of them promoting writing as a component of healing, grieving, and reconnecting with self and others after major loss. Most of the titles differed from the ones I'd found via Internet searches; how many could there be? What would it take to conduct a thorough search of this subject that has been marginalized for so long? Several anthologies explore the complex patterns of grief and mourning after the death of one or both parents; many workbooks are designed to help survivors "work through" their grief, and the variety of workbooks suggests that many people are buying into the power of writing for healing and grieving.

Nonfiction is obviously not the only venue for examining death. Countless novels, plays, poems, and films—historical, multi-cultural, and modern—feature characters struggling with issues of loss and grief. If loss is truly "writing's source and subject" (Nelson 74), it would be impossible to name all the literary works that illustrate it. While doing this study, I began to understand my fascination with The Wizard of Oz, with the orphaned Dorothy's quest for home, and with her realization, upon finally awakening in her bed in Kansas, that she was blessed with the life and unconventional "family" she was given.

Another example of a motherless daughter who finds healthy surrogates is Lily,

the 14-year-old narrator of Sue Monk Kidd's best-selling novel, The Secret Life of Bees, set in South Carolina in the 1960s. Lily describes losing her mother at age 4 and believing her father's story that she, Lily, had shot her mother accidentally. Lily and her African American nanny run away to a house where they are taken in by three bee-keeping sisters who worship the Black Madonna. Before finding a life with the beekeepers, Lily says, "my whole life had been nothing but a hole where my mother should have been, and this hole had made me different, left me always aching for something . . ." (Kidd 292). She had felt shame and glory, both loved and hated herself (71) as she felt "the same old grief" in church every year on Mother's Day: "I wanted something. Something, I didn't know what. *Mother, forgive*. That's all I could feel. That old longing spread under me like a great lap, holding me tight" (55). With the bee-keeping women, she learns "to write everything down" and to share her grief with these women who become mother-figures for her. One tells her: "'You have to find a mother inside yourself. We all do. Even if we already have a mother, we still have to find this part of ourselves inside'" (288). This is solid advice for readers of any age as we contemplate losing our mothers or struggle with having lost them, literally or emotionally, as children. Like Lily, we need to learn how to nurture ourselves as adults and how to reach out to others in healthy ways.

Lily develops a crush on a young writer named Zach who listens to her losses and vows to "'write it all down . . . put it in a story'" for her (185). Lily then realizes that what she wants is what everybody wants: "for someone to see the hurt done to them and set it down like it matters," for the "wounded places down inside people" will breed "a kind of love between them" (184). I've seen this happen almost every semester in twelve

years of teaching writing: students hear or read each other's pain and begin to develop respect and concern for classmates they otherwise might have dismissed. Like Lily, they learn that the problem with most people is that "they *know* what matters, but they don't *choose* it . . . The hardest thing on earth is choosing what matters" (147). Discovering the power of personal choice and its limitations is an important aspect of growing up and taking responsibility for our lives, whether we've lost parents or not. By giving students choices about their writing and research projects, we expose them to the freedom and responsibility that come with choosing.

One of the best cinematic portrayals of the healing power of telling and writing grief is the 2002 Sundance film, *A Rumor of Angels*, featuring Vanessa Redgrave and Ray Liota. A moody, adolescent boy named James and an eccentric, elderly woman named Mattie discover what they have in common when Mattie hires James to repair the fence he broke while spying on her. She follows him home one day and sees him freeze upon reaching a "road closed" sign near a bridge; weeks later, after they have exchanged stories about her son dying in Vietnam and his mother dying in a car accident, Mattie offers to accompany James on a bike ride and takes him back to the bridge site. He begs her to take a different route, but she insists. When James closes his eyes and refuses to move, Mattie embraces him and asks him to tell her what he sees, what he remembers. At her insistence, he describes seeing a racoon in the road and yelling at his mom to stop, which she tries to do and swerves off the road and over the embankment by the bridge. Her body flies out of the convertible, and the 7-year-old boy tries to wake her up, but she's gone. "Why did I have to yell?" he cries to Mattie. "Why didn't I keep my mouth shut?" He has blamed himself for his mother's death and has never told anyone the story

until now because his father was grieving too much to listen. With Mattie beside him, James is able to cross the bridge literally, on foot, and emotionally, in the act of testifying. She tells him that she knew he had a “terrible grief,” and sometimes “grief gets in the way” of our reclaiming our lost loved ones.

James learns to appreciate Mozart and to use Morse Code in hopes of communicating with his mother the way Mattie communicates with her lost son. Mattie gives James a journal filled with poems and letters she wrote about her son, including a poem she recites often and which James reads to Mattie as she’s dying: “The soul leaves the body/ as a schoolboy jumps out of the school house door/ Suddenly with joy./ There is no horror in death.” When James’ father tries to separate him from Mattie, James confronts him in a rage:

I want you to be here! I want you to talk about Mom. You never, ever want to talk about Mom. You never, ever want to talk about what happened. But I was there. I was there. Mom died while I was holding her. Never once did you ask me what that was like . . . I tried to tell you but you wouldn’t listen. I took Mattie to the bridge and she made me talk about it. She listened, Dad. She was interested, Dad. (A Rumor of Angels)

Before this moment of crisis, James has suffered bouts of physical and emotional paralysis at school for which his father sends him to a therapist, but nothing helps until Mattie returns with James to the scene and invites him to reconstruct the traumatic loss. We never know what healing we’re setting in motion when we allow our students to reconstruct grief narratives such as James does with Mattie and we are willing to return to the scene, emotionally and linguistically, to facilitate human connections in the present

that may be transformative.

Surviving a Parent's Premature Death: Literary Orphans

“Grief needs an outlet; creativity offers one. Some psychiatrists see mourning and creativity as the perfect marriage.” Hope Edelman, Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss, 265

Three recent books present stories and interviews with adults who lost a parent before age 18: Maxine Harris' The Loss that is Forever, Hope Edelman's Motherless Daughters, and Simon and Drantell's A Music I No Longer Hear. All three include lists of Pulitzer Prize winning writers and other literary giants who lost parents early. Simon and Drantell ask: “Are adults whose parents died young attracted to the craft of writing—the modern world's storytelling traditions? Do those who lose many of their own stories need to keep spinning narratives and lives of people they care for? Or are they trying to complete a conversation they never had the chance to finish” (32)? These authors challenge Freud's theory of mourning—“that it is terminable, that after bringing into focus each ‘memory and hope’ associated with the loved one, after spending time with it, grieving it, and then letting go of it you are healed. Your mourning is complete” (33). Instead, Simon and Drantell suggest that “stories and songs and dreams keep our dead ones with us at the same time they help us let them go” (34). They name several writers who lost a mother or father during childhood: Charlotte, Emily and Anne Bronte, Harriet Jacobs, Hans Christian Andersen, Virginia Woolf, C.S. Lewis, Gertrude Stein, Zora Neale Hurston, William Styron, Mary Gordon, Amy Tan, James Baldwin, Anna Quindlen, and Jimi Hendrix.

In Motherless Daughters, Edelman describes the misery she endured after losing her mother when she was barely 17. She recalls going to college and being paralyzed

during conversations about mothers with new friends who didn't know about her loss: "I was frightened by other people's pity. It marked me as different, an outsider, an orphan worthy of compassion at a time when I desperately longed for the anonymity of a crowd. In my dormitory, in my sorority, I felt as if I wore a scarlet letter visible only to me, a personal reminder of what felt like a source of shame" (Edelman xviii). Alone, she searched the libraries and bookstores for resources on coping with a mother's death as a teenager, but she found nothing. Eventually, she realized that her mother's death "had been the most determining, the most profound, the most influential event" of her life, the "focal point of [her] identity" (xix). Most other stressors dimmed by comparison, although "the loss of any relationship, job, or object could send me into a dangerous spin" (xix). This information is worth knowing as we attempt to teach students who have suffered the real or perceived loss of a parent. We owe it to our students to offer the lifeline of writing which has helped countless orphans find hope and meaning in their lives.

In addition to the writers mentioned earlier, Edelman lists the following high-achievers who lost a mother before age 18: Marie Curie, Jane Fonda, Oprah, Madonna, Maya Angelou, Carol Burnett, Rosie O'Donnell, and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader. Edelman reports that psychologist Marvin Eisenstadt studied 575 geniuses in the humanities, sciences, and military, from Homer to John F. Kennedy, and found the rate of mother loss among them was three times that of the general population. Other studies, however, have found equally high rates of mother loss among prisoners and juvenile delinquents, suggesting that orphaned children either develop a fatalistic attitude and give up or find the motivation to excel (260).

Edelman suggests that five factors influence the direction an orphaned child's life will take: her age when her mother died, the cause of death, the support systems available afterwards, the child's early drive for success, and early evidence of a talent (260). She concludes that "loss doesn't give a daughter skills she didn't possess. Instead, it acts as a trigger event that inspires a latent talent to emerge, or it provokes the spirit and will she needs to push her abilities beyond safe and predictable limits" (261). Loss sometimes inspires survivors to work harder or reach higher than they might have attempted otherwise, perhaps as a way to fill the void or to gain the recognition they lack from the deceased parent.

English professor and poet Leslie Simon and her friend, writer Jan Johnson Drantell, both lost a parent when they were children and are participant observers in the book they co-authored, A Music I No Longer Heard: The Early Death of a Parent. They interviewed 70 people, ages 19 to 80, who had lost one or both parents before age 18. They cite U.S. Census data from 1930 to 1980 that suggests roughly 5% of the population is orphaned, having lost one or both parents to death before age 18 (Simon and Drantell 17). From their own experiences and extensive interviews with survivors, the authors conclude that grief can become "a transformational experience" if acknowledged and shared. While their book examines childhood bereavement and its effects on the adults who survive, Simon and Drantell caution that theirs is not a "how to" or "quick fix" book for those who grieve, because "grief never disappears. It changes. It changes those who grieve. It even allows room for hope, insight, and transformation in a variety of paradoxical ways . . . but it only evolves if we acknowledge its ongoing presence in our lives. One way to acknowledge grief is to tell, read, and share stories" (18). Sometimes

the telling, reading, and sharing happen spontaneously in a college composition class when students have choices about their writing and research projects. When one student chooses to bring grief to the writing table, it is not uncommon for others to follow suit, whether they're writing about the literal death of a parent or the loss resulting from relocation or divorce.

Simon and Drantell see memories and stories as constructive forces: "With memory, we retain identity; without it, we are lost. As we recover our memories and tell our stories, we expand our understanding of ourselves" (30). When parents die prematurely, children are left without the stories they need to develop healthy identities. Even when parents are less than perfect or when their survival may have led to abuse or neglect of the child, the child misses the presence and love of a primary relationship (31). Once in college, the child may suffer another round of grief when he or she sees classmates going home on weekends and confronts, again, a sense of abandonment and homelessness.

Many of those interviewed by Simon and Drantell said the most critical factor in their grieving and moving on was being able to share stories of loss and survival: "It pays to talk. We mourn together. We mourn alone. We finish and begin again. Complete? Maybe. Finished? Never. No matter what, we'll always want to tell the stories. Of the day our mother or father died. Of the time before, and how we have survived since then" (35). Although a parent's death may spell the end of childhood and cause something to die in the child's heart, the authors want readers to know that "as you go on with the work of shaping your life, something else will come alive" (35), something that brings the survivor more fully into communion with the present.

When a parent dies, children tend to shut down and lose trust because they feel abandoned. They are left without tools to work through the main task of their lives after the loss, which Simon and Drantell define as the challenge “to somehow reopen to life. That task can take years, decades, or never be accomplished. Because of the shutting down, the death of a parent is very much a formative experience, coloring everything else for years to come” (36). They note that it is “hard work to choose love” and to “put away fear, despair, and denial.” Talking with dozens of orphaned adults, Simon and Drantell began to feel hope from hearing the “transformational experiences of others” (36). Hearing others’ stories helps orphaned adults fill in the blanks of their own lives as they acknowledge the finality of what is lost and find a way to keep their lives open and dynamic, so that “losing a parent to death is *a* formative experience, not *the* formative experience” (38). Again, college students who write about having lost a parent, sibling, or friend often discover that the loss does not have to define their lives.

Like similar books on the subject of traumatic loss, Simon and Drantell caution against “reductionism, dismissal, and denial”—defining reductionism as “the tendency to attribute all of one’s current troubles to past trauma or grief of any kind” (39).

Conversely, dismissing all sorrows does not help, either, because “people who dismiss the effects of trauma in their lives tend to dismiss everything else in their lives as well.” And denial combines elements of both for survivors who insist that the loss “didn’t really affect me then, and it certainly doesn’t make any difference in my life now” (40).

Understanding denial is important for teachers who are tempted to require students to write about significant losses or painful experiences; such writing should be the student’s choice, always, because forcing the issue may cause more harm than good if a student is

unprepared to delve into the emotional terrain of loss.

Consistently, the adults Simon and Drantell interviewed offered three messages: this is their life and the only story they know; several events, including the death of a parent, have shaped their lives; and the fact of death never goes away. One therapist reported that people waste time trying to erase or forget the past, when they would be better off “incorporating it, transforming it, bringing themselves into their present lives” (40), advice that echoes Quaker educator Parker Palmer and Buddhist psychiatrist Mark Epstein, who urge readers to befriend whatever arises rather than trying to obliterate the painful parts of our lives.

As trauma theorists and survivors have indicated, comparisons are meaningless when the subject is grief, for “to suffer devastating loss is to suffer devastating loss. And it is in relating the particulars of one’s loss and sharing the similarities and differences with others orphaned young that one finds the seed of recovering from that loss” (Simon and Drantell 40). Healing begins in the process of naming the loss out loud, telling and revising the story, and listening to the stories of others:

To heal from trauma, we must remember as much of it as we can in order to make some kind of sense of the fear and grief, the shock and sorrow for the first hours and days of a disaster . . . Going back is not going backward into retreat. It’s about revisiting, retelling, and sometimes revising the story of the events that forever changed our lives. Our narratives make us who we are and remind us we’re still here: different, changed, but still alive. And with an understanding of how each of us got to where we stand now, our stories bind us to one another.(93)

Simon and Drantell devote an entire chapter to the first year of mourning. Based on their own experiences with grief and their interviews with survivors, they say: “How the world sees us and how we see the world when we are children is inalterably and inevitably changed by the death of a parent. Relationships with teachers, other important adults, and peers are transformed” (95). Teachers and other adults may become mother or father figures in ways they would not have been prior to the child’s loss; even in college, a teacher who pays attention and encourages an orphaned student to succeed may unwittingly become a mentor whose words and actions carry weight and responsibility—another reason writing teachers should be aware of and sensitive to the life circumstances of students.

Another researcher, cognitive psychologist Bowlby, studied childhood mourning for more than 20 years as a clinician and academic. Unlike deaths that are expected due to age or chronic illness, he found that deaths that are deemed “premature” or “unjust” often lead to “high grief” and “infinitely greater social and emotional needs” among survivors, both children and adults (Bowlby qtd. in Leming and Dickinson 199). Bowlby found that mourning among young children resembles that among healthy adults if certain conditions occur:

- Child’s relationship with parents was “reasonably secure” before the death
- Child was informed and aware of what was happening during and after the death
- Child participated in funeral rites and other mourning rituals, and
- Child’s ongoing relationship with the surviving parent or a trusted substitute becomes a comforting, continuing presence.

Many families, however, fail to understand what their children need, personally and

socially, when a parent is dying and try to shield children from what is happening—a move that may prolong the child’s grief. Bowlby found that “childhood bereavement appears to be traumatic for most children, with some having grief symptoms years later” (Leming and Dickinson 197). Researchers across the disciplines offer evidence of the long-term, painful consequences of a sudden or premature loss of a parent on a young person’s identity and suggest methods for transforming or healing such grief.

One writer whose life and work epitomize the literary orphan is Virginia Woolf. In her reflective essay, “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf describes the relief she found in writing To the Lighthouse at age 44. Since her mother’s death when Woolf was 13, she had been haunted by her mother, who “was one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life” (Woolf 312). Further, she notes: “If we cannot analyze these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir; and again how futile life-writing becomes.” Suddenly, as she walked around a London square, Woolf had the idea for To the Lighthouse, which she rushed home and wrote, quickly, “and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her” (313). She concludes that she did for herself “what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest. But what is the meaning of ‘explained’ it? Why, because I described her and my feeling for her in that book, should my vision of her and my feeling for her become so much dimmer and weaker?” (313). While researchers in psychology and medicine are attempting to answer Woolf’s questions to determine the role story-telling plays in survival, we still do not understand fully the connections between expressing and surviving traumatic loss. In

piecing together a fragmented and non-linear narrative that mirrors portions of her mother's life, Woolf was beginning to record and rescript her memories, but she was unable to recapture and release enough of her traumatic experience to lessen its death-grip on her psyche.

Woolf's suicide leaves open the question of the power of writing to save lives. Perhaps writing gives a traumatized life meaning and sustains it beyond what the writer could manage otherwise. While scholars and researchers in the last century have developed theories regarding the connections between creativity, trauma, and survival, many questions remain unanswered as we examine the lives and writings of Woolf, our students, and ourselves. To what extent does writing about trauma enhance the lives of writers and readers who survive? Would Elie Wiesel, for instance, have survived the horrors of the Holocaust if he had remained silent or not been encouraged by an empathetic witness to write extensively about his experiences there?

Telling and Writing: The Transformative Potential

Countless experts across disciplines tout the transformative power of writing and telling, even as they acknowledge the unspeakable nature of trauma and grief. Theorists in composition, psychoanalysis, trauma studies, and medicine describe the benefits of naming, knowing, and re-visioning our experiences in the presence of an empathetic witness. As both a writer and a writing teacher, I have reached for wholeness by writing poetry and essays about personal and cultural loss and betrayal and by witnessing my students' stories (Milner, "From Southern Baptist..." and "Telling"). In the process of articulating fragments of traumatic memory or assisting my students in their articulations, I/we have found hope—a pathway (to a new) home—in what remains. In Pockets of

Hope: How Students and Teachers Change the World, De los Reyes and Gozemba praise teachers who “initiate and then with their students consciously create community—that magical web” (21) where students learn to speak and listen to the voices of others without threats of physical violence. De los Reyes and Gozemba conclude that “finding one’s voice in a supportive community is a transformative experience” (24), one that teacher/scholars involved in local sites of the National Writing Project discover over and over again with each summer institute (Dessommes 25). In writing and reading their stories aloud in a roomful of other teachers, Project participants often experience a supportive community that enables them to develop their voices as teachers and writers.

Naming and re-framing our subconscious debris in ways that allow others to hear or read it makes room for the beauty of the present moment and moves us toward “an acceptance as whole of what remains” (Selzer qtd. in DeSalvo 183). Such a move is a shift away from the paralysis, blame, and isolation that often accompany grief. The process of focusing on an event and describing it for a reader or listener enables the teller to remember and/or reconstruct forgotten details that may, once recalled, facilitate healing. For orphaned students who have been silenced earlier by grieving family members, writing about losing a parent enables them to remember more specifically the circumstances of their loss and to reconstruct their options for living. The act of describing their situation for a caring audience of peers and teacher may trigger a transformation of memories into food for surviving, even thriving.

In their introduction to the 2003 anthology, Loss: The Politics of Mourning, editors Eng and Kazanjian offer a counterintuitive perspective of loss as creative rather than only negative and fragmentary. They view loss as “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) Attending to what’s left after loss “generates a politics of mourning that might be active rather than reactive, prescient rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary” (2). Through the Freudian lens of melancholia, the essays in Loss focus on the individual and collective legacies of revolution, war, genocide, slavery, decolonization, exile, reunification, globalizations, and AIDS. The editors conclude that “the psychic and material practices of loss and its remains are productive for history and for politics” (5), and, I would add, for individuals trying to remake their lives after suffering, often silently, from traumatic memories and losses.

In Crazy Vision: A Chronicle of Illness and Recovery, education professor Sandra Nettles describes the nightmare of living with a brain tumor for many years unaware and the role writing played in her survival. Between 1982 (her first blackout) and 1994 (diagnosis of tumor), she wrote “more than 40 volumes of diary entries, poems, and notes for novels, short stories, and essays” (46). While her resume and other official papers such as voter registration cards, marriage licenses and divorce decrees “tell the story of the person who tried to be a good mother and citizen,” her journals “tell the story of the person, the self, who was dying.” Reviewing her journals enabled Nettles to piece together a narrative where before, only traumatic fragments and gaps in memory had existed: “My tumor took my ability to describe the world, to communicate with people in it, and to understand my experience of it. I surmise that my narrative, my story, disintegrated: from whole connected paragraphs linked by plot and theme to sentences and phrases, and finally to wordless emotions” (148). After surgery and rehabilitation,

she reentered the world and “went beyond loss and survival to a new narrative,” a narrative built on two fundamental human tendencies: “agency, expressed in strivings for power and independence . . . and connection, the strivings for love and connection” (149). Both agency and connection are crucial tendencies for college students to develop as they shift from being dependent, extrinsically motivated teens to independent, intrinsically-motivated adults.

Before her diagnosis, Nettles had spent many years studying the concept of psychological resilience as part of her research as a faculty member at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Maryland. The term “resilience” has multiple meanings, including the body’s capacity to bounce back from illness and the person’s ability to function well, mentally and socially, despite adversity (Nettles 2-3). In her recovery after brain surgery, Nettles discovered “resilience as transformation, the capacity for the individual to emerge renewed, sometimes stronger, after calamity” (5). Whether they have suffered traumatic losses or not, college students have much to teach each other and to learn about resilience.

Nettles’ transformation began, she says, when she “grieved for obvious losses of health and income, and for other losses that were more subtle, such as the sense that I was on-time in my accomplishments and keeping apace with my peers, the feeling of invulnerability, and the certainty of infinite time.” During a period of weeping spells a few years after her surgery, Nettles realized that she was mourning not only the specific events—one friend’s death, another’s assault, her daughters leaving home for college, and her own illness—but mourning “a more pervasive sense of loss . . . reminders everywhere of what used to be” (141). She concludes that “some losses are irreparable”

(143) and that telling her story offers opportunities for restoration and transformation:

Telling my story gave me a way of accepting loss and regaining perspective and a sense of connection to others and everything around me. I had many safe places, not only in which to recount events as I experienced them but also in which to express the feelings I had. I wrote poems and this book. I told my friends who hadn't been able to see for themselves; I spoke to a class that was studying brain functions; the topic recurred in therapy hours; and people who had relatives with brain tumors wanted to know about symptoms . . . people actually listened to me. (150)

Since childhood, she has survived in part by finding what she calls “zones of narrative safety,” sites of expression and listening. If identity is the story we tell about ourselves, then a “safety zone” is a place where we can express ourselves however we choose—“one of the elements necessary for weaving trauma and adversity into the vast web of life, putting them in a place where you can see them for what they took and what they gave” (151). In telling her story and witnessing the stories of others, she learned many lessons, most importantly this: “While you may have support, ultimately you are in charge of your recovery.” Hers is a message worth sharing with our students, especially those who feel victimized or embittered by their traumatic experiences and lose sight of their own power for recovery.

The arts in a broader sense offer transformative possibilities. Imaginative texts, metaphors, symbol, narrative techniques, and poetry invite readers into an in-between space which is “rich with possibilities for self-transformation” (Venema 7 qtd. in Saye 43). Touting the use of fiction and poetry as relevant, effective learning tools, Neal Saye

concludes that “in our bodied worlds, we can think, emote . . . and transform” (42).

Likewise, writer, teacher, and psychoanalyst Alice A. Jones, author of several books and a collection of prose poems, Gorgeous Mourning, sees writing as “a necessary place to metabolize experience” (Jones 26). In an article about the healing potential in writing and psychotherapy, Jones says both processes “revolve around what we are willing to let ourselves know out loud. Both parts are essential, the knowing and the saying, in order for each to have its transformative effect” (27). Speaking as both a therapist and a writer, Jones says it is not enough to reconstruct an event or fantasy in a journal that remains locked in a drawer, for “utterance, beyond the intellectual meaning of what is said, is part of what makes the difference.” Natifa, a former student interviewed for this study, concurs; she used to write her feelings in a notebook and then tear out the sheets, wad them up and throw them away, “but that didn’t help much. I needed an audience.” Now, she writes and performs her work at poetry slams and enjoys hearing the stories of other young people who have survived similar losses.

Dangers of Not Telling, Personally and Collectively

Many writers agree that keeping secrets works against survival and that writing is an act of faith that life could be better. In Wild Card Quilt, Georgia author Janisse Ray cautions readers: “I know, too, the danger of silence, as well as of leaving things unnamed and unrecognized. By understanding what you feel as love, you claim it. By claiming a thing, you give it life” (47). When what you have loved and claimed is suddenly lost, Ray says you must prepare “to create anew that which is beloved. Then you will do whatever you can to keep it alive.” While words cannot resurrect a lost relationship, they serve as a bridge between what is lost and what survives; in telling

stories or writing poems about what is lost, we “keep it alive” and learn to relate to its memory, hopefully, in healthy ways. For Tim O’Brien, stories can “make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again” (180). Whether he’s telling about his buddies dying in Vietnam or his first girlfriend, Linda, dying of cancer at age 9, his writing enables him to remember them and to save himself in the process.

The ill effects of repressing sorrow have been documented by researchers Wegner and Lane in “Secrecy to Psychopathology.” Citing their own research and that of Pennebaker and others, Wegner and Lane conclude that those who consciously avoid disclosing traumatic loss tend to suffer more than those who confront their pain more freely, for “the active nondisclosure of these sorrows promotes their expansion into pathologies” (41). Researchers, writers, and physicians have found that breaking secrecy may be a first step toward diagnosing and treating psychological and psychosomatic disorders and improving a person’s quality of life (Wegner and Lane 43, van der Kolk and Saporta 30).

In her 1999 memoir about being raped in college, best-selling author Alice Sebold describes her life-long tendency to tell: “My family had secrets, and from an early age, I had crowned myself the one who would reveal them. I hated the hush-hush of hiding things from other people” (73). Sebold felt “constitutionally unable” to remain silent about her uncle’s death from alcoholism, her mother’s alcoholism and nervous condition, and her rape on the campus of Syracuse University as a freshman in May, 1981. After telling her mother, father, an old boyfriend, and others who could not understand, Sebold returned to Syracuse and enrolled in Tess Gallagher’s poetry workshop and Tobias

Wolff's fiction workshop. When Gallagher asked students to "tackle the hardest things" in their writing (97), Sebold responded with a rambling, five-page poem about violence in society and mentioned rape only as a "muddled metaphor" (98). Later, in a private student-teacher conference, Gallagher listened to Sebold's story:

She was not bowled over, not shocked, not even scared of the burden this might make me as her student. She was not motherly or nurturing, though she was both those things in time. She was matter-of-fact, her head nodding in acknowledgment. She listened for the pain in my words, not to the narrative itself. She was intuiting what it meant to me, what was most important, what, in that confused mass of experience and yearning she heard in my voice, she could single out to give back. (Sebold 98)

Gallagher then asked Sebold to start a poem with the line, "If they caught you..." and write directly to the rapist. After writing the poem, Sebold "was shaking" (99) as it was "the first time I'd addressed the rapist directly. I was speaking to him" (100). One week later, Sebold ran into her rapist on the street and eventually had him arrested, charged, and convicted—a process encouraged by Gallagher, who accompanied Sebold to court when her parents could not.

Gallagher asks Sebold to distribute copies of her poem to her 14 classmates and to read it aloud during a writer's workshop. Sebold's description of the workshop exemplifies embodied rhetoric: "I was, as I read it, hot. My skin blushed and I could feel the blood rush to my face, prickle along the tops of my ears and the ends of my fingers. I could feel the class around me. They were riveted. They were staring at me" (100). When she finished, Gallagher asked her to read the poem aloud again and reminded the class

that she expected everyone to comment. A classmate asked Sebold if she really wanted to kill the rapist, and she said yes. Another student, Maria, said nothing, and when pressed for a comment, left the room and did not return. A few weeks later, Maria survived two suicide attempts, and when Sebold visited her in the hospital, Maria confided that Sebold's poem had "'brought it all back,'" that the father and brothers who had just left the hospital room "had raped her for a period of years when she was growing up," and that her mother made her promise not to tell (147). Maria said Sebold's poem articulated the feelings she had repressed for years but couldn't tell or write; Maria recovered from the suicide attempts and returned to school, and for a while, she severed relations with her family (148).

In 1989, The New York Times Magazine published a first-person narrative of Sebold's rape, an account in which she "beseached people to talk about rape and to listen to articulate victims when they had a story to tell" (Sebold 233). She appeared on Oprah's television show and began using heroin and teaching as an adjunct at Hunter College. Eventually, she spent two months sobering up at an artists' colony in rural California, then found a therapist and began writing in earnest after seeing her earlier narrative cited in Judith Herman's book, Trauma and Recovery. She saw herself in Herman's descriptions of victims of PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) and began plotting her novel, The Lovely Bones.

As Nettles, Sebold, and other memoirists' stories illustrate, there is no permanent solution to suffering because grief never ends. We cannot resurrect the dead any more than a star athlete can run marathons after an injury paralyzes his legs. But studies have shown and individuals have testified to the restorative nature of telling, writing, and

connecting in the present moment with other human beings. Learning to locate one's personal pain within a larger landscape of loss can reduce isolation and remind us of our shared humanity, of the very essence of life as impermanent—reminders that could leave us with hearts open instead of closed, with courage in the face of loving and losing again, and with healthier habits of self-expression instead of self-destructive, reactive patterns that numb us to life and lead to more anguish. Instead of spending so much time and energy on maintaining the myth of permanence, acknowledging our losses takes us to the truth of mortality and beyond, the truth of continuation, of no boundaries between self and other, if only we are awake enough to see and hear and know, to reach inward and outward in an attempt to understand and accept *what is*—the goal of education, according to J. Krishnamurti.

CHAPTER 3: THE PLACE OF GRIEF IN THE ACADEMY AND THE DISCIPLINE

“In the early decades of the twentieth century . . . to be emotional was to be ill.”

Alice G. Brand, “Social Cognition, Emotions, and the Psychology of Writing,” 399

Admitting Students’ and Teachers’ Emotions

Many academicians avoid any display of grief or other emotions because we see them as unpredictable and difficult to manage. In a round-table discussion of scholars on “Why We’re Still Fighting the Civil War,” one researcher reported that some public school teachers omit the Civil War from history courses because it is “too controversial and emotion-laded” in today’s southern schools (Georgia Public Radio, May 28, 2004). Schools and universities historically have separated emotion from intellect and treated feeling as the enemy of thinking—a tradition some compositionists, psychologists, oncologists, and neurologists cited in this chapter are trying to change. In the sections which follow, I establish the context for my research by exposing the setting into which the scholarship of writing and healing is burgeoning. I examine academic resistance to integrating grief, shame, and other emotions into the classroom and explore the alternatives for physical and emotional healing offered by writing, telling, and witnessing traumatic loss in a university setting.

Every day, college writing teachers encounter stories of loss among students from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. In a time of war, composition teachers can no longer afford to deny the grief many of our students bring to class, grief that threatens to block some students’ learning if left unexpressed (MacCurdy 195, O’Reilly, Radical Presence 28, and Pagnucci 17, 29). In recent years, composition

theorists such as Bleich, Blitz, Fleckenstein, Gradin, Hurlbert, Kamler, Newkirk, Payne, Tobin, and Welch have moved the debate pitting “academic” writing against “personal” writing to a less polarized, more productive place. These and other scholars seek common ground and terminology that reflects, more realistically, what happens in our classrooms, the unpredictable and uncomfortable place where anything can happen, and will. They are shifting the boundaries of pedagogical camps and creating hybrids such as Sherrie Gradin’s “social expressivism” (xiv), a pedagogy which takes the best of expressivism and social constructionism to encourage personal writing within a social frame that acknowledges the relationship between the personal and the public.

Social expressivism emphasizes “writing for discovery, writing to discover self and voice, and development of power and authority of one’s own writing . . . positioning the self within the world and writing for change” (xv). I agree with Gradin that a social expressivist pedagogy acknowledges that all writers “act and are acted upon by their environment” and therefore must learn to negotiate the terrain between themselves and the world. Learning to negotiate boundaries and relationships begins with students developing a sense of their own beliefs and seeing how their values intersect or not with others, important steps in the process of learning to communicate effectively (xv). Allowing orphaned students to situate their loss in a broader context of family structures and cultural attitudes toward death could foster their connections with others and their ability to communicate and live more fully in the world.

The word “emotion” now covers a range of inner states from passions to moods, and only recently have scholars begun to explore the realm of emotions without apology. Scott McClemee’s 2003 cover story, “Scholars Get Emotional,” in The Chronicle of

Higher Education tracks academic interest in emotions back to the fourth century BC, when Aristotle coined the term “pathe”—plural form of the Greek *pathos*, which meant suffering—and used “pathe” to refer to anger, fear, bravery, affection, and other feelings (A14). Aristotle “thought that dangerous feelings could build up in the public, like toxins in a body,” (A16), and his solution was catharsis by watching tragedy. Today’s historians, scientists, psychologists, and anthropologists are challenging the assumption that feeling can be separated from thought as they examine rage and love across centuries and cultures. Aristotle’s ideal “was to have just the right amount of orge [full-body fury] in your system—not so much that you were a menace to society, nor so little that you were a doormat, but enough to get suitably angry, in an effective way, on appropriate occasions, for a fitting amount of time” (A14). This condition of feeling balanced, which neurologists call homeostasis, is essential to healthy lives and relationships.

In the academy, grief tends to split along gender and class lines as we privilege the writing of male elegists such as Milton, Arnold, Yeats, and Auden and dismiss the work and images of female grief as hysterical (Hallet 86-87). A masculinized curriculum view sees any alignment with the female body as leading to a loss of language—“a return to the womb and to excesses of physical and emotional . . . negates the structure and language that guides and grounds the university” (88). Our classrooms and pedagogies are haunted by this history; we re-enact it almost daily when we ask students what they think and not how they feel, or when we insist on rigid, cognitive approaches to teaching writing. Hallet acknowledges that “the encryptment of emotion and the academic guard against embodied writing is not, of course, a conscious act” (87), not a deliberate move by male administrators or faculty to deny personal development or voice. She sees “the

suppression of embodied and emotional discourse” as being “predetermined by political, cultural, and historical structures” (88) which we inherited, structures largely patriarchal and Aristotelian. We teach in a culture that associates emotion with illness and illness with despair, so it’s no wonder many writing teachers embrace reason and logic and deny the powerful influences of emotion and loss.

In “Social Cognition, Emotions, and the Psychology of Writing,” published two years after her ground-breaking book, The Psychology of Writing, Alice G. Brand offers a brief history of how composition scholars came to deny the influence of emotions on writing and to emphasize, instead, the writer’s mental and cognitive processes. She shows how the disciplinary resistance to researching or acknowledging “feelings” mirrors a massive cultural and societal bias against them, as historically, expressing emotion was equated with being sick (399). Cognitive psychology tends to disavow anything that interferes with objective realities, and that includes feelings: “emotions were bad . . . composition studies has believed likewise.” Brand argues for emotions to be included in the study of writing processes and social constructionist pedagogies: “We do not need to apologize to cognitive psychology for forays into social or emotional processes. Nor do we compromise ourselves by including interpersonal emotion in our socio-cognitive thinking. Emotional processes are not hostile to cognitive or to social ones. They are profoundly complementary” (402). She notes that affective patterns of discourse deserve to be explored and delineated along with social patterns of discourse, and compositionists who claim to be social constructionists should be considering the “complete social agenda, and that means considering interpersonal emotion” (403). She traces the concepts of “attitude” and “emotions” back to social psychology of the early 20th century, noting

that attitudes developed in part as a result of experience: “attitude, a preparedness or readiness for response, came to have behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components” (398). While many embrace Kenneth Bruffee’s work on the importance of conversation and group work in teaching writing, too many ignore the role of emotions in the processes of learning to talk, write, and listen. We still hear more about group work and grammar than we hear about the feelings involved in writing and teaching writing.

In “Making Connections: Writing and Emotion,” compositionists Bruce McPherson and Nancy Fowler argue that writing is more than a tidy, rational, cognitive act: for beginning writers as well as professional writers, sitting down to write means sitting down with psychological pressure to perform, and for newcomers to the process, teachers may help by making the rituals and habits of writing more explicit. While many theorists see writing as “a conscious process of deliberate choices,” McPherson and Fowler insist that intuition and emotions play an equally important role. Most teachers are aware, though perhaps not explicitly or consciously so, that they are dealing with students’ emotional responses to being evaluated even as they’re dealing with technical and intellectual proficiencies. Whether we teach writing as a process of moving through stages or a process of solving problems or both, we often struggle when we or our students encounter writer’s block; we reach for solutions to a writer’s resistance or paralysis, often forgetting the emotional components that influence composing.

A strictly cognitive approach to teaching writing sometimes fails to address two key issues: “the existential involvement of a self in the process of thinking and writing . . . [and] the problem of the ineffable—the difficulty of writing about what we feel to be ideas or arguments that defy our efforts to put them into words” (McPherson and Fowler

41). Grief writing falls into the category of the ineffable because loss is often inaccessible and its language, indescribable. Philosophers Michael Polanyi and Hannah Arendt explain the gap between inward and outward thought/speech, between what is said and what is not said: “In any act of writing, we express an aspect of our ‘self’ . . . The degree of difficulty in writing may possibly be related to the degree of emotional involvement invested” (McPherson and Fowler 42). It is easy, for instance, to look up a word in the dictionary and copy or paraphrase a definition onto a page; discomfort arises, however, when we are asked to write for five minutes on the connotations and multiple interpretations of a certain word or concept such as “home” or “play” or “death.”

When asked to write from our own view or situations, the investment and stakes increase, and thus, the emotional risks. We should remember this when reading and responding to student writing, especially when students choose to explore emotional issues such as the loss of a loved one. Instead of assigning topics with no links between the students’ lives and what they are learning, we should encourage them to explore subjects that engage them emotionally and intellectually, ever aware of the challenges inherent in such writing.

McPherson and Fowler urge us to teach students “to struggle in their writing with what they don’t know” because in that struggle, the students’ genuine voices may be heard and they may begin to connect with an audience (42), a challenge reiterated by Oliver and Felman. We can never succeed completely in writing because “only part of what we mean” will come through to readers; language is imprecise and readers bring a variety of experiences and assumptions to any written communication. McPherson and Fowler remind us that writing is performance: the writer is trying to deliver a message,

and he or she does it with a certain style or feeling that may or may not work with a given audience, and mistakes or “Freudian slips” occur that may confuse readers/listeners (43). Children learn early to edit what they say out loud, to “develop a presentation” of themselves that may or may not be genuine but will enable them to survive and to fit in—tendencies that enable orphans to survive their sense of abandonment but often with disabling, long-term consequences if they are unable to revise their scripts and embrace their experience of loss (see Harris in Chapter 5). By giving such students a chance to name their losses and revise their identities, college writing teachers facilitate integration and healing or at least a sense of coherence among orphaned students.

McPherson and Fowler caution us against being primarily grammar police or fault-finders because errors often have a logic of their own, even in grief narratives. They cite Mina Shaughnessy’s research in support of reading rough drafts for meaning instead of errors: “Once freed from the constraints of having to deliver a perfect performance the first time out, however, the writer ‘will be free to think about what he means and not worry so much about the way he is saying things . . . ’” (qtd. in McPherson and Fowler 45-46). Many adults panic or suffer from lack of confidence when faced with a writing task, largely because they’ve internalized the voice of a “tyrannical, judgmental, and narrow-minded teacher” (44). Emotions are real and raw, especially when students come to college wounded already and lacking a sense of themselves as writers. The more we understand the role of grief and other emotions in the composing process, the better able we are as teachers to facilitate meaningful writing for our students.

In “Repositioning Emotions in Composition Studies,” Kia Jane Richmond documents the discipline’s reluctance to embrace the role of emotions, and she sees

emotions as integral to learning and writing. She offers a historical overview of the role of emotions and composition, starting with Elbow, Brand, and Winterowd and the debate between linguistic knowing and nonverbal knowing, or Gendlin's "felt sense," defined as neither thought nor feeling but "a bodily awareness that has meaning" (Richmond 68): goosebumps, spine tingling, stomach churning, lip quivering, hands shaking, and knees knocking. These sensations fuel and invigorate writing, especially when writers stop, listen, and pay attention to the visceral reactions that accompany certain thoughts, sounds, smells, sights, events, or people.

While I think many writers and teachers would agree that feelings influence creativity, few say so explicitly and fewer include "felt sense" in their teaching of writing processes. When we consider the undercurrent of pain and loss that many students carry, sometimes subconsciously, we begin to see the benefits in teaching students to pay attention to the feelings triggered by certain ideas or memories. Incorporating felt sense in our teaching of writing could be liberating for students who have been unable to access or process their grief (see Chapter 4).

Richmond recaps the expressivism vs. social constructionist debate in terms of personal growth, nonverbal knowing vs. a socially constructed, cognitive approach. She notes Nancy Welch's idea that compositionists may be banishing emotions from our discourse in a desire for academic legitimacy, a desire to separate ourselves from certain pedagogical practices perceived by some to be soft and non-academic (69). Richmond criticizes David Bartholomae for ignoring the affective aspects of writing that inevitably arise in any act of writing or any student-teacher relationship: "Although Bartholomae mentions the positions of 'power' that are 'inherent' in our roles as teachers, he does not

concede that within any human relationship emotional elements can complicate notions like ‘power, tradition, and authority’” (70). Although a growing number of compositionists acknowledge the influence of feelings on writing and teaching writing, few textbooks on composition theory or graduate programs in composition include chapters or courses on the role grief or other emotions play in writing and pedagogy. The lack of such information is worth noting because graduate students should be exposed to research beyond the cognitive; they will certainly have to deal with feelings when they step into a classroom, sit down for a student-teacher conference, or grade and return their first set of student papers.

As Susan McLeod and Alice Brand have illustrated in articles and books about affect, the cognitive model of composing is commonly and unconsciously accepted by most teachers and scholars, partly because we doubt and distrust “anything that cannot be observed, counted, or measured” scientifically (Richmond 71). Reflective assignments given as part of portfolio assessment, for instance, direct students to reflect on their thinking and writing processes but rarely ask students to explain how they felt during these processes: “Regrettably, emotions are often viewed as tied to healing or rehabilitation, a connection that supposes a therapeutic relationship between writer and teacher—a relationship that causes skepticism among composition specialists” (73). Because many teachers are uncomfortable with their own and students’ emotions, they ignore the therapeutic value of writing and the application of psychological theories—theories that lost favor in English studies, generally, as the discipline rushed to embrace computerization and globalization—as if feelings could be outlawed.

The fields of globalization, computerization, and “felt sense” are not mutually

exclusive, either/or propositions. When students develop websites or prepare research projects on societal issues such as domestic violence, the consequences of capitalism, or the effects of war on women and children, they may be motivated by feelings of fear, rage, or grief stemming from their experiences at home, school, or work. Their positions often become more persuasive when they personalize their writing with relevant vignettes from their own lives, for as O'Reilley concludes in The Peaceable Classroom, "the personal context keeps us grounded in the real. It puts a little more at stake" (119). Teaching students to listen to felt sense is crucial in an age of disembodied writing in disembodied contexts such as electronic chat rooms.

Noting a recent trend toward re-casting personal writing in the context of socio-cognitive pedagogies, Richmond lists several scholars who are exploring the role of affect in writing processes: McLeod, Bloom, Brand, Fleckenstein, Flower, Larson, Selfe, Tobin, and Fulkerson (74). Richmond's work in the ethics of empathy fuses social and affective goals as she respects students' feelings as worthy of academic attention. She challenges us to consider the connections between collaborative learning and emotions, something many scholars have ignored, and to explore the anxiety, motivation, resistance, and beliefs that help or hinder writers. We also need to examine the biological and chemical aspects of emotions for both teachers and students, and not just individually but their impact on social anxiety (78). Richmond recalls being taught "that a student's emotional well-being is not as important . . . as his or her intellectual development. I believe, however, that this attitude toward students suggests an educational philosophy that emphasizes humanistic education without wanting to view its participants as (fully) human" (79). No matter how educated we are or how intellectually strong, feeling

emotionally unstable may prevent us from becoming self-actualized as writers, teachers, and human beings.

Nancy Welch has written widely on the role of emotions in both teaching and writing. In “Revising a Writer’s Identity,” Welch criticizes compositionists such as Bartholomae who insist the university is no place for personal writing; she faults teachers who try to squelch “unruly and restless” emotions because such emotions interfere with students “modeling and adapting” the teacher’s so-called academic behaviors and attitudes, and because emotions disrupt teachers’ mythic notions that classrooms can be “predictable and safe” (44). Echoing Bleich’s position in Know and Tell and Perl and Wilson’s in Through Teachers’ Eyes, Welch urges us to examine frequently our roles and motives in requiring students to perform as academics, to become mini versions of ourselves. As teachers, these scholars suggest that developing a habit of self-reflection may enable us to see the ways in which we limit our students by pushing them to emulate our (narrowly defined) academic selves and styles (Mack and Zebroski, Bleich, Grumet, Welch, Perl and Wilson).

Welch cites Suzanne Clark’s research on our discipline’s fear of the emotional and our attempt to distance ourselves from writing as therapy. Our history of fearing and distancing “marks a continuation of the Enlightenment project, which is founded on creating as ‘gendered and perverse’ the category of the sentimental” (45). Again, we and our students suffer the consequences of centuries of patriarchal, patronizing attitudes that equate emotions with illness and processing of feelings with the feminine, always weak or inferior. As sociologist Mary Bradbury suggests, our “fears of pollution from the decomposing corpse and the strength of taboos around death and decay” tend to reinforce

male power and authority (123), especially in the university, where student grief narratives are seen by some faculty as emotionally excessive representations of death which have no place in the academy.

In our desire for disciplinary legitimacy and classroom control and our fear of being overwhelmed by students' emotions, many compositionists deny the influence of feelings and relationships in the teaching of writing and in writing itself. Welch urges us to consider that "by suppressing connections between intellect and feeling, writing and relationships, we're reproducing the essence of Enlightenment rationality" that Clark describes and that theorists such as Bakhtin critique and work to dismantle. That essence is a tendency toward "hushing up the discursive carnival of laughter, anger, tears, and joy that might disrupt our official, moving-into-academic-high-culture narratives" (Welch 45). Instead of using pedagogies that attempt to repress or neutralize emotion, Welch suggests using reading as a "third factor" that interrupts the teacher-pleasing or teacher-modeling mode and "reveals our inability to see ourselves reflected entirely and unproblematically in a particular mirror, and produces, as a result, restlessness, examination, and revision" (49). She wants us to reconceptualize the role of reading in a writing class so that students are not trying to imitate the writers they're reading or be quizzed on the content of a novel, but reading to "promote revision and provide students with the support and perspectives they need to re-envision the meanings, the identifications of a text and of their lives" (55). In this regard, she echoes the call from bell hooks, John Mayher, Lad Tobin, and Hurlbert and Blitz to make education meaningful and relevant to students' lives.

A Crying Shame: Beyond (Academic) Reason

The prevalence of shame among those who are grieving—especially among children who lose a parent prematurely or violently—makes it an emotion worth studying in more detail. In Scenes of Shame: Psychoanalysis, Shame, and Writing, Joseph Adamson and Hilary Clark offer eleven essays examining shame and its connection with creativity and survival in the lives and literary works of several authors, using the psychoanalytical framework of psychologists Silvan Tomkins, Helen Block Lewis, and Leon Wurmser—all considered pioneers in the scholarship of shame. Editors Adamson and Clark introduce the collection with a persuasive essay about the role of shame in shaping identity and the importance of affect, more generally, in human life and learning. They note that the academy, especially the sciences, tends to disregard “both the affective and the imaginative dimensions of human experience,” just as our culture tends “to deny the emotions any real significance in our understanding of the world” (2). Consider the trend toward appearing “cool” and emotionless rather than displaying sadness, excitement, rage, or a passionate intellectual interest; maintaining a flat affect seems more desirable than showing a range of emotions, in or out of the classroom.

Independent research by Tomkins, Lewis, and Wurmser between 1963 and 1981 suggests that the basis for personal identity is primarily emotional, not “the drives” as Freud said, and that shame often impedes self-awareness and relationships with others. The self-loathing that accompanies the internalized shame experienced by those who are orphaned and by victims of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination must be overcome if they are to experience healthy relationships. One way to combat or overcome shame is to name it and know it, to write or find some other

creative outlet that gives the shamed person a way to claim his or her space in the world that hates him or her. The excessive inhibition of emotions, generally, and unacknowledged shame, in particular, often leads to anger, rage, and “malignant feelings of resentment” because it is natural for human beings to want mutual recognition from each other. Patterns of shame become ingrained during infancy and childhood when the primary caregiver disappears or fails to mirror back to a child that he or she is lovable and worthy of life. Many such children grow up and become writers in an attempt to assert their worth, to seek approval from others, and to counter-balance the shame and self-contempt they learned as infants.

Contributors to Adamson and Clark’s collection examine shame in the lives and works of George Eliot, Hawthorne, Faulkner, D.H. Lawrence, Anne Sexton, Toni Morrison, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. The final essay, Jeffrey Berman’s “Unmasking Shame in an Expository Writing Class,” moves away from literary criticism and addresses what happens in a creative writing course when the class reads and responds to a male student’s essay of being sexually abused by his uncle and suffering years of shame and secrecy. While Berman offers no easy solutions to managing student disclosure, he develops his example fully and shows the complexities of writing and witnessing traumatic narratives. He concludes that student writers should have the opportunity to write from their own experiences and to have their work read and responded to by peers and teachers.

Like Adamson and Clark, theorists Beth Daniell and Jerome Bruner emphasize emotions and spirituality, which many academicians resist, and challenge us to reconsider the role of feelings. These scholars ask us to remember that meaning comes

not only from logic and reason but from our “beliefs, desires, intentions, and commitments” (Bruner 14), to recognize that “for some people the profoundest part of their identity is their religious beliefs or spiritual life” (Daniell 164), and to reclaim “imagination” and “creativity” in academic scholarship because “the ideology of science has for the most part tended to disregard and undervalue both the affective and the imaginative dimensions of human experience” (Adamson and Clark 2). The academy’s disregard for emotions and its evangelistic emphasis on ideological and political understandings of culture can lead to shame and shaming: “Whenever a person is disempowered on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, race, physical disability, whenever a person is devalued and internalizes the negative judgment of an other, shame flourishes” (2-3). One of the central features of shame is that we experience the other as hostile judge, and when the “other” is a teacher, shaming can be crippling because the student is looking for encouragement and acceptance, for a reflection back to herself of her value and worth, and the loss or perceived loss of acceptance can induce shame.

In Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity, queer theorist and English professor Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick exposes the paranoia and shame at the root of much critical theory, including queer, feminist, deconstructionism, and new historicism. Like Adamson and Clark, Sedgwick relies heavily on Tomkins’ work on shame and other affects and on Judith Butler, Foucault, and Derrida in her analyses of performativity and pedagogy. Sedgwick aims to develop a more Eastern, nondualistic system of theorizing difference that not only allows room for feelings and emotions, but makes them central in any intellectual endeavor. She acknowledges up-front that scholars in physics, gender and sexuality, art, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, pedagogy, race, and the recovery

movement find it easier to “deprecate the confounding, tendentious effects of binary modes of thinking” than to “articulate or model other structures of thought” (2). The dualistic thinking that pervades Western culture, in and out of the academy, limits what we think, feel, say, and do—how we can live and work in the world.

In her closing chapter, “Pedagogy of Buddhism,” Sedgwick acknowledges how a cancer diagnosis forced her to re-theorize her position on grief and pedagogy. She connects early Asian thought to ancient Greece and German Romanticism and to the American Transcendentalist movement of the mid 19th century. Most Buddhist texts present ideas in the form of a master teaching a student, and “this teaching situation, evidently, thrives on personality and intimate emotional relation. At the same time, it functions as a mysteriously powerful solvent of individual identity” (160). Ideally, teaching and learning occur throughout life, and the line between teacher and student blurs as the learning goes both ways. Sedgwick cites Elizabeth Peabody, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson Alcott as proponents of all souls being “potentially what Jesus was actually” and that “every soul is an incarnation of the infinite” (164). The idea of no separation between teacher and student is rooted in Asian thought, as is the Socratic philosophy of “know thyself” and move outward from there. Sedgwick notes the Buddhist emphasis on process----the means being equally important to the end, the journey to the destination—and says becoming aware or “realizing” what we already know is both the means and the end in Buddhism, in pedagogy, and in education more generally. We can know something but not fully know it until we REALIZE it, as she has done in the face of a diagnosis with breast cancer. Such realizations, however, may not be communicable easily in words.

Unlike the Transcendentalists and even Socratic dialogue, Sedgwick credits the “conscious dying movement” with dealing more directly with the Buddhist notions of nonself and with articulating the “subjectivity of the dying” (173). Further, she notes drily that having a fatal diagnosis “makes inescapably vivid the distance between *knowing* that one will die and *realizing* it” (174). What she calls “the pedagogy of illness and dying,” those situations in which a hospice worker, nurse, friend, or family member is in close contact with someone dying, can bring “means and ends into unaccustomed relations with each other” so the caregiver receives as much or more than he or she is giving to the dying person (176). Sedgwick acknowledges that the “very painful epistemological/psychological knots” she once obsessed over (do I fear death? Will my confident atheism wither in the wind?) now seem “numbingly boring” as she confronts the reality of her actual death. Similarly, sociology professor Arthur Frank refers to “the pedagogy of suffering” to describe what ill people have to teach society (145). This pedagogy is Frank’s response to administrative systems that refuse to take suffering into account “because they are abstracted from the needs of bodies” (146). Illness narratives tend to foreground the body’s pain and vulnerability and require “a new social ethic” that asks for sick people—or grieving students, in the case of schools and universities—to be treated as whole beings.

In Scenes of Shame, the editors cite Kierkegaard as pitting the need for self-assertion against the fear of exposure and shame in a social context; “‘despair’ occurs when there is a conflict between the fear of self-loss and the fear of being rejected as flawed in some way by the other if one reveals that self” (11). The greatest danger is “not to be seen at all, to be a ‘disappearing who’” (12), something that countless college

students experience as they enter the academy at age 18, unsure of their place or their voice. Adamson and Clark suggest that the “excessive inhibition of emotion has dangerous consequences,” and they’re right. They argue that “shame is the emotion that functions most to discourage the expression of other affects, including itself” (16). Unacknowledged shame may lead to anger, rage, or “malignant feelings of resentment,” destroying our capacity for positive, healthy, happy feelings, as well, and reducing our capacity to write.

Sometimes shame becomes chronic and interferes with learning, a reality that educators should attempt to ameliorate. In traumatic or abusive situations, “shame, combined with other negative affects, becomes magnified and turns into a chronic experience. It then has a toxic effect on the development of healthy desires to know and discover the world and commune with others, and on the development of a confident and trusting self” (Adamson and Clark 18). I suspect we’re witnessing the long-term consequences of educational shaming when our students enter first-year composition reluctant to engage in writing, reading, or discussing ideas; those who have been told from kindergarten through college that they can’t write may understandably lack the motivation or confidence to compose. It behooves teachers to know the way shame functions and thrives, and that it sometimes leads to exhibitionism, withdrawal, or antagonism. Among those burdened by shame, “fears of being overexposed, invaded, or taken over by others may be amplified to a paralyzing extent, leading to severe states of depression. Correspondingly, compulsive forms of self-assertion and the aggressive desire for power and control over others can serve as defenses and as a means of satisfying the thwarted, innate wishes to show and see” (19). When students disrupt class,

refuse to participate in group work or discussions, or resist writing personal narratives, their behaviors may be evidence of shame, depression, or other complications related to grief—something to which writing teachers should remain sensitive as we design syllabi and assign grades. Instead of punishing them and further inducing shame, we should invite them to write about their resistance and noncompliance and let them locate causes and solutions.

Psychologists and thanatologists agree that shame often flourishes in a person who has lost a parent early, whether the loss results from death, divorce, prison, relocation, or some other event (Harris, Simon and Drantell, Leick and Davidsen-Neilsen). If not articulated, shared, and transformed, shame may cripple the survivor emotionally, socially, and intellectually. The only way to heal shame is to speak it, to call it out in the open and work creatively to bear/bare it as countless writers, artists, musicians, and others have done in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries (see section on Literary Orphans). English teacher Georgia Heard acknowledges the shame that comes with sorrow: “Sometimes this United States culture wants to drown sorrow in Smiley Faces and ‘Don’t Worry Be Happy’ songs; we don’t allow ourselves to feel sorrow without feeling ashamed that there’s something wrong with us. Millions of people drink or spend their lives in front of televisions to avoid feeling pain” (86). Teaching our students to channel their avoidance energy into writing may be a real gift. Though at times difficult, embodied writing and teaching “require us to revisit our pasts” as we attempt to transform our practices and take our grief to the page or to the classroom (Banks 22). Making room for painful stories offers English studies “a chance to be an ethical discipline, one concerned with the ethos of the writer” and one that encourages

personal writing (38). Knowing what we know about the educational and personal benefits of grief writing, composition teachers are uniquely positioned to witness students' development and the rescripting of their lives after traumatic loss. Researchers have found that when children are told to accept a parent's death silently, to not cry and not speak of the absent parent, they have a more difficult time moving through mourning and establishing trust again (Harris, Simon and Drantell, Edelman). Children feel anger, sadness, and abandonment—feelings we commonly associate with death—but they also may feel “shame, guilt and relief” related to the parent's death (Harris 37). In her interviews with dozens of orphaned adults, Harris heard many say that their “forbidden” feelings had been the most difficult to deal with after the loss. In fact, “shame is one of the most common experiences of children who lose parents” (37), and it emanates from many sources: embarrassment at being associated with sickness or death, especially when the child is gossiped about or ostracized as a result of the parent's illness or death; vulnerability that accompanies the emotional overload and shock of losing a parent and having peers stare or gawk; being expected to “act normal” in school and elsewhere only days after losing a mother or father, and being labeled “weird” when unable to conform to expectations.

When a parent's illness or death is controversial, as in suicide or alcohol- or drug-related death, the shame multiplies exponentially as the child internalizes the surviving parent's humiliation and learns to cope by remaining silent or emotionally aloof (Harris 40). When students enter college having experienced significant loss and shame, they may have difficulty relating to others or focusing on their studies; and they may begin to make reparations within the newfound community of writers in a first-year

composition class.

Drop the Story: Narrative Modes of Learning

“Because we can write and rewrite the stories of ourselves, new stories hold the potential for new ways of experiencing ourselves and our lives. In editing our narratives, we change the organization and nature of our memories and, hence, reorganize our brains as well as our minds.”

Cozolino, The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy, 103

Stories and story-telling—ancient avenues of human communication and survival—continue to thrive in our global, technological culture within and beyond the academy. Stories drive most movies and television programs in America today, whether afternoon soap operas, talk shows, cartoons, reality TV, live court hearings, home improvement shows, daily news, or dramas set in hospitals, police stations, funeral homes, neighborhoods, schools, courtrooms, and even the White House. We want to know who is doing what to whom, and where and why and how. Viewers become addicted to certain programs to find out who is falling in or out of love with whom, who is pregnant, who miscarried, whose parents or children are ill or dying, who lost, found, or changed jobs, who is making money and who is losing it, and more. Sadly, many people spend more time watching the make-believe stories of television than engaging in real-life, in-depth conversations with family members, neighbors, and friends.

We enjoy round-the-clock access to each other via email and cellular telephones, yet many of us spend less quality time sitting down together and listening attentively to each other’s stories in satisfying ways. Everywhere we go, people are talking and multi-tasking—talking on the phone as they walk or drive to class, emailing to ask “what’s up?” as they search the Internet for news—but there’s a frenzied, anxious tone to such encounters. Habitually rushing from one event to the next, we opt for abbreviated

telephone conversations or cryptic email exchanges that leave us wanting more. As a result, many of us are suffering from what Clark Strand, a former English professor and Buddhist monk, calls “a feeling of loss at the heart of modern people” (11). We crave connecting in meaningful ways but don’t settle down long enough to let ourselves unwind or our stories unfold, don’t stop long enough to listen or be listened to or to notice the ongoing cycles of birth, decay, death, and rebirth in nature, in ourselves, or in our friends and families.

Despite or perhaps because of narrative’s place at the heartbeat of modern culture, most universities and scholarly journals still consider the personal stories of students and faculty to be non-academic and irrelevant to the goals of education. Academics are among the last to embrace story-telling as a legitimate tool for learning, communicating, and meaning-making. However, as Barbara Kamler notes in Relocating the Personal, a growing number of scholars in composition, education, sociology, and literacy view narrative as “a framework for understanding the construction of knowledge in relation to lived experience” (45). Whether used in research, pedagogy, or curriculum inquiry, stories are gaining credibility among scholars because they “do not tell single truths, but rather represent a truth, a perspective, a particular way of seeing experience and naming it” at a particular historical place and moment.

For people on the front lines of war, storytelling facilitates survival because “narrative organizes experience *after the fact*. Though the narratives may reaffirm past violences, infusing old into new, they will never *be* the raw primary experience of which they speak” (Nordstrom 22, italics hers). As human beings face embattled conditions which ultimately influence their identities and realities, only narrative “flows through the

cracks and bridges the disjunctions to give meaning.” Only the narrator can judge “what ‘whole’ the fragments should produce, what ‘reality’ flows through ruptures” after war and other traumatic experiences (22). Without individual and collective narratives, or conscious moves to craft a story after familiar scripts are annihilated, human beings miss opportunities to find creative solutions for living, whether they face the challenge of rebuilding a nation, a village, a family, or a life after trauma.

Increasingly, educators across disciplines are embracing narrative as a necessary educational practice; consider Joseph Trimmer’s Narration as Knowledge, Gian Pagnucci’s Living the Narrative Life, Robert Coles’ The Call of Stories, Kieran Egan’s Teaching as Story Telling, Arthur Frank’s The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics, Molly Andrews et al’s Lines of Narrative: Psychosocial Perspectives, Haroian-Guerin’s The Personal Narrative: Writing Ourselves as Teachers and Scholars, and Rachel Naomi Remen’s Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal. These authors share a commitment to stories as a way of connecting otherwise isolated or estranged human beings to each other, a commitment that could save the world if more people practiced it. Unlike statistical data or disembodied reports, narrative “has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist’s interest—with involvement and sympathetic understanding, with anger at our society’s refusals of visibility” (Nussbaum 88). Seeing “the other” as fully human is a step toward treating him or her well, ideally curbing fear, hatred, discrimination, and other forms of violence. Besides residence halls, college writing classes may be the safest, most supportive environment for students to exchange stories with peers from diverse backgrounds.

In Living the Narrative Life, Pagnucci challenges educators to make stories

central to teaching, especially those who teach writing. He reminds us that figuring out the goals of education is “a politically charged issue” that moves us into the realm of ideology, and that ideology always informs what we teach, whether we emphasize academic arguments or personal narratives (28). He concludes that promoting and practicing a narrative life must also mean “being political, ideological, and radical” (30)—work worth doing in order to make sure everyone’s story is heard. The traditional, masculinist culture of the academy often silences individual stories in favor of a more disembodied, authoritative language; this culture will not change on its own but needs those who support narrative to say so and to use narrative for teaching and learning.

In his 2002 narrative dissertation, More than ‘Once Upon a Time’: Fiction as a Bridge to Knowing, veteran composition professor Neal Saye promotes a broader application of narrative as a legitimate mode of learning and teaching. He summarizes three main objections by those who reject narrative as a learning tool: “it is unscientific and even subversive of science, it is irrational in accepting the emotions, and it rejects impartiality and universality” (Saye 30). Echoing Jerome Bruner and other theorists, Saye insists that the narrative mode of cognition “provides a valuable paradigm of understanding, a healthy alternative to scientific reason as king” (29-30), an alternative that encourages dialogue rather than monologue and active rather than passive learning. Paraphrasing Ricoeur and Venema, Saye argues that narrative allows writers to reconstruct identities and worlds using verbal images, metaphors, and stories to discover ways of living and “modes of selfhood” that they might not consider otherwise (43). Referring to Ricoeur’s “Life in Quest of Narrative,” Saye notes that we develop narrative identity by

‘applying to ourselves the plots that we have received from our culture and of trying on the different roles assumed by the favorite characters of the stories most dear to us. It is therefore by the means of the imaginative variations of our own ego that we attempt to obtain a narrative understanding of ourselves, the only kind that escapes the apparent choice between sheer change and absolute identity. Between the two lies narrative identity.’ (Ricoeur 33 qtd. in Saye 43)

Whether we’re writing fiction or nonfiction, imagining our lives differently—as more compassionate, more open, or more engaged in life—is critical to making positive changes in our actual lives, especially for one whose sense of identity has been decimated by a parent’s premature death.

Telling and revising stories enables us to grow and learn more about ourselves in relation to others. Compositionist Amy Robillard reminds us that “the point of telling stories lies in how one moves from *what happened* to *what happens*. This is why stories are not easy to tell” (84). Therefore, we have to pay attention to the current effects of the stories we’re telling about our pasts, because “the point lies in interpretation. We understand our present by interpreting our past, analyzing its details and selecting the plot line.” For students writing about traumatic loss, making the narrative move to the present is critical in terms of their recovery. Robillard concludes that everything she has experienced as a reader and writer of narrative convinces her that “we cannot distinguish between narrative and analysis” or “narrative and argument” because they “interanimate” and support each other (82). The hierarchical distinctions between categories tend to blur and dissolve, just as a person’s past and present melt into one moment, the present.

The stories we tell and re-tell about ourselves, families, and neighborhoods remind us who we are and enable us to re-envision our lives. Story-telling facilitates identity development and learning as children use narrative “to perform their identities or to reflect on them” (Daiute and Buteau 55). Coherence and other narrative elements have been linked to personal well-being, and narrative writing provides a context for critical reflection and resistance, which also serves developmental needs. French psychologist P. Janet and other clinicians have found that transforming fragmented, perceptual memories into cohesive narratives often mitigates “the unhealthy effects of traumatic experiences” (Lepore and Smyth 4). Zen writer and psychotherapist Gail Sher reminds us that “we are all, despite ourselves, drenched in narrative. Implicit in every syllable of our uninterrupted inner monologue is testimony to an entire life” (131). Retelling the testimony becomes “a way of relinquishing, a way of overcoming. Since we constantly reimagine ourselves in this fashion, we need to learn to self-listen with a child’s rapt attention” (132). Learning to listen to ourselves, to notice subtle shifts in the meaning we make from our stories as we grow and mature, gives new direction to our lives—an important practice for grieving students.

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’Reilley, Radical Presence, 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 separate entities. A text is a representation of experience, and the text is not equal to the actual experience or to the writer himself or herself (Kamler 64, Nordstrom 21). Published texts are relatively fixed and limited, whereas human life is fluid and evolving, always open to revision. For those whose grief remains unattended or unprocessed, as is the case with many college students, writing becomes a way to bring the story of loss to light and revise and rescript it, as needed, with encouragement from an audience of peers and teacher.

Consider the consequences of denying students the opportunity to write, revise, and share their experiences with readers. Citing Egan's Teaching as Story Telling, Pagnucci cautions educators that blocking personal stories from university classes and libraries “often deprives students of the very thing that might help them make meaning” of what they are being taught in school (17). He worries that focusing only on teaching “critical essays” and “precious research papers” will prevent students from writing “the narratives [they] actually need to tell in order to grow” (29). Likewise, O'Reilly 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, to the residual wounds of racism, war, and other forms of cruelty (38). In making such wounds explicit, bringing them up and out, we may begin to heal, individually and culturally; when sorrows go unattended, planes fly into buildings and nations drop bombs in attempts to seek revenge.

In his introduction to Refiguring the Map of Sorrow, Mark Allister notes that "writing as a way to work through grief is as old as art itself" (1), most often in the genre of autobiography. Allister examines nature-based grief narratives written by Peter Matthiessen, Gretel Ehrlich, Bill Barich, Terry Tempest Williams, William Least Heat-Moon and Sue Hubbell. These authors "reframe and work through their grief by focusing on external subjects that absorbed each writer as a replacement for their loss" (1), another way of focusing on what remains. In each book-length narrative in Allister's study, the writer begins by recounting a recent trauma—two about mothers dying, four about the loss of a lover or spouse—and describing the despair and depression that initially accompany such loss. As each book closes, we realize that the writer has moved "tentatively, awkwardly, mysteriously—through the mourning process" (1), a move Allister attributes to the process of writing (in) nature. Each writer's "disabling grief" is tempered by the process of writing about what moves them, from their position both inside and outside the text, and they learn to re-envision their lives, past, present, and future.

The nature-based writing advocated by Allister could be another tool for students

who are struggling to rescript their lives after losing their mother or father. By placing their loss in the context of the natural world, students may remember that animals, plants, and people are constantly being born, living, and dying and begin to accept death as natural rather than foreign. In her 2003 thesis at Utah State University, "Nature Writing and Healing: Recovering the Wild Soul," Denice H. Turner explores common problems associated with constructing trauma and grief narratives and offers nature as a healing site/emphasis for such writing. Frustrated by her own attempt to write a healing narrative, she analyzes the stories of nature writers whose texts are both personally reflective and socially aware. For many writers, their relationship with nature and their embodied writing of it brings meaning to and relief from their grief.

A Positive Shift: Relevant Dissertations

One sign that the academy is shifting toward acknowledging the power of expressing or repressing grief and other emotions is the increasing number of dissertations on mourning, writing, and healing. An online search of Dissertation Abstracts in spring 2004 yielded several studies related to writing and healing. In her dissertation advised by Carol Gilligan at Harvard University in 1992, Brina Caplan examines the role of forgiveness in the long-term effects of having lost a parent in childhood. For her study, "Forgiving the Loss of a Parent in Childhood: Three Case Studies," Caplan chose three adults who lost a mother at age 9 or 10. After intensive interviewing, Caplan concludes that forgiving a parent is integral with other developments in identity, self-awareness, and empathy; that a seemingly forgiving stance may help the adult survivor to stave off residual anger or grief or to preserve what little is left of the relationship with the deceased parent; and that both adult identity and a clearer,

more forgiving view of the lost parent may be discovered through a creative re-imagining of parent-child relationships.

Another dissertation that explores the healing power of storytelling is Diane Hyland-Russell's "The Storied Nautilus: Life Writing, Narrative Therapy, and Women's Self-Storying," University of Calgary, 2003. Drawing on literary criticism, social work and life writing, she explores the connections between narrative structure, the stories women tell about their lives, and their resulting sense of self and identity. Similarly, Marilyn Chandler Tiechert's work at Princeton University, 1984, examines seven post-World War I autobiographies in her attempt to illustrate the healing nature of autobiography in recovering from crisis and restructuring reality. She outlines three literary challenges to creating crisis narratives: finding words for the unspeakable, finding a perspective from which to view the traumatic past, and finding a form or structure that allows the writer to incorporate chaotic, fragmented memories. Working through these challenges often enables the writer to restructure consciousness and return to the present.

Two dissertations explore the grieving and meaning-making processes of parents who have lost a child. In "A Narrative-Relational Approach to Grief Therapy with a Bereaved Patient," written in 2003 at Alliant International University in San Diego, clinical psychologist Eugenia Liberman Weiss looks at how a bereaved mother uses writing and story-telling to create meaning after the death of her adult son. During four years in therapy with Weiss, the client makes meaning through revising her self-narrative or memory, her relationship to the deceased, and her relationship to others through the use of language, memory and interpretations of loss. Likewise in "When the World of the

Family is Shattered: Narratives of Loss and Healing Practices After the Sudden Death of a Child,” Maria Gudmundsdottir writes an interpretive phenomenological study examining the experiences of seven families who lost a child to sudden, unexpected death. Some survivors had made narrative meaning of the loss while others considered it senseless and meaningless; the loss was described as an “embodied experience” which revealed itself over time, and Gudmundsdottir looked at family healing practices and rituals of comfort, including the birth of another child.

To help fill the void in thanatology research pertaining to healthy bereavement models, social worker Gail Madelyn Giacalone studied Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton’s experiences with loss and grief, specifically her letters and journals. Along with writing, Seton used many methods deemed “natural and healthy” through her bereavement process: walking in nature, telling about her loss, crying, praying, meditating, and caring for others. In “Elizabeth Ann Seton’s Experience With Loss and Bereavement and Its Applicability for Bereavement Work,” written in 1987 at New York University, Giacalone concludes that Seton’s “natural” methods resemble those recommended by thanatologists to assist other grievers.

In “Memories Lost: One Teacher’s Heuristic Journey Through Autobiography,” teacher/researcher Candace Brown Adams describes the transformational and healing effects of writing about growing up with an alcoholic parent. In recounting significant life events, Adams shows how her experience transformed her sense of self and influenced her pedagogy as a high school teacher. Revisiting feelings of pain, loss, and abandonment was part of her research, as was conducting a comprehensive review of others’ research and stories. In “Treatments: Negotiating Bodies, Language, and Death in

Illness Narratives,” Lisa Lee Diedrich investigates the phenomenological, psychological, and social meanings of illness as described in the contemporary memoirs of five writers. Specifically, she asks: how does language both capture and fail to capture the scenes of loss portrayed in illness narratives? What sort of ethics emerges out of such scenes of loss and the attempts to capture them? Her dissertation was written in women’s studies, philosophy and literature at Emory University in 2001.

In “After the Flood: Survivor Literature of the Vietnam War,” Jeffrey Theodore Loeb (University of Kansas, 1995) suggests that narratives written by Vietnam veterans display both a desire to bear witness to trauma and a need to structure experience in such a way that a recreated self begins to emerge through the writing. For these survivor-narrators cannot endure the “postmodern uncertainty” without trying to find meaning in their traumatic experiences. They seek healing and a sense of home through the act of writing, but often remain “irreparably divided,” which manifests itself in their stories.

Works and Days: The Discipline Takes on Grief

Other than the occasional issue dedicated to a deceased scholar or paragraph written “in memoriam,” most academic journals are not known for their expertise in dealing with death. When questions arose about the academic and disciplinary responses to grief among supporters of the late composition scholar, James Berlin, many turned to each other in an online dialogue after Berlin’s death in 1994. The editors of Works and Days initiated the electronic conversation with 20 scholars who had worked with Berlin: graduate students, faculty colleagues at Purdue, and friends at other universities. The personal, academic discussion is published in Works and Days 27/28, Cultural Studies and Composition: Conversations in Honor of James Berlin. Editors David Downing and

James Sosnoski introduce the volume as a 16-month conversation in which “contributors came together online to grieve, to honor, and to keep alive the issues, the memories, and the hopes for future work linking composition and cultural studies” (13). The conversation includes everything from references to esteemed journals to heart-felt questions from graduate student Teresa Henning about the academic taboo against grieving: “Where do we deal with [death] concretely?” (39). With Berlin’s assistance, Henning had been developing her dissertation proposal: “When he died my work stopped—even though I could hear his voice in me at times” (38). As always in a crisis, Henning turned to her mother, but three months later, her mother died, too, and Henning’s “work stopped again” (39). She writes:

Even here at Purdue, we talk about Jim’s work, but we don’t talk much—even here in whispers—that we are still sad—that we miss him. I think maybe we should talk more about such matters. I am beginning to wonder if what makes us human and humane is mortality—not our own—but of those around us—those we love and work with. And I am wondering if there is a place for these thoughts in academia. And I wonder if I still belong here when all I find interesting and important these days is my humanity and your humanity and his and hers and theirs. I can’t stomach reading more theoretical articles or working on my dissertation. I am after something larger—I’m just not sure what. (39)

Another graduate student of Berlin’s, Kris Blair, assures Henning that she is not alone and that people need to remember Berlin the person, not just the scholar, and that “we need to maintain that connection to each other” (40). Blair also notes that “it’s sad that so many of us kept our grief private” (39). Downing agrees with Henning and Blair that academics need to talk more about death and that academia is missing something “in the ways it has been institutionalized, disciplined, and professionalized” (41). Mark Hurlbert praises all the writers who responded in support of Henning’s grief: “If we can’t make this disembodied place [academic listserv in cyberspace] a location for genuine

meeting, then I would want out” (42). He goes on to assert that “the personal is the critical,” and no one escapes from the reality that “our students, friends, and relatives die.”

Citing Mary Rose O’Reilley’s question in The Peaceable Classroom—can we teach English so that people stop killing each other?—Hurlbert asks Henning a related question: “Is it possible to teach composition in such a way as to compose meanings of death? I am guessing so” (43). He then asks what can be done in the classroom, where students bring stories of death and loss every day, stories that often remain untold:

Now I know that many cynics would say that what I am calling for is just more personal confession—more personal writing amounting to nothing. I say they are wrong for a number of reasons. First, although I fully recognize that personal writing can become coercive, oppressive and pointless in the hands of academics, I also can’t help but feel that “critics” who challenge personal writing are often those who teach from teacher centered perspectives----with the answers, the topic, the curricula, with everything figured out for getting students to write the easily collected and evaluated practice academic writing. Haven’t we seen students write of death in such a way as to make sense, meaning, —to relieve pain? (Works and Days 43).

Hurlbert then asserts that students should be encouraged to create social, political, epistemological, cultural, and multicultural projects “to honor the dead and promote living,” to which Henning quickly responds: “I had no idea that my one message would call up such support.” She concludes that “just knowing others are struggling in the same ways I am really helps” (44). Hurlbert’s frequent co-author, Michael Blitz, joins the conversation with this observation: “even in a time of such profound sadness as Teresa has experienced, she makes the effort to write, to share something and to make something with and in language, to affirm the need and desire for community—through writing (for starters)” (44-45). Other writers offer gratitude for the opportunity to “share our sorrow”

(Tina Perdue 45) and to provide “frank and emotional talk about grieving for Jim” (Lisa Langstraat 46), a conversation that leaves Langstraat feeling as if she is “part of a large community of others who feel his absence so poignantly.” Again, having a semi-public forum for collective grieving gave Langstraat and others a path back to the group and forward into the world, a forum many faculty members long for when they are mourning and no one acknowledges it.

Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth challenges the Freudian model of mourning in which the survivor detaches from the lost object and reattaches as quickly as possible to another love object, hastening the process of mourning to closure. Such a model is problematic in that it short-circuits the long-term grieving process and implies that the solution to loss and mourning is to replace the lost loved one immediately in order to heal and silence the survivor’s pain. Instead of embracing one’s loss and learning what it has to teach, the survivor rushes to bond with another in hopes of avoiding the pain of abandonment. Likewise, when university faculty insist on disembodied writing that represses emotion in favor of a distant, academic “voice,” we are reinforcing the Freudian model and leaving our students no outlet for expressing their grief and reconstructing their identities and homes (Hallet 89-90). The modern university emerged in the 19th century along with the removal of cemeteries from cities and the establishment of funeral homes for hiding the dead, all three striving to erase personal effects and deny “the shirt sliced open to reveal the body in trauma, the bodily traces, the literal and figurative blood stains, and the effects of dying” (90). As part of our cultural denial of death, we separate ourselves from any reminders of sickness or aging, both in and out of the academy, and such denial often leads to depression, rage, and violence when something happens to

disrupt our fantasy of permanence.

CHAPTER 4: THE PLACE OF EMBODIED GRIEF IN THE COMPOSITION

CLASSROOM

“I thought I could describe a state, make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process. It needs not a map but a history.”

C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 47

Mapping Sorrow at School: A Natural Act

Whether or not we hear, speak, or read about it, we and our students face death of all kinds almost daily. These deaths may be “of the body, of spirit, of hope, of desire, of the ability to care. When we address some of the struggles just to live that our students face, we also address the tensions that tear at the health of the world” (Blitz and Hurlbert 1). Whether rural or urban, privileged or poor, alumni or first-generation college, “our students know all too well about suffering and death . . . they come to our classrooms with questions about death that demand answers” (32). They bring us stories of brothers committing suicide, sisters dying in car wrecks, fathers maimed on the job, and mothers dying from cancer. Hurlbert asks, how are we responding to their sorrow? “They come to us not just to expose and express the personal, but to hear something life-affirming, peace-giving. Can we give them that? Can we teach anyone to give this to themselves? What if we can’t?” We can affirm our students’ life-sustaining attempts to survive via writing, every time we invite them to write from their lives in ways that connect personal pain to the social injustices that often cause it (43), and every time we respond in ways that normalize loss, death, and grief as natural elements of a healthy life.

In “Equaling Sorrow: (A Meditation on Composition, Death, and Life),” the artistic format and multi-genre structure of the essay symbolize the non-linear,

paradoxical message that Hurlbert and Blitz are trying to convey: that life and death, and the sorrows in between, are immeasurable, yet human beings are compelled to measure anyway. The authors see writing as a means to create a self “that can at once take its own measure and recognize its own immeasurability” (88). Although they do not refer to trauma theory per se, their presentation of fragments of letters, poems, lists, journal entries, student essays, and literary and theoretical references reinforces their message about the immeasurable nature of love and loss. They cite both quantitative and qualitative evidence to illustrate that students can, do, and should be allowed to write what is relevant to their lives. In ten years of assigning hundreds of students to write a book on what they’re burning to tell the world, more than two-thirds of Hurlbert and Blitz’ students (at an urban New York campus and a rural Pennsylvania one) have chosen to write about the deaths of loved ones and other sorrows.

After posing a series of questions about life, death, teaching, learning, and writing, Hurlbert and Blitz acknowledge that writing brings us closer to the people we have lost and that “writing puts us—and keeps us—in the thick of living because it is an act of living” (85). They see their students’ writing about death as an attempt to “be equal to that sorrow, perhaps to transform it,” even though writing about a thing is not the thing itself. Writing letters and using words enables people to “take sadness in” and to “keep track” of what has happened, what is working and what is not working, so we’ll know the difference, and this is the work writing teachers must encourage (86). Those who teach writing are engaging in “an act of faith the size of the world” (90), faith that writing is worth doing and that students have something to say worth saying, and faith in themselves that looking at the ends of things is crucial. Hurlbert and Blitz criticize

current textbooks because there's a wide gap between much composition pedagogy and the circumstances of people struggling to compose: "Composition teachers will have to make room for the ways in which students keep track of their own lives, their own struggles, their own pain" (91). Like Bleich, Brand, and Tobin, these teacher-scholars challenge us to create space for whatever students bring to class, especially when it pains us to embrace it.

Hurlbert and Blitz acknowledge that "sorrow is not strange—should not be strange to see in the writings of our students because it is, in fact, all-too-familiar to them and to us" (92). They ask us to reconsider our habitual resistance to sadness, our own and our students', because "sorrow is not a disability but is a force that alters human life in ways we struggle to understand" (96). Despite sorrow's place in the natural order of life, many college writing teachers discourage sad stories and prefer, instead, to ask students to model professional essays about "academic" or controversial issues that do not allow for the potentially messy "I" or self-reflection that appears when students select their own topics.

For Montaigne, "the written word was intimately tied to one's ability to face—and more fully experience and understand—the use of one's lifetime and the reality, and sorrow, of death and dying" (Hurlbert and Blitz 94). Writing, then, becomes a way of looking at, a form of paying attention to, the living and dying around us and therein prepares us to meet death when our time comes. Citing examples from many cultures, from student writing to Buddhist nuns to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Hurlbert and Blitz illustrate the importance of naming and embracing sadness. They challenge instructors to read and respond with compassion when students choose to write their

sorrows, to teach writing so that “writing is not looking the other way” but is “acknowledging the tensions that fracture our illusions of well-being” (96). Such fracturing is essential to waking up, to breaking the bonds of acculturation. If we resist reading our students’ losses, what message are we sending them? What business do we have teaching writing if we only want students to write what we are comfortable reading, if we require them to struggle and squirm but are not willing to do so ourselves?

To those who argue that personal writing will not prepare students for academic courses or professional careers, I would suggest that crippling grief, left unexpressed, may prevent some students from finishing one semester, much less graduating and entering the professions. As Rabbi Wolpe says in Making Loss Matter: “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” (15). In expressing grief and in remembering or reconstructing the life of the lost parent, students find healing connections with others in the present, reducing their sense of isolation and giving them the courage to begin to open up and trust again in spite of feeling abandoned or betrayed.

Finding Wholeness in Fragments and “Felt Sense”

The fast pace of life in the 21st century often leaves us feeling fragmented, lacking a real or imagined “unified self” and yearning for a sense of internal or external connectedness. Faigley’s postmodern notion that identities are floating along uncentered is problematic because it ignores the painful embodiment of emotion and loss, which may become life-threatening if ignored. The postmodernist’s refusal to admit coherence denies the body as a material site of mortality and grief—denial that is dangerous in

academic settings where students often lack the authority or assertiveness to disagree with powerful teachers who would dismiss them and their experience. Such denial creates hurdles for students who carry traumatic losses and struggle to express them or anything else of relevance in their writing. Perhaps we are born whole and lose our sense of wholeness as we suffer psychic and bodily wounds. Perhaps our internal shattering, which occurs when a parent dies or disappears prematurely, is the biggest loss of all, leaving us isolated and alone. In these situations, we make up stories (often painful, self-destructive ones) to live with what is happening to us as children or adults (Henke). Unless we revise these stories, we may not realize we are locked within them.

For many students, first-year composition is a safe place to begin finding and filling the gaps in old scripts with help from peer readers and teachers, a place to begin restructuring stories and opening them to new endings and beginnings, or better yet, leaving them open-ended. Wolpe may be right that “the only whole heart is a broken one” (7), for individual suffering has the capacity to make us more aware of and more responsive to the suffering of others. I agree with Deborah Mutnick, who returns to personal narrative as a response to the nihilistic relativism of postmodernism: “From philosophical and literary investigations of subjectivity to everyday spectatorship and consumption of popular culture, the turn to personal discourses reveals an attempt, however effective or futile, to overcome feelings of fragmentation and deracination endemic to postmodern culture” (82). Contrary to charges that narrative writing is individualistic and discourages social relationships, grief writing emerges in response to the lack of meaningful death rituals and the lack of family and community ties as referenced in my introduction.

In Felt Sense: Writing With the Body, Sondra Perl summarizes and then counters the “postmodern impasse,” a theoretical position that foregrounds language and culture as constructing human beings rather than humans constructing their own lives using language. Postmodern theorists argue that everything has been said and nothing is new, that one idea cancels another so there is no truth, and that since everything is relative, nothing ultimately matters (57-58). Citing theories of embodied knowing developed by psychologist Eugene Gendlin, Perl refutes the view that nothing new can be said: “Every time we go to the edge and pause, we are engaging the *not yet said*. We are, in other words, engaging what surrounds language and ideas but is not yet in words. At this edge, new words, new phrasing, new insights can and do come” (57-58, italics hers), insights that may lead to improved lives for our students.

Perl notes that many people fear the edge and remain unaware of the connections between language and the body; they prefer, instead, “to live, speak, and write within the world of the *already said*, within the world of stock phrases and common public knowledge” (58). If we learn to approach the edge of knowing and wait for words to arise from the body’s “felt sense,” Perl insists that we will “find the newness that postmodern theory denies.” Such embodied knowing fuels a way of speaking and writing that honors the truths of our experiences and enables us to re-envision the world.

For 25 years, Perl has been applying Gendlin’s concepts of “felt sense” in her writing classes as she teaches students to listen to their bodies and to leave room for new thoughts and feelings—often wordless at first—to emerge. She reminds us that “the body is central to knowing and speaking” and that a writer’s “body, language, and situation are inextricably linked” (54). We speak, write, and create from a bodily awareness of our

changing environments: “We know because we have what Gendlin calls ‘a bodily orienting sense’ that ‘knows’ the whole of each situation and, in fact, far more aspects of it than we can ever think or say . . . once we recognize the way the body functions within situations and with language, we can turn to it often as a source of new knowledge” (53). Perl offers guidelines for students to learn, experientially, how bodies and minds are connected, how meaning arises from intuition as well as cognition (xvi). Because mourning and grief reside in the body as well as the mind, bereaved student writers may benefit from learning to listen to their “felt sense” regarding what they have lost and what remains. As they identify the sorrow in their shoulders, chests, and stomachs, writers may begin to transform their grief in healthy ways.

Like Perl, Tom Newkirk challenges the claims of postmodernism and cautions academics about the consequences of nihilistic thinking. He reminds us that “often there is something mildly coercive in these [postmodernist] assertions; as if the issue has been settled, the paradigm shifted. In academic debate, merely to use the label ‘essentialist’ is often enough to discredit an idea” (101). Too many English departments are out of step with the religious and other practices of mainstream culture, and we might do well to remember and respect our students’ values as we preach Down with Emotions, Up with (the University’s brand of) Logic, and Everything’s an Argument. Why not listen to the stories our students are telling and let them inform us about their culture and what they might do to improve it? Such truth-telling often breaks “the stubborn silences in which pain often operates” and increases the possibilities for intimacy (Blitz and Hurlbert 58). While it may seem “odd” to call a college composition class “intimate,” Blitz and Hurlbert note that “the sharing of pain and understanding and the community that can

arise in the process of this sharing” often does create intimacy. Pausing long enough to pay attention to body language and listen deeply to what is being said or not said will strengthen the intimate connections between students in pairs, small groups, or whole classes.

Embodying Loss: A 21st Century Approach

“When death comes/ like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,/ I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:/ what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?”

Mary Oliver, “When Death Comes,” in New and Selected Poems, 10

Unlike many philosophers and theorists, poets tend to reside in the real, using material metaphors such as Mary Oliver’s description of death coming “like an iceberg between the shoulder blades” (10). They resist the temptation to talk the body out of existence and opt, instead, for images that ground us in the senses and immerse us in the moment. Consider Joyce Sutphen’s poem, “Coming Back to the Body,” which describes how easily humans negate or vacate their bodies for long periods of time until something jolts them awake: “Coming back to the body, as if to/ a house abandoned in time of war, you find/ it stands tall as you left it, the same/ fingers reaching back to rub the same neck” (103). As you return to the body and remember how it feels to embrace another, you are relieved to find that your dreams are only dreams and that “you have escaped again/ into skin and bone. They’ll never think of/ looking for you in the body, alive.” After hours, days, or years of habitual denial of muscle and marrow, which intellectuals often master, you discover that “You’re still you.” Amazingly, no one asks, “where were you hiding all those long lost years?” Like the subject of Sutphen’s poem, some of us are apt to leave our bodily homes and hide in the land of language, dwelling in words and

ideas and disregarding bodies, perhaps because life in the flesh feels too difficult, painful, or unpredictable and trucking in intangibles feels safer, more controlled. Ironically, poetry enables us to find our way back, to commit to the page the temporal reality that our bodies insist on integrating.

Occasionally, students call our attention to the flesh evidence of their lived histories, as mine did on the second day of a Writing and Healing class. One student rolled up his sleeve to reveal a gay pride tattoo as he described making amends with his father shortly before his death a year earlier; another turned and raised her blouse to show the large tree-of-life tattoo across her back, exemplifying her passion for nature and animals; and a 50-year-old widow stood up and tugged down her pants to expose the scar on her lower spine from surgery to correct paralysis: “I was told I would never walk again,” she said, smiling as her eyes welled up. “I gave away my wheelchair a year later.” These revelations were offered by way of introducing themselves, one of many moves toward the embodied learning and writing many students practice. Their scars and tattoos served as landmarks for the stories they would write and tell later in the semester; by voluntarily revealing them, these students took risks and insisted on grounding their education in the real, in the lives and losses which will not be denied.

And what is more real than the sudden death of a first-year college student, a writing major who was researching MFA programs and planning her career as a poet and bookstore owner? My physiological understanding of grief changed radically when a student in two of my classes, Brittany “Ally” Harbuck, died in a motorcycle accident the last week of spring semester, 2005. After 14 weeks in Composition II and Writing and Healing, this vibrant conversationalist was gone. I had graded her portfolio the night

before and was eager to return it to her on Tuesday, but was greeted instead with the news of her death and a photo taken by a television cameraman at the scene—complete with a body bag on the road beside the mangled bike. I vacillated between weeping and paralysis as I witnessed her classmates’ presentations of their final projects. I could not read or write on anyone’s papers. One student suggested that I write about Ally, and since I could do little else, I decided to try it. The following poem, written April 29, attempts to capture what was lost:

Final Project: A Study in Flesh

for Ally and all my students

Her name, spelled like ally, served her well:
the first “out” lesbian I’d ever had in class
in 13 years of teaching composition—
finally, I was not the only one

The last time I saw her
four days before her death
she wrote a poem about her name
Brittany Alaina Catherine Harbuck
and read it aloud in class
how she’d claimed Catherine from the Catholic saint:
*“a strong, proud woman
who died for what she believed in
that is why I chose her name”*

Ally walked and talked tirelessly
for gay marriage, women’s lives,
and peace
on this earth she loved.
Like the biblical Queen of Sheba
Ally KNEW who she was, and she ACTED like it
Her poem acknowledges:
“My name changes its shape . . . just like I do.”

I like to think her fluidity made for a smooth departure
from the body that housed her spirit for 19 years
This woman child lived in the flesh

in the moment
 in the community
 bright-eyed and barefoot
 baring skin and cleavage, scars and tattoos
 without apology

Her passion for self-expression and social change
 inspired and shamed me:

Why NOT reveal more of skin and soul?
 What are we hiding, and from whom, and to what end?

She dropped off her portfolio Monday morning
 knowing she could miss our 5 p.m. lab with my blessing
 because she had finished her work early

At 5:35 p.m., the Newton fire alarm began belching out a series of beeps
 the first fire alarm of my career
 her classmates and I evacuated the building
 unaware that Ally's spirit was evacuating her body
 at that very moment
 unaware that she was flying off the back
 of her boyfriend's custom-made trike
 on Highway 21 in Port Wentworth
 where she was pronounced dead on the scene

At Ally's funeral today
 I struggled with verb tense
 as I introduced myself to her parents:
I am—I was— her teacher
 We'd spent more than six hours a week together since January
 and *I was not—am not—prepared to lose her, or any student*
in such a violent and permanent way

Three years immersed in theories of grief and trauma
 and writing a dissertation on *The Language of Loss*
 did not prepare me for the material reality
 of Ally's empty chair
 of the echoing silence beside her orange signature
 when it was her turn to present her power-point project
 in *Writing and Healing* last night

Before I knew Ally was gone
 I graded her portfolio, praising her revisions
 and promising to write her a letter
 about all she taught me this semester—

something I had never said on a student's paper

I grieve that she will not see
 the A+ she finally earned
 after a semester of hard-won Bs
 and much pushing and prodding from me
 I grieve that I will not see
 her montage for Writing and Healing
 Now I wonder:

*Was I too hard on her?
 Did she know how much I respected her?*

Perhaps her life becomes her final project
 for as she wrote in an essay and an online journal
 days before her death:
"I am content."

I managed to read this poem aloud—standing barefoot in the grass, as Ally often did—at the memorial service we held in the university's botanical garden, attended by 70 people including friends, family, teachers, and administrators. We paused for almost two hours on the brink of final exams to remember the life of this young woman whose body had left us but whose spirit surely remains. I know that Ally would want me to let go of my grief, my remorse for things left unsaid between us, and to live happily with those who remain, just as I know that my grief follows its own course and returns in waves, sometimes gentle, sometimes crashing, in the mind and body, seeking ease and balance.

In sharing the poem with my students and in telling this story now, I am practicing the kind of embodied teaching and writing advocated by compositionists William Banks, Kristie Fleckenstein, and Jane Hindman: gendered, non-linear, tentative ways of knowing and connecting that offer "transformative potential" for teachers, students, and writers (Banks 22). As Banks suggests in the September 2003 College English, embodied teaching and writing "help to dismantle the boundaries that often exist

in academic writing environments” (25), a move that facilitates learning and creativity on many levels. In such teaching, we pay attention to the actual person writing or speaking because denying the body, our own or others’, can lead to literal and rhetorical violence.

In “Writing Bodies,” Fleckenstein notes that the bulk of composition research emphasizes conceptual frameworks about writing which are far-removed from the lived experience of it. She asserts: “In sacrificing bodies to some illusion of either transcendent truth or culturally constituted textuality, we cut ourselves adrift from any organic anchoring in the material reality of flesh” (281). In doing so, Fleckenstein says we lose our “proprioception,” defined by neurophysiologist Charles S. Sherrington as “our secret sense, our sixth sense” which allows a body to know itself as real. Without proprioception, she says, “without a corporeal way to address the tragedies and victories” we encounter in and out of the classroom, including grief and illness, “we cannot change or celebrate our concrete existence” (281). Ignoring our bodies and their visceral reactions may lead to physical and emotional pain and poor decision-making (Damasio), problems teachers are in a position to ameliorate if we learn to attend to the bodies teaching, writing, and learning. Damage is done when teachers and students try “to maintain a Victorian distance from one another” (Banks 25) in futile attempts to make education a mind-only opportunity. Unknowingly, we maintain the distance and indulge our fears at great cost to ourselves and our students, as Alfred North Whitehead predicted in 1929 when he cautioned educators to remember the physicality of students’ bodies (Ochsner 2). Whitehead’s plea was reiterated 50 years later in Janet Emig’s essay, “Hand, Eye, Brain: Some ‘Basics’ in the Writing Process,” and expanded by Robert Ochsner in 1990 in Physical Eloquence and the Biology of Writing. What writers experience,

consciously and physiologically, in the act of composing will influence what they are able to discover in the process of naming, knowing, and transforming their lives.

Most professors have been trained to treat authors' personal stories or emotions as "self-indulgent at worst, irrelevant at best" (Hindman 11). As an alternative to traditional, masculinist discourses which negate the person writing and promote a rigid, authoritative style, Hindman asks scholars in English studies to incorporate "embodied rhetoric" into our teaching and writing. Such rhetoric features references to the material practices of teaching composition (hours spent alone at a kitchen table assessing student writing or conferencing in cramped offices with individual students) and to the life circumstances of the writer (her emotions, motives, background, and investment in a particular position) (10). Hindman credits feminist compositionists Patricia Bizzell, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Andrea Lunsford, and Lynn Worsham with arguing for the incorporation of affect and the body into professional writing and teaching writing.

Instead of posturing as objective experts, arguing disembodied ideas, and drawing conclusions prematurely, Banks asks us to claim our allegiances up-front and to engage our readers and students in dialogue. Echoing Linda Alcoff and Donna Haraway, Banks wants scholarly writers to "situate" or "position" ourselves by disclosing our race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or other identity markers which influence our choices and motivations as writers and readers (24), something I attempt to do in my introduction. In his embodied essay for College English, Banks intersperses vignettes—sometimes violent, sometimes homosexual—from his childhood at home and his adulthood at school as both teacher and student. He considers his essay "embodied" for two reasons: first, because violence is always embodied and difficult to erase, it may

control the way we read ourselves and others and therefore needs to be acknowledged, and second, “embodied writing hedges because the body hedges, moves in fits and starts, pushes toward puberty and holds back, has days without knee pain and days with. Writing through the body lets writing make the same (often) tentative steps the body does.” Ideally, readers will recognize such movements as metaphors of their own experiences (25).

Unlike linear, seamless academic writing, embodied rhetoric resuscitates both reader and writer as it mimics the recursive, cyclical nature of living and dying, of shifting between knowing and not knowing, clarity and confusion, love and loss. Embodied writing also influences classroom dynamics; Banks found that sharing his stories with students effects how they relate to him as teacher and more importantly, how they understand their own histories, “the parts they have believed they could not reflect on in the presence of others” (25). Embodied teaching and writing “help to dismantle the boundaries that often exist in academic writing environments,” and such dismantling makes way for student-directed learning and growth.

What distinguishes embodied rhetoric from purely expressivistic writing, according to Banks, is this: embodied writing is more socially responsible “because it requires writers to foreground their sense of self at the same time that they consider the social implications of this gesture away” from more traditional, disengaged academic discourse (35). For instance, when a writer situates himself as white, male, heterosexual, and educationally and economically privileged, he reduces the possibility of readers separating him from the text he produces. The typical academic mode of erasing the gendered body from a text allows masculinist rhetorics to become accepted as universal,

and it silences other (female, homosexual, multi-cultural) perspectives—a habit Banks calls “irresponsible” (33). He says the kind of embodied writing Hindman employs in “Making Writing Matter” illustrates the potential for transformation: “Hindman comes to her theories of writing ‘through’ the body by looking at her own alcoholism and her sense of recovery-through-writing.” When her personal writing is “‘disciplined and responsible,’” Hindman discovers how her “‘responses have been socially conditioned’” and how she “‘can intervene in that conditioning’” as a writer (qtd. in Banks 33). Similar discoveries await students who have lost parents at an early age and are writing from their pain in search of ways to interpret and/or transform their loss. Like Banks and Hindman, and as I have done in this dissertation, students may blend the genres of creative nonfiction, academic argument, and critical autobiography to produce embodied texts that facilitate healing and understanding.

To succeed in embodied writing, authors must be willing to commit to both “immersion and emergence” (Fleckenstein 295), to both diving into the personal and resurfacing publicly, a move Tim O’Brien accomplishes literally and symbolically in The Things They Carried, as he returns to the scenes of traumatic loss and writes new endings for himself, his war buddies, and his children. Similar to the scene with James and Mattie revisiting the bridge in A Rumor of Angels, O’Brien wades into the murky water in Vietnam where his Army buddy disappeared decades earlier. As his daughter witnesses from a distance, O’Brien immerses himself in the muddy water, releases his buddy’s shoes along with unresolved grief, then emerges with a new awareness of how his life has continued and must continue, despite what was lost. In writing and publishing his story, he completes the cycle Fleckenstein describes; unlike many other Vietnam veterans, he

escapes suicide—perhaps through the creative, rejuvenating processes of writing and telling his grief.

Our students make similar moves when they delve into their grief and release a written representation of it in a writing group or in a context that acknowledges the universality of death. Immersion occurs in life and in writing when the boundaries between self, other, and reality dissolve as the writer burrows into her own identity and place; emergence is equally important as the personal body is contextualized within the public body (297). Fleckenstein reminds us that such writing “requires that we commit ourselves to more than the pleasure derived from the confusion of boundaries: we must also make ourselves responsible for their construction” and for empowering readers (298). She notes that Richard E. Miller discovers that in order for his father to save himself after a second suicide attempt, his father must medicate his body with both drugs and language. Miller writes that his father must “learn how to tell stories that he has never told in order to escape the terrible power they have over him” (qtd. in Fleckenstein 298), for only in the telling will he begin to heal. Similarly, our students may need to immerse themselves in mourning and memories in order to emerge as scholarly writers into a more connected, collective place. Writing allows one to re-see his or her experiences and to re-situate those experiences within other possibilities, other embodied reactions—an act of re-visioning that changes the writer’s life and may not happen without writing and telling.

Helene Cixous’ description of embodied writing echoes Fleckenstein’s immersion and emergence process: “you write to give the body its Books of the Future because Love dictates your new geneses to you. Not to fill in the abyss, but to love yourself right to the

bottom of your abysses. To know, not to avoid. Not to surmount; to explore, dive down, visit. There, where you write, everything grows, your body unfurls, your skin recounts its hitherto silent legends” (42). In the act of embodied writing, the mind and skin become unified and open, not closed or resistant, and transformation of both writer and reader becomes possible in the process of opening. Because bodies exist in specific times, places, and circumstances, the words that come from them reflect our ever-changing contingencies (Banks 34).

We find a powerful example of embodied grief writing in Kidd’s Secret Life of Bees, when Lily, the orphaned child narrator realizes that “loss takes up inside of everything sooner or later and eats right through it” (55). Lily acknowledges that “the body knows things a long time before the mind catches up to them. I was wondering what my body knew that I didn’t” (69). She feels “broken to pieces” after her father tells her that her mother was on her way to leave Lily the day she died, something Lily realizes “would sink me forever” if it’s true (40). But her writing saves her; when a teacher tells her she could become a professor or a writer of books, Lily starts keeping a collection of her writings, especially of things that she and her father “had never spoken of,” the “secret knowledge that would slip up and overwhelm” her sometimes (17). Other than writing, her only comfort comes in lying on the ground in the peach orchard and feeling the earth against her bare skin.

Resisting Trauma: ‘But We’re Not Therapists!’

“Good teaching *is*, in the classical sense, therapy: good teaching involves reweaving the spirit. (Bad teaching, by contrast, is soul murder).”

O’Reilly, Peaceable Classroom, 47

One of the most common arguments I hear from writing teachers who resist students' personal narratives is that "we're not trained as therapists." In most cases this is true and obvious, just as it's true that many composition instructors were not trained as writing teachers, per se. Hiding behind the defense of "I'm not a therapist" ignores the multiple, material realities of the 21st century composition classroom where traumatic stories rise up and out every semester, dropping into discussions and onto pages to demand our attention. Our students come from diverse backgrounds—ghetto, suburban, or rural; first-generation college or privileged, educationally and economically—and many have suffered in ways that are not immediately apparent but could threaten their ability to succeed in school if ignored. Many support themselves through college, and others lose state or federal funding when their personal circumstances unravel and ruin their grade point averages. Add to this scenario the importance of narrative and the need for making education meaningful and relevant to students' actual lives, and we cannot afford the luxury of silencing our students' personal stories. Ready or not, here they come.

Sometimes students' personal writing pushes teachers into assuming a sort of therapist's role, but teaching writing differs from doing therapy. According to Newkirk,

These [first-year] 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 represents a third part of the relationship; it is an artifact, a construction, a relatively stable representation of experience. (19)

Students come to us with their narratives, knowing that we are teachers, not therapists, and that we will be reading and grading their writing. While the therapeutic benefits of writing may not be our top priority as teachers, it behooves us to be aware of them and to foster them when students choose such writing. Though we're not therapists, we are human beings, educated by life and by schooling to respond humanely to the suffering of others. Hallet reminds us that "good teaching invites crisis" because "transformation occurs through not just listening, but also articulating and writing" (18). She notes that "critics of loss narration do not recognize the complex entanglement of writing with learning and loss, the complicated enmeshing of composition (composing) with mourning and memory (decomposing and recomposing)" (48). Such critics who are "unable or unwilling to acknowledge the recursive nature of grief and traumatic memory" may also "negate the recursive nature of writing itself, its constant cycle of, and relation to, breaking down and breaking through, razing and restoring, de-composing and composing, revisiting and revisioning" (48). If not in a composition class, where will students have a chance to practice and learn about the nature of writing, life, and loss?

The practices of psychoanalysis and teaching writing have more in common than most of us acknowledge. Both depend on dialogue in which a teacher/therapist/group listens and responds to a student/client speaking or writing in an attempt to know and to transform her life. Shoshana Felman notes that both teaching and psychoanalysis are interested in "the capacity of their recipients to *transform themselves*" as they become aware of new information (53). For students writing grief narratives, a transformation occurs through a combination of listening, articulating and writing, a process that complements but does not replace what students may also choose to do in psychotherapy.

As Bishop argues in the 1993 Journal of Advanced Composition: “saying that we’re *not* (*not* therapists, *not* counselors, *not* specialists in affect or dysfunction) is not helping us to understand and prepare to be what we are” (512). In response to complaints that teachers are not trained to handle emotional texts or students, Bishop proposes enlarging the training of new teachers and writing program administrators to include “an introduction to psychoanalytic theory and the basics of counseling to support them in their necessary work.” Someone should survey graduate programs in composition studies to see how many offer such a course.

In her book published the same year as Bishop’s article on writing and therapy, O’Reilly describes her own early objections to the kind of freewriting advocated by Ken Macrorie in Telling Writing. She admits that her objections “were based on a poorly understood Freudian model of the unconscious” that she held at the time (Peaceable Classroom 46). She feared that freewriting would dredge up students’ traumatic memories and turn “English class into some kind of therapy session.” Immediately, she asks why we refer to therapy in a pejorative sense, “as if we do not need all the help we can get?” She suspects that her early resistance to student freewriting and journaling said more about her inner world than about her students; over time, her understanding of the unconscious shifted as she began keeping a journal and discovered that “the act of externalizing and owning up to confused feelings” gave her a “measure of equilibrium” (46)—something we and our students need in this age of terrorism, domestic violence, and splintered family structures.

Now, O’Reilly sees that “daily, free, surrendered writing is very much like Zen practice, and by means of it we come to something Zen teachers call ‘great mind’ or ‘the

larger container,' a place of focused and compassionate clarity" (47). For students who struggle to contain their feelings of shame, fear, and grief over having lost a parent, freewriting and narrating may provide relief and even faith in their futures. O'Reilley has learned to trust students to take self-directed journeys in their writing and to find the campus counseling center if needed: "But in the main, freewriting seems to be self-correcting and, at its best, self-healing," a sentiment expressed by others who have studied the connections between writing and healing. Our job, then, is to create space and make room for students to bring forth, name, discuss, and revise what matters to them, not as a solipsistic act but in concert with other students engaged in a similar process, looking for bridges to connect and transform their inner and outer worlds, their homes and schools, their communities and countries. Our challenge is to relinquish control and to trust ourselves, our students, and the processes of composing, telling, and healing sorrow.

Rather than retreat from the therapy analogy, O'Reilley asks us to examine it more closely to see what it has to teach us:

. . . we need a great deal of psychological and spiritual insight in order to do our teaching jobs properly, an understanding conveyed primarily in the depth of our listening. Most of the healing that goes on in English class (and maybe everywhere) is self-healing. The teacher's job is not so much to counsel as to provide an atmosphere of safety and to keep out of the way of the process. (47)

She notes that an analyst "listens to a client with the same questions in mind that a literary scholar asks of a text: What recurs? What is emphasized? Why this word and not

that? What is the meaning of this pattern of images? These parallels are not surprising since Freud borrowed much of his methodology from creative writers.” Likewise, composition teachers ask students many of the same questions about the texts they are constructing and revising in an attempt to draw the students closer to what they are trying to say or discover.

According to Bracher, a psychoanalytic teacher’s response to student writing is always “to help students recognize and assume ownership of their own unconscious desire,” a response that avoids “validating or criticizing particular values, ideals, enjoyments, or fantasies that students either arrive with or come to embrace during the course of the semester” (153). Responding primarily with praise and/or criticism can be paternalistic and problematic, he says, because it maintains the teacher as all-knowing authority figure instead of inviting students to make their own meanings. Bracher cites Brannon and Knoblauch in faulting teachers who assume that “they always and necessarily know what writers mean to say and are therefore always reliable judges of how well writers actually say it” (qtd. in Bracher 158). Instead of pushing students to incorporate our values into their texts or alienating them from their own identities or desires, a psychoanalytic approach respects the student’s autonomy and asks questions aimed at uncovering discrepancies between the writer’s intention and effect (157). Such a teacher focuses on what’s missing or on gaps or connections in logic in an attempt to “help the student encounter and work through his or her own desire” in the face of the expectations of teacher and writing community.

The problem with any judgmental response is that it leaves the teacher in charge of directing the students’ learning instead of helping students take responsibility for their

own education and writing (159). Bracher proposes a more reflective, nondirective approach, similar to a therapist's "Rogerian reflection," in which teachers repeat or mirror back what the student is saying in an effort to inspire the student to clarify his or her writing or feelings. The teacher may point to structure, invite clarification, expand or recall earlier comments, or summarize what the student has said or written—all functions geared toward enabling the student to work through his or her own desires and conflicts in writing.

The process of writing, like psychoanalysis, involves finding words for what has remained unspoken and giving voice to feelings, often linking ideas and events by association rather than logic. Both processes require "a sense of safety and trust, meaning no judgment, no threats of destruction or invasion" (Jones 27). In this sense, the college composition class becomes a problematic place for *requiring* therapeutic writing in that no matter what we do to decentralize the authority and create a safe space for writing and responding, we eventually have to "judge" student writing and issue grades for writing and performance. Too often, as O'Reilly says in The Peaceable Classroom, "the central activity of our discipline is judging" (91), a habit she asks us to reconsider if we are interested in promoting peace. She aims for a balance between critical mind and poet's mind, acknowledging that criticism is necessary to intellectual enterprises but should not be the only method used in teaching writing: "We should at least remind ourselves that we are engaged in an activity [responding to students' writing] that has more potential for pain than benefit; such an attitude might keep us from taking it all too seriously" (92). In critical mind, she feels her "claws are at the veins of life" scratching around for the flaw; she finds herself to be a "happier, gentler, and healthier human" when she is in poet-

mind—more “receptive, unjudging, listening—than when I am in critic-mind.” Her message is clear: read and respond to early drafts with an open, less judgmental attitude that seeks understanding rather than perfection, and save the more critical, yet kind response for final revisions, a method that diminishes our chances of harming students who are writing about grief or other personal issues.

Brad Sachs, a writing teacher turned psychotherapist, routinely encourages his clients to write “letters, journals, autobiographies, family histories” because he believes that “the very *act* of writing, regardless of what is produced, has profound and enduring healing properties” (14). Author of several nonfiction books and poetry collections, Sachs has taught writing to preschoolers, prison inmates, senior citizens, police officers, psychologists, physicians, and students from kindergarten through college. He sees writing as “the delicate process of discovering what we *don’t* know, what we don’t *want* to know, and what we don’t *know* that we know” (19). The “curative powers” of writing are immeasurable, he says, similar to the benefits of a strong therapeutic relationship between therapist and patient:

Therapists’ engagements with patients are similar to writers’ engagements with themselves—both sets of relationships require great courage and persistence, but are littered with pitfalls that make it difficult to summon the resourcefulness to persevere and march on. But it is by doggedly pursuing, through the sharing of words, the potential intimacy embedded in these kinds of *interpersonal* and *intrapersonal* encounters that we begin the process of transfiguring the ordinary and rescuing and liberating our solitary consciousness from its long and lonely exile. In so doing, we find

that we are somehow able to remain alive and ultimately, to fall back in love with ourselves, with others, and with the world. (21)

Similarly, neuropsychologist Kristie Nies notes that creative work of all sorts is related to grieving, and that both writing and therapy are “creative in their own right” (51). Both writing and therapy “involve the mastering of trauma. By revisiting painful experiences we address the longing for what we have lost or never had through attempts to articulate and communicate. At times, through sheer perseverance, we find what we need and recover.” What a gift we offer students when we allow them to write through their desires and grief and are able to meet them and their texts with equanimity and poet’s mind. The extent to which such writing leads to recovery is something we and they may not know until years later.

Comparing the teacher-student relationship with the therapist-client one raises questions about the Freudian concepts of transference—students endowing teachers with certain powers, often without realizing it—and counter-transference, teachers reading/treating students in terms of their own past relationships, often subconsciously (Bishop 508). Lad Tobin asks teachers to take responsibility for the many ways in which our own subconscious biases and prejudices enter the student-teacher relationship, which sometimes resembles therapist and patient:

By attempting to edit feelings, unconscious associations, and personal problems out of a writing course, we are fooling ourselves and shortchanging our students. The teaching of writing is about solving problems, personal and public, and I don’t think we can have it both ways: we cannot create intensity and deny tension, celebrate the personal and

deny the significance of the personalities involved . . . Transference and counter-transference emotions . . . are most destructive and inhibiting in the writing class when we fail to acknowledge and deal with them.

(“Reading Students” 342)

Naming and monitoring our own biases and emotions become important moves toward improving our written and oral responses, especially to students we find threatening or disconcerting. If we recognize, for instance, that the passive-aggressive attitude of the tall, bearded student in the back row triggers our memories and fears of our father, we may find more constructive, compassionate ways to engage the student in classroom activities. If we spend less time judging and more time paying attention, we may find ourselves delighting in our students and their writing. Reading or hearing a student’s story of loss without turning away or rushing her to the counseling center may facilitate learning more than we realize.

Robert Brooke of the Nebraska Writing Project compares the composition teacher’s practices of conferencing and responding to the patient’s practice of telling in psychoanalysis:

the plural, ongoing articulation of the student’s text is fostered, encouraged and validated in response teaching. In such a classroom, the student confronts her (process of) writing in much the same way as, in analysis, the patient confronts her (process of) desire. Both involve language (the ‘talking cure,’ the ‘writing process’). Both involve the presence of a Subject Supposed to Know (who, in both cases, knows only that more exploration is needed). (“Lacan, Transference” 687)

Both psychoanalysis and teaching writing allow the “Subject” (patient or student) to enter a dialogue with the “Other” (therapist or teacher)—processes which, at best, lead to discovery and transformation. Brooke sees writing, like analysis, as a life-long process: “the exploration of our relationship with the symbol-systems that constitute us is an ever-shifting, ever-ongoing process, ending only with death” (689). Rather than seeking a cure or a perfect finished product, he sees writing, like analysis, as “a way of living, a ‘style’ of being human . . . it allows us to recognize and accept our coherence and our incoherence, our internal divisions and the tenuous orders we occasionally produce to integrate them. It is an identity we can learn to live with. Therein lies its value—for teaches, for writers, for the culture” (690). Such a humane approach becomes crucial in dealing with students who feel alienated from themselves or others as a result of parental loss, neglect, abuse, or other forms of suffering.

Listening to Sorrow, Not “Fixing” It

“I would not be able to care very long if I thought it was up to me to make a wise comment about everything people tell me, or to fix them . . . I listen with what love I can muster.”

Mary Rose O’Reilley, Radical Presence, 28

Most composition scholars agree that listening to our students and teaching them to listen to each other and to texts is essential to teaching writing. In Writing Down the Bones, the Zen writing teacher Natalie Goldberg ranks listening as crucial to good writing: “Writing, too, is ninety percent listening . . . If you want to become a good writer, you need to do three things. Read a lot, listen well and deeply, and write a lot” (52-53). Likewise, compositionist Richard Miller notes in College English that “learning to speak in such a way that one gets heard is a lifelong project that involves, perhaps

paradoxically, first learning how to listen better to others” (285). For teachers who prefer talking to listening, perhaps a course in attentional skills would enhance our ability to hear or read what students are trying to say with their texts and bodies. Perhaps then we could assist them in communicating clearly, in writing and speaking, where they have been and where they want to go.

When it comes to listening to our students’ sorrows, we should remember that we cannot fix what is broken or restore what is lost. O’Reilley suggests that it would be “overreaching” to think we had to fix what ails everyone, and that the best we can do is “Pay attention . . . Just be there. Don’t be thinking about a solution, or how you should fix it” (Radical Presence 27-28). Through her long-term, reciprocal listening relationship with a friend, O’Reilley discovers that “We don’t need fixing, most of us, as much as we need a warm space and a good cow. Cows cock their big brown eyes at you and twitch their ears when you talk. This is a great antidote to the critical listening that goes on in academia, where we listen for the mistake, for the flaw in the argument” (29). When you listen closely to students with eyes and ears attuned, you are “listening people into existence. You are saving lives. You are producing Grade A” (29). And in the case of grieving students, you may be giving them the attention and encouragement they need to rewrite their lives after traumatic loss.

Our students are more apt to remember how we treated them than what we said about writing theory, more apt to remember how we responded to their texts than how much we knew about Marxism. Listening has gained credibility in English Studies as scholars such as Krista Ratcliffe (“Rhetorical Listening”), Jane Hindman (“Making Writing Matter” and “Some Thoughts on Reading”), David Bleich (Know and Tell), and

Michelle Payne (Bodily Discourses) argue for less teacher talk and more emphasis on listening to students and their stories. In Know and Tell, Bleich encourages writing teachers to listen to students and to disclose and foster disclosure within cooperative, collaborative pedagogies. In his opening and closing chapters, Bleich promotes disclosure and listening as a means of changing the world: “In order for academic teaching to contribute to society’s striving for just, comprehending, and peaceful social relations, practices of disclosure encourage teaching in many directions and by everyone who enters the classroom” (12). In his classroom, teachers would not ask students to disclose without being willing, themselves, to disclose appropriate information about their lives.

Teaching Writing: Relationship(s) Central

“Writing students succeed when teachers establish productive relationships with—and between—their students. It makes sense, then, for a writing teacher to focus as much on questions of authority and resistance as on invention heuristics and revision strategies, as much on competition and cooperation as on grammar and usage.”

Lad Tobin, Writing Relationships

Teaching writing requires teachers and students to negotiate a complex series of relationships beyond the apparent student-teacher and student-student roles. Regardless of our theoretical schools, teachers hold the power to harm, heal, wreak havoc, inspire, and authorize learning and growth in our own and our students’ lives. We tend to forget that “to be authorized by the academy to write about one’s life is a powerful and often startling experience for university students” (Kamler 157), especially for first-generation college students and/or those who are shy, ashamed, or easily intimidated. While it is difficult to know or measure the consequences of our teaching practices, we should

reflect often on what we're doing with students and ask them if it's working. We should remain aware of the force of long-held academic habits that demean and sometimes hold students hostage, even in so-called democratic classrooms, and begin to dismantle the hierarchies to make room for what students need to learn.

Without vigilant reflection, we and our students are doomed to reinforce the very systems we want to transcend or change. We must ask, mindfully and repeatedly, what we are doing to authorize student writers in our classrooms and what we are doing, subconsciously, to deny authority to some students. We must examine our own positions—the limits of our empathy, our training, and our resistances—and learn to listen to and validate our students' resistance to what we are (in the name of liberation, love, or capitalism) trying to teach: “We must use our disciplinary knowledge and practices to appreciate the social, emotional, and intellectual dynamics of classroom interactions. Thus we can grasp the limits of our own empathy and rework those limits” (Gorzelsky 321). By frequently checking our perceptions against our students' understanding of them, “we can model the ongoing efforts at understanding needed to work collaboratively with others,” and we may avoid the urge to dwell in the teacherly position of “knower” as we keep asking how, why, and what we are doing, and with whom. If we talk with students about their perceptions of our classes, we minimize the risk of doing harm, especially when the subjects they choose to examine are fraught with emotion.

As students mine the messy relics of their memories, dreams, and desires in search of a way in or out of a writing context, they begin to explore and to explicate, to create order where none existed. As Elizabeth Boquet cautions in *Noise from the Writing*

Center, order “must develop *out* of chaos, not through the elimination of it. We must imagine a liminal zone where chaos and order coexist” (84). Boquet asks writing teachers to embrace the dissonance and gaps, a move which allows space for students and their texts to emerge, even blossom (107)—especially students whose grief may have choked their inner lines of communication and creativity. Creative compositions often come from confusion, from cracks in our foundations of knowledge and experience—but only when we befriend such cracks and welcome the weeds that peek through.

Although writing teachers cannot escape their responsibilities and preordained positions as authority figures, we do play many roles and work from multiple relationships in a variety of contexts (classrooms, conferences, computer labs with students, individually and collectively). The way we read and relate to students depends, to some extent, on race, gender, religion, class, and sexual orientation, both ours and theirs. Sometimes we play parents to adolescents, or preachers to congregations, or therapists to clients, or dinner party hosts to guests (Tobin, Writing Relationships 16). Depending on the context and purpose of a given class or group of students, teachers need to negotiate different productive relationships and avoid establishing “prescriptive rules and roles for writing teachers, no matter what camp or position they defend.”

Elbow, Bruffee, and Murray have said for years that student writing would flourish “if teachers played a less authoritarian role in their interactions with students and fostered more supportive student-student relationships” (Tobin, Writing Relationships 4). But such relationships do not develop by magic. Tobin suggests that we help students become better writers—“our primary job”—by looking more closely at the interpersonal relationships that shape their writing and reading processes (5). Relating well means

embracing the full range of human emotions, ours and theirs, because fear, embarrassment, pain, and tension are central to writing and teaching writing, and we ignore them at our peril. Like writing for an editor, writing for teachers is “all about power and authority, identification and resistance, negotiation and compromise” (7). Many compositionists aim to be “facilitators” or “just another member of the writing group,” and while these are lofty goals, they may not be realistic. Tobin acknowledges that “many teachers deny their tremendous authority in the classroom because it does not fit the image they want to project. Most are uncomfortable admitting that we *are* the center of a ‘decentered’ classroom” (20). Our students see us as authority figures, regardless of our pedagogies, and when we ask them to write about their feelings and to meet with us one-on-one, we may hold even more authority “because the stakes are higher,” personally and academically.

Like Boquet and other theorists, Tobin and Gorzelsky invite us to unmask, to step outside the prescribed box of freewrite-draft-revise, to veer off the map, to embrace dissonance, to accept ambiguity, to relax with uncomfortable relationships, and to remember that creativity arises from confusion just as flowers bloom from garbage. They invite us to practice interrogating ourselves and inviting students to interrogate us as we acknowledge that we may not be doing what we think we’re doing. One way to find out how we’re doing is to ask students, directly, and to listen closely to their answers as we uncover who feels authorized to speak, write, or remain silent.

Assessing Traumatic Narratives: No Magic Answers

“As we ask students to develop scenes, to ‘show-don’t-tell’, to exhume the details of relationships and departed persons, we need to be aware of the emotional, psychological, *and* intellectual impact of our requests on both

teacher and students, the difficulties and consequences of performing this task and also the possible, yet complicated rewards of doing so.”

Hallet, Grief (W)rites, 135

In Bodily Discourses, Michelle Payne explores what happens when students write about their suffering from sexual abuse or eating disorders. When she received three personal essays on sexual violence from students in a special topics writing course dealing with female experience, Payne’s response to their initial drafts was surprise and empathy. She recalls that her “first concern was for the student—how she felt, why she wrote about this, how she wanted me to respond, and what if anything I could do to help her with her writing . . . The same kinds of questions I asked of other students regardless of what their essays were about” (xv). When Payne’s colleagues asked how she would grade such troubling essays, she explained that she had asked her students what they wanted from her response and they clearly “wanted the essays evaluated” (xv). She subsequently offered suggestions and questions inviting students to revise their work because she believes that the act of shaping their stories into meaningful language was crucial to their development as writers (xv). Her students chose to take the course and chose to write about their histories of sexual violence, knowing their work would be read and graded. Apparently, they were ready to articulate their traumatic experiences and to revise or reconstruct them with support from an empathetic witness.

As Payne moved into a doctoral program in composition and realized she had lingering questions about how to respond to traumatic narratives, she began researching the issue and marveling at how little had been written on it. When she presented her findings to a large, crowded audience at a national conference, she emphasized how students are “negotiating their identities within the text” and explored the myriad reasons

undergraduates choose to write about traumatic experiences (xv). But her audience wanted to know about grading: how does she assess such essays? Payne concludes: “Even if I had told my audience that, as individual essays I might give one an A, the other a B, and the third a B-/C+, I doubt anyone would have been satisfied because this question isn’t really about evaluation, about wanting a rubric or set of assurances about standards. It’s about anxiety” (xvi). We want a plan, a set of foolproof rules and guidelines for dealing with every student and every situation, even though philosophers and personal experience tell us that control is an illusion, groundlessness is inevitable, and learning is most likely to occur in these uncomfortable, ambiguous spaces. Instead of reaching for concrete rubrics, perhaps we should reach into ourselves and examine the roots of our anxiety around the suffering of students. Perhaps we should prepare ourselves to meet students and their texts with equanimity and compassion as we read first drafts and assign grades to final revisions.

By incorporating moments of stillness and reflection into our days and nights, we may become more aware of our biases, preferences, and resistances; by consciously stopping ourselves and breathing deeply instead of responding immediately from hostile, fearful, or exhausted positions, we may avoid inflicting damage. By remembering that we are more inclined toward some students and texts than others for often unknown reasons, we may become more mindful and responsible teachers (Spellman, Tobin). Whether we’re assessing a personal narrative of loss, a literary analysis of Kate Chopin’s The Yellow Wallpaper, or a web project on the popularity of body piercing, we should be clear with ourselves and our students about what we are looking for and how our visceral reactions and attitudes influence our responses to students and their writing. Students

expect their work to be graded, whether they're writing about their mother dying or arguing for abortion rights. We do them a disservice when we recoil from grading certain subjects because of our own discomfort or fear.

If we are vigilant and mindful in how we hear, read, and respond to each student and to his or her writing, then we minimize the risks of pushing too hard or not hard enough. One way to know if we are asking too much or too little is to check with the student, as a good physical trainer does with a body in training: Are you satisfied with this amount of pressure or would you like to go further? Could I encourage you to do X or Y now, or do you feel you've done enough?

In "Death Gets a B," Marlow Miller brings to light the complexities of reading, responding to, and grading student narratives about death and other personal losses. He recalls giving a presentation at a national conference on the challenges of grading personal narratives. Afterwards, a colleague approached Miller with a confession: Whenever he receives "unbidden written expressions" about the death of a loved one, he automatically gives the essay a B (98). Miller acknowledges both shock and sympathy for his colleague's approach and then states the obvious: "most faculty members are not trained psychologists." Therefore, we must "create boundaries of relative comfort and safety in our classes," boundaries which don't "deny students the power of personal engagement with their writing" (98). He describes his commitment to being clear and precise with assignments, assessment criteria, and letting students know the responsibilities and potential ramifications of disclosing highly personal information.

Whether our pedagogies emphasize the traditional rhetoric of Aristotle and other canonical texts, promote the self-actualization of social expressivist modes, or advance

the liberatory potential of critical pedagogy or cultural studies, all teachers must assess each student's writing and performance. Barbara Kamler acknowledges the spatial issues of students writing narratives in college classes: Are students composing in crowded labs with computers humming and no room for the teacher's body? Are they wheeling around in padded chairs and sharing tables with plenty of elbow-room, or are they crammed into old-fashioned desks made for small-boned and small-bodied people? Are they listening to music or sitting silently in rows, listening to lectures? The physical environment influences what a writer, student or otherwise, produces, and this aspect of assessing writing should be considered.

Kamler challenges teachers to invite students to frame autobiographical writing in broader historical, social, and cultural terms: "To confront death by constructing a narrative of dying, however, is to break a cultural silence that refuses death as part of life" (55). Based in feminist theory, Kamler infuses personal writing into academic writing by emphasizing the student's *text*, not the student himself or herself, which distinguishes assessment of texts from assessment of writers. The text is one representation of many, and can be treated as such; the student is not the text, the text is not the student. In writing conferences reminiscent of a craftsman and apprentices at a workbench with a block of clay (text), Kamler might ask the following questions of student writers:

1. What is powerful in the writing? Identify an image, line, metaphor, or representation of person that is powerful.
2. What is omitted? Who/what is absent and/or hinted at or overgeneralized?
3. What clichés are used to gloss over experience, facts, feelings?
4. What doesn't fit? What contradictions emerge?
5. What aspects/issues of the main issue (aging, tax reform, spouse

- abuse, etc.) are constructed/concealed?
6. What common issues, experiences, storylines do the texts share?
(62)

These questions relocate the student's personal experience to a more textual (and therefore changeable, not fixed) emphasis. I ask similar questions and encourage students to ask them of each other in a writing class. Each teacher has to work out a method of responding to student writing and encouraging revision that works for her physical and philosophical situation with a given student or class; we are wise to solicit suggestions from seasoned teachers and then to adapt them as needed for particular students in particular moments of composing and revising.

Our job is to invite students to look for what is suggested but not articulated in their writing, and to encourage them to name and possibly rewrite the cultural narratives that privilege and imprison us. We should remain mindful of what we ask student writers to do and in what situations, and for what purposes. Giving students choices about how much weight each piece carries in terms of a final grade may help to equalize power dynamics.

When serving multiple roles as reader, coach, judge, and university rule-keeper, teachers may unwittingly invade the private space of students by asking for personal writing, a problem I avoid by letting students choose their writing subjects and point of view (first or third person). Allowing students the freedom to elect their own topics is no simple solution, but it takes them closer to writing about what is relevant for their lives, past, present, and future. I prefer open-ended assignments in which students write essays, often research-based, exploring problems in their homes, neighborhoods, schools, and communities. Such assignments are assessed according to criteria determined in advance

so that everyone knows what it takes to earn a certain grade.

Rather than feeling violated or invaded by teachers asking for personal narratives, most students say they appreciate the opportunity to reflect on their lives in a structured context. Newkirk has read “thousands of anonymous, student-written evaluations of teachers” over the past two decades as administrator of the University of New Hampshire’s writing program. He “cannot remember one in which a student made this kind of complaint [of having their privacy invaded]” (19). Instead, students frequently write comments of gratitude, leading Newkirk to conclude that composition students are not looking for a counselor when they write personal essays:

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. (19-20)

We should treat traumatic narratives and the students who write them with sensitivity, but don’t hurry them off to the counseling center without first responding to them and to their text. Teachers decide almost daily what fits within the bounds of “normal” or “appropriate” academic discourse for students and for ourselves. We should ask ourselves who we are protecting and who we are making comfortable or uncomfortable when we deny students the opportunity to investigate what matters to them.

CHAPTER 5: THE PLACE OF GRIEF WRITING

IN ORPHANED STUDENTS' LIVES

Reflections on Writing and Telling: Three Students' Stories

“By engaging in lament, we care for ourselves. For not to express grief is to put ourselves at risk for isolation, for illness.”

Louise DeSalvo, Writing as a Way of Healing, 54

For those who have lost a mother or father permanently and traumatically, the transition to college can be unbearable, as clinical psychologist Maxine Harris discovered in her interviews with adults who had lost a parent early. Harris found that “this feeling of being rootless, of having no solid ground, of being without an anchor, is shared by many who have lost parents in childhood” (15). She describes a man whose mother died when he was 13, leaving the boy’s father “lost and adrift” and the boy alone; when he went away to college, he felt alienated from other freshmen who were going home to structured families on weekends. He felt “completely lost and at loose ends” and was suicidal when he returned to his father’s house. The sudden freedom of time and space offered by college life can be overwhelming for orphaned students, and many feel vulnerable and out of control “when faced with the task of creating the self” (138)—a task that many composition scholars describe as commonplace among college students, generally and first-year writers, specifically.

Rather than engage the intellectual, social, and personal experimentation inherent in college life, Harris found that many orphans choose to marry young, enter the work force or join the military. One woman recalled being a “good girl” before her mother’s death and then “going berserk” and dropping out of college. Some seek “containment” in relationships and find a steady boyfriend or girlfriend to buffer their feelings of loss and

vulnerability. Many who lose a parent early are unable to contain their rage or other strong emotions and therefore never outgrow their adolescent impulses to act out: “These individuals . . . find their way into jails, into homeless shelters, and at times, to an early death on the streets” (139). While many of Harris’ participants had survived “some severe and often dangerous acting out,” each of them had found comfort in work, marriage, the military, the university, and other institutions designed to insure social order.

While the number of college students who have lost a parent to death is statistically low, almost all students—like teachers—have been dealing with loss since birth, including brief or extended separations from one or both parents for a variety of reasons. From our earliest days to our most recent ones, we struggle to adjust to losing people, pets, and places that we assumed would be in our lives forever. In Necessary Losses, Judith Viorst acknowledges the potential for growth and transformation in learning to name and accept our tangible and intangible losses, “our conscious and unconscious losses of romantic dreams, impossible expectations, illusions of freedom and power, illusions of safety—and the loss of our own younger self, the self that thought it always would be unwrinkled and invulnerable and immortal” (16). While naming and reframing our losses may not reduce our sorrow or resurrect our loved ones, Viorst says that becoming aware of how we respond to loss “can be the beginning of wisdom and hopeful change” (18)—so much so that medical schools are now teaching courses in dealing with loss effectively.

This chapter offers portraits of three former students who chose to write in my first-year composition classes about the death of one or both parents. When I contacted

them about participating in my study, all three were eager and willing. Two had graduated and one was a senior, and all had kept in touch with me peripherally since leaving my class. I spent two hours interviewing each student and additional hours reviewing their portfolios, letters, and other writings they provided as artifacts. I sent invitations and informed consent information to two additional students, both fathers now, but I am not certain they received the letters, as they did not respond and I could not locate electronic mail addresses or phone numbers for them.

Chaja

Chaja is a petite, ebony-skinned woman with a bright smile and steady gaze, a first-generation college student who was 23 at the time of our interview. We met in a quiet room at the University Writing Center on a summer day in 2004. I had spoken with her a year or so earlier in the process of preparing a conference presentation and article on loss, which I reference in the first paragraph below.

After losing both parents and her grandfather before her 19th birthday, Chaja discovered that writing and using rhetoric enabled her “to express pain, grief, and love at the same time” as she wrote an essay and journal entries referencing her mother’s life and death (Milner, “Compos(t)ing Loss” 34). In a letter introducing her final portfolio in second-semester composition, Chaja writes: “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.” When asked three years later to reflect on her experience of writing and grieving, she recalled the initial pain of losing her mother and writing about it, but still saw such writing as beneficial: “Writing in general helps me to understand who I am and what I want” (34). For students like Chaja whose sense of home and self are changed

irrevocably by the loss of parents, writing provides a medium for mapping where they are and where they're going.

Chaja's "You" poem, below, was written in response to an assignment to describe yourself in third person without using I or punctuation.

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, in a battle between the living and the deceased
 trying to be an ally and stay among the
 fittest winning the wars of life.

Four years after writing this poem, Chaja recalls writing it outside of class: "I don't think I intentionally sat down to write about them [parents and grandfather dying], but that's who I was at the time. I just started writing and that's what came out. I was surprised." After reading her poem again, she sees that she was "struggling with trying to accept it [the losses], trying to see how it was supposed to shape me as a person. It was very hard, and it's still very hard, accepting the fact that they're not here, that I'll never see them again." As she talks about it during an interview, her eyes fill and spill over: "I was taught not to question God. For so long, I wondered why this happened to me, back to back . . . It's still painful . . . I have faith that God knew it was time for them to no

longer be with us. He knows and sees all. I just have to trust and believe there is an answer, a reason.”

Before enrolling in my composition class in fall 1999, Chaja had written letters and kept journals but says she did not begin to feel confident as a writer until she received an “A” in college English. She performed so well that I recommended her for the university honors program, and I had the privilege of teaching her again in an honors section of Composition II in spring 2000. A few weeks into the semester, on January 24, Chaja’s mother was killed by a speeding motorist. She attended the funeral in her hometown and returned to campus quickly, determined to excel.

“I tend to deal with things on my own time, not publicly, so my friends weren’t seeing any emotion. I was sort of putting off actually thinking about it or trying to work through it. I was in school. I knew SHE [Mother] wouldn’t want me to jeopardize school. I was trying to be as strong as I could for as long as I could. But it didn’t take long for reality to set in.”

Within a few days of her return to composition class, I asked students to bring a song or poem to class for us to hear, along with a copy of the lyrics and a summary of why they chose to share it. The one-page paper was the first step toward a longer, more developed analysis of and personal response to the piece. Chaja recalls choosing a song memorializing mothers: “I’d been listening to R Kelly’s song, “Sadie,” on my own before the assignment. It was occupying a lot of my thoughts. It captured everything that was me at that time, and it was a way for me to communicate with [Mom]. I could identify a lot with the details of the song so I challenged myself to do it.”

The song was not new to Chaja; she, her mom and brother had enjoyed it in 1993,

when Chaja was in 7th grade. The initial assignment was due on Feb. 7, which would have been her mother's 46th birthday. Chaja remembers listening to everyone else's songs before sharing hers.

"I wanted to get it over with, but I was sort of hesitant to do it because it was her birthday. I waited until there was almost no time left in class and was the last one to go. I said something about why I had missed class [for the funeral], and I think I had started crying by the time I stopped talking . . . I remember trying not to look at anybody. I looked down at my paper the entire time the song was playing. When it went off and everybody looked up, everybody was crying." Looking back now, she says, "That may have been one of the hardest days. I do remember everybody coming up and hugging me after class. It meant a lot that they cared."

As for writing and telling about losing her mother at 18, only two weeks after her death, Chaja recalls that writing allowed her to express "pain, grief, and love at the same time" even though she felt "overwhelmed. That's pretty young for somebody to have to deal with that for the rest of their life, knowing that's how it's going to be, and sharing it with everybody. I had not been able to come into it [the grief] before that moment in class. It was something I didn't want to think a lot about . . . So I was just coming into it. I couldn't call her and say happy birthday. That was the first day it hit me, really hit me."

While that day was painful, she says she does not regret sharing it in class or crying or breaking down. "I never want to cry in front of somebody," she says. "I didn't want to cry in front of you today. I'd known my [college] roommate since elementary school, and I didn't cry in front of her until the next school year."

Chaja says she did not feel pressured to share her grief or to choose a song with

such emotional power. She insists: “I know for a fact that the actual doing of that assignment began the process I needed to start. I had to make it a reality to be able to think and write about it. It was very beneficial to me. That song was the first thing I thought about. It was very painful, but I did get a lot out of it.”

Before the analysis paper was due, Chaja received lengthy written responses from a few classmates during peer review. She says she did not feel vulnerable having her paper and her emotions read, because “what mattered to me was that I completed the assignment. These were my thoughts and feelings, and nothing they had to say was going to change that.” Neither her peers nor I asked for significant revisions, only a few corrections in punctuation, pronouns, and “explaining a point here and there,” and she does not remember the grade being important.

“I didn’t want the fact that it’s so personal to influence the grade that I got. Some teachers can’t be as objective in grading a paper about losing a parent, but I was not writing to try to get pity. I wrote it to grow for myself. If it was poorly written—not descriptive enough or so disjointed that you couldn’t get to what the paper was trying to say—then the grade should reflect that. I wanted you to understand why I chose the song and what it meant to me.”

What she learned from the process of writing about her mother’s death and sharing it with her teacher and peers is that “writing could help you get through anything. I learned how therapeutic writing could be AND that I could be an effective writer.” In the first weeks and months after her mother’s death, writing made her sad, but the long-term effects of her writing have been “more acceptance of the situation and a promotion of growth. Getting past the beginning is always the hardest part. It’s the same with

writing: you leave the situation for awhile, and then come back.” She acknowledges that writing and grieving follow similar patterns of starting and stopping, of erupting, flowering, and settling again. Writing reminds Chaja that “although she’s not physically with me, she’s with me.”

In her cover letter introducing her portfolio in May 2000, Chaja concludes: “You were there for me as a frightened freshman, and now you are leaving me as I soar into my sophomore year. I owe you so much, but I could not possibly repay you. I know that I will cry as I leave your class for the last time because you are my mother at Georgia Southern . . . thank you for being that driving force pushing me to be better.”

In her last three years of college, Chaja volunteered as an English tutor for student athletes and continued to write poems or pieces “with deep thinking,” dealing with her experiences of loss and survival. She pulls a sheet of paper from her book-bag and reads aloud a poetic letter she wrote to her mother the previous summer when she was “feeling really down about my mom not being around. I picked up a paper and pencil as if writing a letter to her.”

In her letter, Chaja laments “what seems like an eternity of separation” but acknowledges her “fortune” of having spent 18 years with her mom: “I love it that I was your baby girl. I love it that you were a friend, and I love it that I have become you.” She explains in the interview that her mother was an outgoing, emotional person with a “kind heart and spirit,” someone who often “neglected herself in order to make others happy. I have become her in that aspect.” While Chaja has developed her “own ways” and her own person, she feels that she has “become” her mother “emotionally, spiritually, and physically. A lot of her still lives in me.”

She ends the letter by noting that she and her brother are “missing our reason for being, but the knowledge and intimacy [mom] instilled assures us that we have an angel watching over us. Thus, we are inspired and driven.” She offers gratitude to her mom, for “everything I have and will become, I owe it to you. I will continue to be your pupil in spite of your absence, and all I ask is that you continue to grace me with your beautiful smiling rays of sunshine.” She signs the letter “pooh bear” and “CSW”, symbols of both the child and the woman. In writing the letter, Chaja merges many parts of her identity and seems to shift into acceptance of her mother’s death by focusing on their life together and their connection now, as Mattie encourages James to do in *A Rumor of Angels*. In writing and telling, the grief becomes less “terrible.”

Other than her “You” poem written in 2000, Chaja says she has not written of her father or grandfather’s death. “Many times, I don’t feel like I CAN talk about it. With writing, I don’t have to pretend. It’s just paper, pen, and myself, very therapeutic, very clarifying.” She says that her sense of home, both physically and emotionally, has changed since her mother and grandfather died, as she grew up running back and forth between her mother’s and grandparents’ house: “Although this person may not be in my life anymore, I still have a home. My home is wherever my family is. My mom is also in them, as well, and they’re still with us.”

Educationally, Chaja has always excelled, and losing her mother her first year of college did not interfere with her academic success; she graduated in four years with honors and received her master’s degree in educational psychology in spring 2005. Her losses have, however, shaped her career choices: “I want to help others when they want to give up and feel they have no where to turn. Losing my mother, father, and grandfather

has made me more empathetic to others and made me want to be the listening ear for them. Eventually, I'd like to do some grief counseling, and I think that would be helpful to me, as well."

Natifa

Natifa is a tall, striking woman with high cheek-bones and dread-locks, another first-generation college student. She was 25 at the time of our interview and has been accepted to a doctoral program in African American Studies. We talked for almost three hours on the screened porch of my home on a summer afternoon in 2004.

Natifa had dropped three composition teachers, three semesters in a row, before finally settling into my composition II class in spring 2002. Having kept a journal since age 12 and written poetry since age 16, she was no newcomer to writing. She didn't realize she "had a knack" for writing until her senior year in high school, when her essay defending gays in the military was chosen as the best in her class. At 17, she became pen pals with three prison inmates—one of them her sister's boyfriend—and still enjoys writing to inmates with short-term sentences in hopes of "keeping them straight."

During her first month in my class, Natifa was called home to Atlanta to take care of her mother for several days after renal failure sent her back to the hospital—a familiar but painful scene for her family. Natifa incorporated her mother's disease into her first essay for Composition II, a personalized analysis of one or more themes in Tuesdays with Morrie, Mitch Albom's best-selling book about his college sociology teacher, Morrie Schwartz. Natifa opens her essay this way:

My mother was diagnosed with renal failure at the end of my 9th grade year in high school. The very next year my father died of AIDS. He was

never really a prominent figure in my life but he was my father and for him to die at the age of 46, the year after my mother was diagnosed with a terminal illness, was almost too much for me to bear at that age.

What she doesn't say in the essay is that in addition to losing her father and preparing to lose her mother, she lost her adopted brother to a violent death when she was 18 and he was 23—a loss she says she has not begun to grieve. She reflects on her brother's death in an interview:

“I haven't really dealt with my brother's death at all, not in journals or in poetry. I know there's a need for closure and maybe I'm not ready for that. I haven't been to his grave site at all. I've written about my father, but it's difficult for me to get the words together to say what I wanna say [about brother]. Usually I write easily from emotions, but my feelings for him are so confused. The last time I saw him alive, we argued . . . He had only been out of jail for a year, and he came to a July 4th cookout with his no-good friend, the same one he was with when he got killed. I said, “Why you hangin' out with this guy and not with your family?”

A fragmented story about her brother's death appears in a rough draft of her second essay, a persuasive paper about the effects of war on a person's faith. The assignment asked students to use Wiesel's Night and Mehmedinovic's Sarajevo Blues, both autobiographical accounts of what each author had witnessed during genocidal wars, to help students illustrate a theme about human life. Natifa writes: “My brother was murdered when three men, one armed, kicked in the door of a hotel room that he and two friends were sleeping in.” Two of the assailants were captured; one received the maximum sentence for murder with malice, and the other was released by a hung jury.

This was her first time to write about her brother's death, something she had avoided doing. In the interview, she recalls:

“We were talking in class about how Wiesel had lost his faith, living in concentration camps. People try to judge others who have lost faith, not really understanding what others have gone through. When my brother passed away, I was like, ‘God, who?’ I was an atheist! I did not believe in God. I don’t think I knew that [my brother’s] story would work in so well when I first started writing about living in a war zone in America, which was almost as bad as what Wiesel witnessed, hearing sirens and seeing people living as less than human . . . I had at least three revisions of that story, which started out with a scene of our neighborhood. I remember trying to draw a parallel between life in the projects and life in [Wiesel and Mehmedinovic’s] war, and tying it in to loss of faith. When I read the final draft of that paper, wow! It’s one of the best papers I’ve ever written.”

In concluding her essay on war and faith, Natifa acknowledges that the shock of her brother's murder and of two killers going free “shook me to my knees. I began to not only question my faith in the justice system, but also in God. How and why he chose my brother was a question no one could answer, and as a result, I rejected the religious beliefs with which I had grown up.”

The spring after her father's death, Natifa joined 30 other students on a trip to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., as part of a genocide seminar for low-income high school students. She remembers walking through the museum and seeing the “gold teeth and human hair” that Hitler's officers had collected from Jewish people before incinerating them. She also remembers dropping out of high school with only two classes

to go and spending three months in a self-destructive routine: “I would wake up, get high, go to work at Wendy’s, come home, and chat on the Internet all night until I fell asleep.” By 19, she was ready to start college, and at 25, she is preparing for a career in helping prison inmates transition back to freedom.

“All my life I’ve been into politics. I come from a long line of activists and rebels. When I got to college, the first thing I did was join the Black Student Alliance and the Black Panther Collective. I took Africana Studies classes and political science. I always think about how society influenced what happened to me and our family’s relation to the police. My father and brother’s deaths could have been avoided . . . If America hadn’t been such a capitalistic and materialistic society, my father probably wouldn’t have been using drugs and my brother probably wouldn’t have been selling drugs and might not have been in that hotel and shot.”

In a learning support class she took before enrolling in mine, Natifa wrote an essay “from an 8-year-old child’s point of view” about an argument her parents had after her father sold their Disney-On-Ice tickets for drug money. She recalls: “The way I saw things as a child is completely different now, as an adult. In that essay, I wrote that I ‘didn’t know who Crack is, but I’ll get him back for stealing our tickets.’ I’ve learned a lot in writing about my life and my parents. I’ve learned to think about the things going on. In writing, a lot of times I realize why he or she did this or that. I think that’s why I write about those things. If I didn’t write,” she says with a sigh, “I probably wouldn’t know anything. I’d be living or thinking blindly. I wouldn’t have clarity on things that were happening.”

Natifa still uses writing as a means of understanding herself and others, releasing

emotion, and organizing her thoughts. When I asked her to speak at a World AIDS Day vigil on campus December 1, 2004, she agreed whole-heartedly and proceeded to write and perform a poem about her father—how he became hooked on crack, infected with HIV, and died suddenly a few months after attending Natifa’s 16th birthday party. He had left her family when she was 8 years old, doing prison time for robbing a convenience store, and she saw him briefly in fifth grade and eighth grade. The year he died, he was finally clean and sober and had visited her monthly from March until his death in August. The common refrain in her poem for World AIDS Day was, “I loved him, even though I didn’t know him.”

She says she has no regrets about writing or telling her family stories, in class or in poetry slams in Berkeley and Atlanta. Her primary goal as an activist writer is “to open people’s eyes to America’s social ills, to the things I want to change.” She enjoys meeting people who have survived similar losses. “Writing about my father was definitely beneficial, almost therapeutic. For a long time, I was afraid to talk to Mom about him. I was afraid of the answer I might get.”

Natifa thinks students should be offered a class in grief writing because “all students, by graduation, will have to deal with some type of loss, and writing it out and letting others read it really helps. We need other people to validate our feelings. If I just write about my father and put it in a drawer, that’s not helping me. When I write and have someone read it, I ask them to give me feedback, to let me know if I’m a little vague or going over the edge. And it might help someone else.”

Having her work graded “was never a big issue. I don’t feel ashamed or awkward about my writing. I never get anything that I don’t expect; it’s not traumatic or sad when

people review it. I don't feel bad about it. Regardless of what you write about, you know it's going to be graded. You try to make sure everything else is just as good as the story."

She recalls my response to an early draft of her essay about war and faith—a very rough draft with no references to the books she was supposed to have read and cited. "I thought it was my worst paper ever when I turned it in. I knew I was behind. The next to last paragraph sucked, and I didn't have enough citations to support my argument. So I wasn't offended at all [by the teacher's comments]. You gave me some help that I could use. I was HAPPY. You said it was "a gut-wrencher!" and I'll always remember that." I remember feeling conflicted about my response because I wanted to encourage her to keep writing but had to deduct points for the lack of focus and the missing references to our texts. Apparently, she was not disappointed in my response or her grade.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a petite, ivory-skinned woman with dark hair and luminous, brown eyes and speaks in a southern drawl. When we met in a quiet room of the public library in her small town, she was 22 and approaching her senior year of college.

Elizabeth started writing the day her father died in a car accident. She was 5 years old. "My grandfather pulled me into a room, gave me crayons and paper and said, 'Draw everything you remember about him. Write and draw.' So I sat down every night for two months and wrote. It was a way to keep Daddy's memory in my mind. That's how I knew that writing could help me."

She kept a journal and "vented feelings on paper" until she entered high school, a private school with only 150 students in grades 9-12. Her teachers knew her extended family well, which sometimes made it "kind of tough" for Elizabeth to share her grief

and other feelings. So she threw herself into basketball and track, and she began starving herself—a habit that led to pre-anorexia and therapy for her and her family.

“My mom married at 19, had me at 20, and my Dad was killed when she was 25. She was still growing up when I was growing up, more like a sister than a mom . . . We lived with my maternal grandparents from the time I was 5 until I was 11. Then she remarried and I was taken from my comfort zone and put into a strange environment with a strange man she had dated for four years.”

Along with adjusting to a new house and stepfather, Elizabeth had a baby sister when her mom was 30 and a baby brother ten years later. She found herself feeling resentful toward her mother for the attention she gave her younger sister, so she spent more and more time with her grandparents.

“I couldn’t control what was going to happen tomorrow but I could control what was going in my mouth. It was a cry for help, like I was saying, ‘look at me, something’s going on with me.’ I went to counseling and we [other girls with eating disorders] talked about it. We had to write what we were feeling that day and how it affected us with our eating or anything else. The death of my father and the relationship with my mother led to my eating disorder. Now I look back and say, ‘Why harm yourself?’”

She still counts calories and “battles with body image” but is much healthier than the 112-pound girl she was in high school. In her senior composition class, she wrote an essay about anorexia: “The sense of embarrassment had gone. I had a sense of writing for an audience and as a way of healing. I felt strongly about [eating disorders] and wanted to write about it and let other people know about it. I don’t know why, exactly, but it just helped me to be more aware of what I was doing to myself. Writing something that

personal is a form of digging up stuff, and it helps me know myself better; the more I write, the more I understand myself.”

In senior English, she also wrote a character analysis of her grandfather who had stepped in to fill the void left by her father’s death. Her mother and maternal grandparents have college degrees, unlike her father and paternal grandparents, who were hardworking farmers. “My identity came from my maternal grandparents. The way [grandfather] is is the way I’ve become; he’s raised me. They always assumed I would go to college and become a teacher. My grandmother is a teacher, her mother was, my mom is, and my great-grandma on my Dad’s side. I was kind of pushed into that direction and I think I’ll do well.” After a brief pause, she adds: “I always wanted to go into counseling and talk to people because I’ve done so much that kids are going through today, with anorexia and loss of a parent. But they [family] all have their own plan for me. What is my plan? Sometimes I don’t know what I want for my own life.” Several months after our interview, she changed her major from education to general studies.

Elizabeth’s transition to college was rocky. Having attended a small, private school since kindergarten with the same handful of friends, she felt lost in a public university with 14,000 students. She had left her comfortable “little environment of love” where she saw her grandfather every day; after two days in college 60 miles from home, she called him in tears.

“My roommate from home had dropped out already, and I was feeling like I couldn’t do this [college] by myself. I’m a very family-oriented person, and it was scary coming to a university with thousands of people and not knowing how things operated.” Her grandfather drove to her apartment that evening and talked with her about staying in

school, which she has managed to do for four years. She sees herself as “more independent” now because she no longer calls home every time something happens.

“I have my own ground now. I have my own opinion and direction of what I want to do. My mom not being my mom and my Dad’s death have affected the person I am now. When I see her doing things for my two half-siblings, I want to ask her, ‘Why didn’t you do that for me?’ I never see Mama; she’s always at school and doing other things. The emotion I have toward her is still strong. It’s not hatred, but it’s hard to not resent what she’s done.”

She takes the time to sit down with her little sister and write as often as possible, leaving her notes or free-writing together so she can teach her sister the therapeutic power of writing: “Helping my little sister now helps me because I don’t want her to feel the way I did . . . Talking helps in any situation, even if it’s hard to talk about it. That’s how I was brought up to see things, to express things after my dad died. That led to my being able to write about it in freshman composition.”

In her first essay for my class, dated September 9, 2000, Elizabeth tells the story of how she had wanted to leave college the first week but her grandfather talked her into staying. Feeling overwhelmed in an unfamiliar campus environment with thousands of strangers, she “didn’t know how to take it all in,” but she acknowledges that this was not her “first experience of being overwhelmed and confused. When I was five years old, my father was killed in an automobile crash. My maternal grandfather had the unenviable task of delivering the news, which seemed far beyond anything a young child could accept or understand. He sat with me in the middle of my big double bed and encouraged me to cry onto my black cocker spaniel puppy. I remember some of the things he told me

that day . . .” She describes the development of their relationship through her adolescent and teen years as he became her “spectator, cheerleader, and critic” and she became dependent on him for guidance.

When her college adventure turned nightmarish within the first week, she called her grandfather in tears, and later that evening, he came to her apartment. Again, they sat down and discussed her problems and possible solutions before she decided to drop one class rather than quit school. Before leaving her apartment that night, he handed her a small box containing a flat, oval-shaped pewter token inscribed with the word “believe.” She ends her essay: “I found someone who had believed in me, and now it was my turn to start to believe in myself. That small gift represents everything my grandfather has tried to help me see. Because he listens when I need a sounding board, he has taught me to trust myself.”

Elizabeth says she has no regrets or negative memories about writing and sharing this essay or her grief in first-year composition. Participating in peer review was “hard at first,” because it was scary “to be open with someone who’s not part of the family,” but eventually, she drew closer to her classmates and felt positive about sharing her stories with them. She chose to publish her piece about her father and grandfather in our Class Anthology at semester’s end, a collection of writings from each student which everyone read and wrote about for the final exam.

“They [classmates] could read what I’d written and it might help them in that situation. It’s okay to lose a parent and let somebody else fill that void. It’s okay. When they read what I’ve written, they get a better understanding of who I am. They might have a different opinion or impression of me from reading what I’ve been through. Their

first opinion might be ‘she’s got it all, she’s perfect, flawless,’ and then they read that I don’t have a father. It’s interesting getting to know somebody through reading what they’ve written.”

Elizabeth remembers her classmates as a comfortable group: “We all got along and it was easy to talk about things. I’ve never been in another class at Georgia Southern where I felt that comfortable. That’s why it was easier to write something personal because you felt like you already knew them. I remember sitting in circles and interacting with people and talking about things—that was amazing! I’d never seen that before in school, and I definitely want to do that with my students, get them in a circle talking.”

As for the grading of students’ traumatic stories, Elizabeth acknowledges that “grades are a big deal” but says she “wasn’t worried about the grade when I wrote about my grandfather. I remember you saying you got goose-bumps from reading it. I’ll always remember that. It made me feel good because I had done what I had set out to do: I made the reader FEEL.” She adds, however, that writing about grief isn’t the same as experiencing it, because “you feel more than you could ever write.” While she’s not sure how she will grade her students’ personal writing, she intends to encourage them to keep journals and to choose their own subjects. She will only read their journals with their permission, because to do otherwise “is an invasion of privacy.”

Elizabeth still sees a therapist and takes medication for depression, and she uses writing and talking almost daily to help herself heal. “I still have a lot of grief, but writing about it makes it not so bad and helps you get over it, helps you confront what you’re afraid of. I don’t know what would happen if I kept it inside.”

“All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.”

Isak Dineson qtd. in Phelps and Emig 411

In all three cases, my students said they chose to write about their parents because it felt right at the time. They were not required to write about a loss and did not struggle in the process of choosing their subject. Their reflections about the healing nature of writing and sharing their sorrows reinforce psychologists' claims about the benefits of moving grief from inside to out, from a private feeling to a semi-public space where caring witnesses can hear and help hold it. Like the orphaned authors cited earlier, these student writers seemed to know, intuitively, that they were ready to revisit the lost relationship and to continue the process of transforming or recovering what was lost. During personal interviews with them years after they left my class, all three became emotional—one cried and the other two became impassioned and breathless as they described the long-term consequences of their losses. All three brought their portfolios for me to review again, which reminded me that in six years of assigning portfolios to hundreds of first-year composition students, I have received only two with photographs of the student on the cover: Natifa and Elizabeth, students who felt compelled to show, in color images that could not be ignored, who they once were and who they are now—an attempt to ground themselves in both the present and the past and to forge a new identity as college students who survived the death of a father.

When asked if they had any advice for writing teachers about grading personal essays or grief narratives, all three said that we should be sensitive in responding but should not be more lenient in grading a paper that is personal. Like students who write about sexual abuse and eating disorders, they want their writing treated with respect as

texts that can be improved. All three said they knew their narratives were being graded and would be peer reviewed and did not find the process painful. Natifa said she knew I would not dismiss her feelings, and she welcomed my suggestions for revision, which were many in the case of her letter to Oprah Winfrey about her brother's murder and her father's death from AIDS. Chaja said she had no memory of the grading or peer review process being traumatic, although she did recall a student "writing a whole letter" in response to her paper about her mother's death. Chaja acknowledged that she might feel differently if her grade had been lower or if her classmates had responded less sensitively to her work. Elizabeth recalled with a smile that I had written "goosebumps!" in response to her essay about her grandfather's influence, and regardless of the grade, she was proud that she had succeeded in making a reader "feel."

My students' reflections reinforce the findings of Belenky et al in Women's Ways of Knowing: Women who are encouraged to tell their stories of intellectual and ethical development often refer to the process as "'gaining a voice'" (16), a critical step for those who have suffered traumatic loss and been unable to articulate it. In lengthy interviews with 135 women of different ages, classes, ethnic, and educational backgrounds from rural and urban America, Belenky found that "the development of a sense of voice, mind, and self were intricately intertwined" (18). Likewise in her essay, "Coming to Writing," Helene Cixous asserts that writing becomes necessary and possible after we have "lost everything" and feel lost, because "writing is always first a way of not being able to go through with mourning for death" (38)—we write to assuage the grief that would settle in our muscles and unsettle our lives, quietly but insistently staking its territory.

Understanding the therapeutic power of writing about the death of a parent is important because the loss is often traumatic to the survivor's sense of identity. In Bequest and Betrayal, literary theorist 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" (Miller 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), a way to figure out who we are in the absence of the parent.

Creating the self is never easy, and many children who reach adulthood with two secure parents still struggle with becoming a person; many of those who lose one or both parents find creating an identity more problematic because they often lack the stories of their own family histories that parents provide. Story-telling is key to developing a sense of self, according to psychologist Laura King, because "the stories individuals tell about their life experiences are the building blocks of identity. Integrating experiences into the self implies constructing narratives that fit into the frame of the storied self" (125). King sees writing as "a process of self-exploration and understanding" and "a process of self-construction" that enables writers to incorporate a range of experiences into "authoring the self." Sometimes constructing a meaningful story of a traumatic experience reveals to the writer some positive insights which would have remained hidden otherwise (124), another reason to allow students to choose topics.

My students practice such writing and reconnecting almost intuitively, even (or

especially?) when they know their stories will be read, revised, and published. Bracher explains the role writing plays in reconstructing identity after a parent dies: Writing “can enact a surrogate body or suit of clothes” for the writer as it expresses either “the writer’s desire for bodily unity and coherence or the writer’s anxiety about bodily fragmentation and lack of control” (41) or both. Like clothing, a piece of writing may express or accentuate a person’s “body ego” or may disguise or compensate for any perceived deficiencies, particularly those related to loss of a parent.

Students who write about their losses are struggling to reconstitute and re-envision their lives, sometimes for the first time since their parent’s death. The act of writing enables the student to see, on the page, the residual effects of her loss and to revisit her beliefs about life and death in the presence of empathetic witnesses. As Payne notes in Bodily Discourses, speaking and writing about traumatic loss can be, for many students, “a way of reassembling an identity that allows one to be seen and heard by those who have *not* suffered, who represent the original state of innocence that preceded the violence” (113). Testifying to loss or violence becomes a way of reconstituting a self that incorporates but is not defined by the loss or event.

Depending on a teacher’s pedagogy and willingness to deal with students’ emotions, a writing class may be ideal for grieving students to continue the work of composing their lives and discovering who they are and may become, in light of their loss. Being able to write and/or tell about their lives and losses brings bereaved students and their peers into dynamic relations with each other that facilitate their staying and succeeding in college, as I have witnessed repeatedly among orphaned students who feel compelled to speak and/or write of their losses.

One former student, Steve, broke down and wept in composition II when it was his turn to share a meaningful song or poem, which his classmates had done as we sat in a circle that day. He played a song by Vince Gill that captured his own feelings of remorse about losing his father unexpectedly, and when the song was over, Steve laid his head on his desk and cried. I was sitting beside him and could feel the heat emanating from his body. I was not surprised by this moment as I had read his earlier essay about his father's death, written in response to a state Regents' test topic about choosing one day to re-live. His father had suffered a heart attack and died while moving a heavy couch for a friend, something that Steve felt might not have happened if Steve had been willing to miss football practice that day to help his dad, as requested (Milner, "Steve's Story").

After the crying episode in class, Steve withdrew from college; a few years later, I saw him in a large retail store and learned that he had returned to school for a double major in engineering and management and was graduating with honors. When I saw him again several months later, he was beaming as he showed me a picture of his wife and baby; though I didn't inquire about his grief, the evidence is strong that his breakdown in class did not destroy his life. Reading or hearing their classmates' personal stories is an important step toward building awareness that may lead to acceptance and tolerance of the diverse experiences that connect and/or separate us from each other. We and our students may not realize until years later the impact of sharing traumatic stories. For a conference presentation on the consequences of bearing witness to traumatic loss, I emailed a dozen former students from different classes and asked them to reflect on any memorable moments or students' stories in their composition classes. Within 24 hours, I had six responses, all of them naming specific students who had told and/or written about

having lost a parent, sibling, or friend to death. Most said they felt somewhat uncomfortable at the moment of disclosure and didn't want to hear, at first, about their classmates' suffering; in time, however, all had absorbed the story and returned to it later as they considered how they would react to similar circumstances. Three said their peers' stories had made them realize that we can't tell by looking at someone what or how they have suffered, and we should be careful in our assumptions and attitudes toward people we don't know well (Milner, "Witnessing Loss: What Students and Teachers Gain").

Hearing and reading each other's stories as part of a writing community may be the only opportunity a student has, outside a grief support group, to connect with those who have suffered similar losses. Teachers and peers stand in for the social groups that normally appear at death events—family, friends, neighbors, church and school acquaintances—and the student's paper about loss becomes a call for community. By writing and reading their grief narratives in class, survivors invite the audience into their private lives and create a path between the old life with both parents and the new one without.

Even in the best case scenarios, students come to college having lost parents through divorce, friends or lovers through misunderstandings or geographic distance, pets through accident and illness, and homes to fire, tornadoes, hurricanes, bankruptcy, divorce, or job relocation. Suddenly they're in college, in a new community of possibilities, asking themselves: Who am I now? Who might I become? (Sullivan 47). Even those whose families remain intact are leaving the familiarity of home and navigating the unfamiliar halls of the university, a challenging transition for many first-year students who feel outcast as "other" because of race, class, gender, sexual

orientation, or other identity issues. Many find themselves on the threshold between childhood and adulthood, wanting both a child's security and an adult's independence and freedom. It is this desire to thrive independently in an uncertain world that I am examining, particularly the ways in which composing and connecting with readers helps orphaned students not only to alleviate the loneliness brought on by parental loss, but to discover joy in living in the present.

Neurologists have found that equilibrium, graceful movements, and ease in acting are associated with joy and with living "in the key of pleasure," while sorrow and its accompanying feelings of fear, guilt, and despair leave us living "in the key of pain" (Damasio 137). Unlike joy, unrelenting sorrow often brings paralysis, disequilibrium, and physiological discord that can, if left unchecked, lead to disease and death (138). Such discord also interferes with learning for students who have felt silenced or angered in response to their parent's death. When they are ready to move their grief into the semi-public sphere of a writing class, teachers should be prepared to meet them in the transitional spaces many of them occupy as first-year students. I cannot count the narratives and poems I have read about traumatic loss written by students whose behavior, at first, appeared distant, surly, or disruptive. Once they trust their teacher and classmates enough to disclose their grief, they begin a dialogue that enables them to recast their past and re-envision their future without the lost loved one and without the rage or paralysis that followed the death.

I suspect many grieving students write because they must. Some of them seem unable to start a new life in the university without declaring their orphan status as part of their identity. I remember Brandy and Steven, former students who introduced

themselves on the first day of class, risking rupture: “My Daddy died when I was 16,” Brandy said, almost defiantly. And every piece she wrote that semester referenced, either minimally or extensively, her father’s influence. A first-generation college student from a poor, rural school district, Brandy dropped all her classes except composition after mid-term when her closest male friend was shot and killed by the jealous lover of his ex-girlfriend. She wanted to quit school, and I encouraged her to stay, to keep writing, because she had a gift for language. She enrolled in my composition II class the following spring which she also completed with an “A,” but I have not seen her since.

In a different composition II class, Steven blurted out in introducing himself: “I’m Steven and my mother died when I was 9 months old and since then, it’s just been me and my Dad.” Like Brandy, he seemed compelled to let others know who he was: a boy who lost his mother and a college freshman who insists, “Here I am! See me. Hear me. Know me by what remains.” Weeks later, Steven came to my office after class to tell me, his eyes and face looking downward, that his mother had committed suicide. He had felt confused when the subject of suicide arose in class that day and now wanted me to tell him my thoughts on it. Carefully, I told him that sometimes people suffer so much that they lose hope and faith and cannot find their way out; I said I couldn’t judge anyone’s actions without standing in her shoes. I asked him to tell me more about his mixed feelings, which he did, and after a half hour of conversation he seemed more relaxed. We never discussed suicide again, but he referred to his mother in almost every piece he wrote—evidence that he was still processing, still mourning, and still wanting someone to hear his testimony.

Countless students suffer identity crises in college and write stories in which their

mothers are alive but appear as shadowy, undependable figures, epitomizing what Andre Green calls the “dead mother” syndrome. The syndrome appears among children whose maternal figure withdraws emotionally during the child’s first few months of life, due to post-partum depression or preoccupation with a crisis, a syndrome theorists Gregorio Kohon and Jed Sekoff have applied to later periods in the mother/child relationship. Dead mother syndrome occurs when the mother’s emotional preoccupation with something other than the child prevents her from attending to the child’s needs, and the child withdraws and attaches to other persons, activities, or places to find stability, which Kohon defines as “selfobjects” (Tingle 8). The result is a failed connection between the child and her mother, which leaves ““psychic holes”” and other traces in the child’s unconscious (Kohon 2). The child then suffers a kind of “blank mourning” as she experiences an “unconscious internalization of the mother’s depression and her longing for a resurrected (alive again) mother. The child’s *conscious* identification of the object for which she mourns, however, is difficult, since the child grieves for an object that is neither overtly present nor overtly absent” (Hallet 168, italics hers). The person suffering from dead mother syndrome remains “suspended between the living and the dead” with a maternal figure who is present, physically, but absent emotionally.

Kohon suggests that one way children cope with having emotionally preoccupied mothers is to become over-achievers, “especially in the area of academics . . . to attract the withdrawn mother’s attention and to pull her back into their realm” (Hallet 186). While some students find college life impossible after losing a parent, others lose themselves in a passionate pursuit of knowledge and status. (See section on Creating Life: Literary Orphans, in Chapter 2.)

Patricia Sullivan studies representations of parenting in the writing of first-year composition students, analyzing the ways in which student writers construct their relationships with fathers and mothers, both living and dead. Most students praise their fathers for having attended school athletic events while they take for granted their mother's presence. In many essays, she finds that the mother is often invisible to the student writer looking for heroes:

'Mother cannot be the hero of such a narrative because it is her nature to be there, like Penelope . . . Students most often write about mothers when their mothers seem to be acting against their nature, when they do not reflect this cultural representation of motherhood, throwing it into question: when their mother works, or returns to school, or asks for a divorce, or has a fight with her child—when the child suddenly has reason to fear that when he or she looks, mother won't be there.' (Sullivan qtd. in Hallet 202)

The significance of Sullivan's research is that "she links [students' written] representations of parents with both real and feared loss, actual and anticipated grief" (203). The implications of her linkages are far-reaching as we consider how many college students are struggling with fears of abandonment and debilitating grief, whether their parents have died, disappeared, or faded temporarily from view. If we know what we're looking for in such narratives, we have a better chance of suggesting alternatives for revision and fostering success in school and beyond. Repeated surveys of American college graduates have shown that a sense of belonging or healthy relationships with faculty mentors and/or friends is key to succeeding in school, both as undergraduates

and as graduate students (Pascarella and Terenzini 395). Writing teachers, then, are in a unique position to receive students' stories of growing up, leaving home, and living to tell about it.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

“This [Writing and Healing] course could/should be incorporated into the core curriculum. As one author we studied suggested, ‘We are all healing from our country’s violent history,’ and therefore, we all should have an opportunity to receive some form of therapy other than that which can be obtained in a session with a shrink. This course allowed us to address our fears and/or concerns. It gave us an opportunity to deal with life issues in a way that most classes do not. We were challenged intellectually and spiritually to learn and grow from our experiences. It was a wonderful, life-changing experience.”

Hand-written comment from an anonymous student evaluation of my Writing and Healing class, Spring 2005, at Georgia Southern University, in response to standard questions about what students liked best and what could be improved.

What I Learned: A Distillation

I have learned that the language of loss is embodied and emergent, often nonverbal. My subtitle, “Transformation in the Telling, In and Beyond the Writing Classroom,” leaves open the question of transforming loss *from* and *to* something . . . but what? Just as matter is neither created nor destroyed, only transformed, so is grief: it remains even as it changes. Writing, telling, and having grief acknowledged by others will not wipe it away, but under certain conditions, these activities initiate a process of recasting grief into art or new stories that enable survivors to integrate their losses in healthy ways. Grief can be transformed if met with even a morsel of faith that life—and love—will continue after catastrophic loss.

As I draw my dissertation to a close, it becomes a distillation, a process of extracting the essence of what it means to teach students whose sorrow refuses silence and opts, instead, for articulation, a process of transforming grief in small quantities. I am reminded of Whitman’s words in “Song of Myself,” where he writes: “Houses and rooms

are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes, I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it. The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it” (38). Education itself becomes a process of distilling, and yet, we should not let what we learn intoxicate us or seduce us into thinking we have found The Answer.

My research into grief both prepared and failed to prepare me for the traumatic death of my student, Ally Harbuck. How would I go on? Where would I find the resources to continue teaching those who survived? With one week left in spring semester, I was stuck. For the first time in my life, I could not work. Could not read and respond to my students’ portfolios.

The closest I can come to describing how I felt is this: One day in eighth grade, two guys were throwing a 10-pound rubber bowling ball back and forth in class while the teacher was out of the room. I stepped between them and didn’t realize I was in their path until the ball smacked me in the cheek and knocked me to the floor. Suddenly, I was face down on the dirty tile, wondering what had happened. That’s how I felt after Ally’s death: Knocked down, face in the dirt, unable to move. And physically sore: my shoulders ached, stomach clenched. For days.

My research told me that I should write and tell and go communal, preferably outdoors, to break the paralyzing isolation of my grief. Since there was nothing else I could do, I decided to test my theory. And to a large degree, it worked. Writing the poem about Ally and reading it aloud at her service allowed me to connect with others who were grieving and to feel the support of colleagues and administrators who did not know Ally but were bearing witness to our sorrow that day in the garden. Through connecting with each other in the present, we began the slow journey toward healing—a journey that

continues each time I see one of Ally's friends or family members around campus. We know what we lost. We remember. And we move forward.

Developing my conclusion has been the hardest part of my dissertation because my subject—composing loss—resists closure. Staying open to whatever arises, in ourselves and our students, in our texts and in theirs, means we cannot draw a fixed or final answer. Every case is different. Thus, there is no “pedagogy of grief.” There are pedagogies, plural, just as there are students and teachers and schools, plural and mixed.

The best I can offer today or any day is my attention to *what is*—attention without aversion or attraction, attention without judgment. This is what I have learned and am attempting to practice, in and out of the classroom. To stay open and attentive—to listen with body and mind—and not rush to embrace or turn away from what I or my students bring to class. This is my practice. This is my education.

Here are the highlights of my distillation:

1. Writing and healing is an ongoing process, like learning. Similar to Zen Buddhism's eight-fold path or AA's twelve-step program or the Christian's Ten Commandments, writers and teachers practice writing and healing individually and together. We keep practicing and do not expect to fix ourselves or others. We respect our students' boundaries and remain vigilant and self-reflective so as not to interfere or advise students in voyeuristic, evangelical, or otherwise inappropriate ways.

2. I offer sweeping, interdisciplinary evidence that writing and sharing grief in a safe setting enables many survivors to recreate a sense of home and return to living. Denying or squelching grief can be toxic physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Compositionists cannot afford to ignore the mountain of evidence that says grief writing

is productive and creative.

3. While writing teachers *should not require* students to dig into or divulge their sorrows, *we should allow* them to do so when they are ready. We should prepare to meet them by studying psychological and educational theories of responding well to expressions of suffering. Writing about loss should be the student's choice, just as people choose to share their stories with bartenders, beauticians, or strangers on airplanes; in choosing to tell, they are not looking for therapists but may find such telling therapeutic. As teachers, we have an ethical responsibility to bear witness to the stories our students voluntarily disclose and to invite them to see how their stories are part of a larger, cultural context. For me, teaching composition blends the best of ministry and medicine as we learn to save lives by listening and reflecting back to our students their own evolving truths and the truths of our culture.

4. The escalating fear and violence in our homes, neighborhoods, schools, cities, states, nation, and world suggest that education is not doing its job. We are failing. We fail when we disembodied learning and discount students' life experiences in favor of teaching from our own wounded, biased, or privileged positions. In a writing class in particular, we should make our students' stories central. We should emphasize listening and practice paying attention.

An Overview

Each section in this chapter offers conclusions about what I have learned from talking with orphaned students, teaching Writing and Healing classes, and reading across disciplines about writing, telling, and transforming sorrow. My work enhances what we know about teaching composition in ways that foster learning and healing in a world that

sorely needs both. I see, now, how students' articulations of grief—however clumsy or messy—often represent their desire for a home they have lost or never had, and how crucial that sense of home can be to their developing personal and professional identities. I see how naming the traumatic loss of a parent in a community of empathetic witnesses enables orphaned students to regain a sense of balance or flow that is necessary to a healthy life. I see the role writing plays in restoring a survivor's faith and in facilitating his or her move toward forgiveness, and I see the role teachers play in encouraging or squelching such moves among students. Finally, I understand more fully how one student's story of traumatic loss becomes, in the telling, part of a universal story of human suffering and survival, and how our only hope for survival, globally, is in learning to listen and bear witness to the losses of those we might otherwise dismiss or mistreat.

I want teachers to listen to their students. Listen to what they are trying to say, and give them time and space to say it. Don't be afraid. If you are afraid, embrace your fear and keep opening your heart and mind anyway. When students cry, the sky won't fall. Work on yourself. Notice your resistance to your own body and emotions and to your students' bodies and emotions. Acknowledge your biases and fears, losses and accomplishments, and examine how they are influencing your choices about whose suffering matters and to what extent or end.

I want teachers to know that being there, attending, and not turning away from students as they attempt to name, know, and re-name their lives is legitimate academic work and a gift to our students and ourselves. We cannot "fix" anyone. We can listen and let our eyes, ears, and mouths serve as friendly mirrors to reflect students back to themselves, to glimpse themselves whole via their own words and images. We can

challenge and prod them, encourage them to go further or dig deeper, as they are ready.

They will let us know how much pressure is too much. It is the writing teacher's job to be there, in the body and in the margins, in dialogue and in desperation, in the said and the unsaid.

Learning to write, like healing wounds or grieving losses, requires a lifetime of effort and attention. When we sign up to teach writing, we step into a stream that flows perpetually forward, and we cannot let our fear of drowning stop us from wading into the muddy water with our students. When students pour out their traumatic losses, we have a rare opportunity to work with them, to do the right thing, to assist as needed and then move out of their way. To help them see that from their wounds may come a life of service to others who have suffered similarly. To help them hear and answer a call to practice medicine or ministry or counseling, a call to teach or coach or write or parent or do business in ethical, productive ways. For writing and telling what they have survived may save their lives and the lives of others.

Students in my study and in my Writing and Healing classes agree that the momentary discomfort of sharing their sorrow, the so-called disgrace of crying in class, is worth the benefits they gain from such disclosure: they begin to release their long-held grief, lighten their load, re-script their lives, remember what is lost and what remains, and create new relationships in the process of bearing witness. They begin to recognize the universal nature and cultural origins of their pain, as do those of us who witness their stories. We discover that we, and they, will survive melting down in class. We pause and pass the tissue before we move to the next speaker or reader. We realize that being real with our students does not mean mothering or smothering them with unwanted nurturing.

We listen and respond with maturity and wisdom, with an open heart and mind, without patronizing them. We ask them how they and we are doing: What do they need more or less of from us? In that sense, my research has just begun. I am learning to step through my fear and trust the process of writing and telling, of crying and laughing, of losing and finding what remains as I, alongside my students, continue a recursive journey toward home and wholeness, forgiveness and flow.

Rewriting Home, Rewriting the Self

“Finding home is crucial to the act of writing.”

Georgia Heard, Writing Toward Home, 2

If we accepted Carl Jung’s notion that the house is a symbol of the self, we might read our students’ essays of family loss with a more open mind and heart. Many first-year composition students are in a state of homelessness or groundlessness upon entering college; we never know when his or her home or self has crumbled due to divorce, separation, or death of a parent or was never established because of a history of poverty, violence or neglect. Reconstructing a home and a way to move forward in the world can be crucial to a student’s developing sense of self as a writer and thinker. For some of us, moving a pen across paper or tapping out words on a keyboard is the most “at home” we ever feel: “There are times when it’s only coming to the notebook that I truly do face my own life. And I write out of hurt and how to make hurt okay; how to make myself strong and come home, and it may be the only real home I’ll ever have” (Goldberg 115). Taking refuge in writing, as Chaja, Natifa, Elizabeth, and I have done, becomes a life-sustaining act.

Through writing, we and our students may discover with feminist theologian

Nelle Morton that “home [is] not a place. Home is a movement, a quality of relationship, a state where people seek to be ‘their own’ and increasingly responsible for the world” (xix). For those of us who live “a distinctly different lifestyle” from our families or childhood friends, we journey outward and develop meaningful new relationships but carry with us a “nostalgic longing to return home” (xviii), something I experienced in my annual sojourns to visit my teachers, the only vestige of a home place that remained after my family scattered. As Morton predicts about such visits, “there is always the implication of betrayal once one asserts herself, breaks the cultural pattern, and refuses to participate in the indoctrination of the clan . . . One is forced to recognize that the branches—the trees—may resemble each other but seem no longer to belong together in the same orchard” (xix). I suspect our separation was happening in imperceptible moments over the years, but I could not acknowledge our differences. For too long, my need for my teachers’ approval was too great to risk the severance that now seems inevitable. In writing and sharing my grief with friendly readers, I am working through the shame over losing my teachers as I learn to appreciate what they gave me, even as I mourn the end of our relationship—something I never thought I would accept.

While returning to our geographic or familial roots allows us to embrace our “whole life and kin,” returning permanently to our childhood ways of being tends to “deny connectedness with the world as one people and the earth as a home for us all” (Morton xix). Instead of grieving interminably over the death of real or surrogate parents or the failure of our families or friends to be available or hospitable to us as we change and grow, we should remember that our home is the earth and we are part of a global family.

Morton's notion of earth-as-home echoes the sentiments of Thich Nhat Hanh, who says that in East Asia, the human body is considered a "mini-cosmos. The cosmos is our home, and we can touch it by being aware of our body. Meditation is to be still: to sit still, to stand still, and to walk with stillness. Meditation means to look deeply, to touch deeply so we can realize we are already home" (qtd. in Gates 223). The same approach is required for writing: we sit still and look deeply into our subjects to discover what we know or almost know. In this regard, we cannot ever leave home because we embody it, inhabit it, and dwell within it, even though we lose awareness of it at times. By stopping and paying attention, which both meditation and writing ask us to do, we and our students find that home exists eternally in the present moment.

Jung also said that the greatest influence on children is the un-lived lives of their parents, and we find this in students' confusion over choosing majors that will please their parents vs. majors that will satisfy their own desire for making a living or making a difference. As environmentalist Janisse Ray recalls of her high school and college days in rural Georgia, "I could not be the person my parents wished me to be. If they couldn't accept who I was, then I would hide that person. And I did" (72). While hiding is sometimes necessary for survival, the long-term consequences can be costly, even toxic, as studies across the disciplines have shown. For better or worse, students carry their families and homes with them wherever they go, and if their "family" or "home" feels too constraining or painful, they find more functional ones in new relationships and venues. In writing about their original or newly created homes, students begin to articulate where they're from and where they want to go, personally and professionally.

The importance of writing (a) home fuels my pedagogical choices as I decide

which readings and writing assignments to employ in a class. Borrowing a metaphor from Michael Blitz, I remind my students that working on a piece of writing resembles imagining, then implementing, a design for a place to live:

Their ideas, styles, desires, frustrations, recollections, notions of comfort or discomfort are all partly in evidence in the design of their writings. And just as they might do in their ideal homes, they can, in their writings, continually rearrange the furniture not only to their own satisfaction but also in an effort to create an environment that reflects their vision of what a common, inhabitable space can be. (Blitz and Hurlbert 13)

Pen, paper, and computers become the writer-carpenter's tools for building a refuge, and our students' survival may depend on their ability to construct and reconstruct safe places to live, internally and externally. Allowing them to write about their conflicted memories and dreams could spell the difference between their finishing school or dropping out, their finding a sense of home within themselves or feeling alienated and adrift.

Many memoirists, poets, and essayists write about their evolving understandings of home and their place in it or outside it. Maya Angelou reminds us that "the ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned" (89). David Wolpe, a rabbi and former college professor, seconds this notion: "We live, each of us, as a child of wilderness. We are enmeshed in loss, in search of home" (39). He notes that many first-year college students have lost home and a piece of themselves, as leaving home marks the end of childhood. In college, "identities must be established anew; the freshmen must make new homes, which means they must remake themselves" (26). For college students and others, leaving home requires an act of faith that we are not

alone, an acceptance that “without loss we cannot grow. But without faith, we cannot bear to lose” (28). Writing and listening to each other’s stories potentially connects students with their classmates and restores their faith in themselves and others in the process of examining multiple options for living.

What about students who never had a “safe place,” or those who have lost one or both parents to death, divorce, injury, illness, or relocation? In their introduction to Home: American Writers Remember Rooms of their Own, Fiffer and Fiffer note: “It is the act of writing, reading, and remembering our own homes—the smells from the kitchen, the whispers from the bedroom, the sliver of light at the bottom of a closed door—that brings us together. It is what brings us home” (xiv). Perhaps such writing brings together the disparate parts of ourselves and speaks to the ambiguity and contradictions that whisper, beneath the surface, that life is impermanent and groundless, that nothing lasts forever, even in memory. Understanding the essential groundlessness of life takes us closer to realizing that we carry home within us.

Losing one’s home, as Adam and Eve do in the Garden of Eden and Homer’s Odysseus does in Greek mythology, often inspires action, creativity, or a call to service. Wolpe argues that “to be cast out is to lose trust, but to build a home inside is to regain that trust in ourselves and in other people . . . We crave the stability of one place, and the place is built not on land but on community, trust, and love” (47). He concludes that however painful, losing our homes can be creative and making new homes inside ourselves can be healing.

Sometimes the children of immigrants, such as authors Constance Curry and Abraham Verghese, find home in the dual acts of writing and service to others. In her

essay about working full-time for the civil rights movement, Curry acknowledges that writing books about Mississippi school integration and attending conferences of southern writers made her realize that she has “no true ‘sense of place’”—an awareness she has known “viscerally deep” her whole life (34). The daughter of Irish immigrants (her mother died when Curry was 24), Curry feels most at home in her vocation: “working for forty years in jobs and with people whose goals and values were close to those of the early Freedom Movement . . . with our vision of a truly integrated society” (34). She finds security in working with like-minded people toward a common cause, a desire that emerged in my interviews with Chaja, Natifa, and Elizabeth. Chaja wants to work with troubled children and Elizabeth with troubled teens, while Natifa plans to develop transitional programs for African American prisoners.

Likewise, Verghese writes in My Own Country: A Doctor's Story about feeling displaced through his childhood in Africa (born to Christian parents from South India) and his medical education in Madras, Ethiopia, Boston, and Tennessee. As the infectious disease expert and “foreign doctor” in Johnson City, Tenn., in the 1980s, when AIDS first reached rural areas, Verghese develops compassionate relationships with the infected men and women he serves—a job sometimes compounded by prejudice and fear among local health care providers. He wonders: “Was there ever going to be a place in this world for me to call my own . . . some place where I could walk around anonymously, where I could blend in completely with a community, be undistinguished by appearance, accent or speech?” (308). Five years later, as he drives his family toward a new life and job at an AIDS clinic in Iowa, Verghese grieves over leaving the hilly, scenic landscape which he suddenly recognizes as his “own country:” “Perhaps my

perennial migrations, almost hereditary, are a way to avoid loss. With deep roots come great comforts. Yet deep attachments are the hardest to lose. Maybe that is why drifters avoid them” (427). Hours later, he pulls off the road, gazes at the stars, and “feels connected” to earth and sky, to his children, his ancestors, and his patients, the ones left behind and the ones he has yet to meet. Like the club-footed artist/doctor in Somerset Maugham’s Of Human Bondage, Verghese feels at home in his dual calling as a physician and writer, regardless of geographical location.

Wherever and however we find home, the act of doing so is essential for writers, according to Georgia Heard in Writing Toward Home: Tales and Lessons to Find Your Way. She instructs writers to “Begin here. With what you know. With the tales you’ve told dozens of times to friends or a spouse or a lover. With the map you’ve already made in your heart. That’s where the real home is: inside. If we carry that home with us all the time, we’ll be able to take more risks” (2). Further, she notes that “all of us hold the history of our lives, as well as our ancestors’ and the world’s history, inside us. Memories darkened by ages of forgetting are still inside somewhere hiding, waiting for the right smell or touch to unlock them” (86). When one writer releases memories and histories, others are inspired to do the same, creating a web of stories that reaches beyond narcissism and enhances our understanding of culture and survival. Understanding that one person’s pain is part of a larger sphere of loss may make it easier to bear.

Southern novelist Elizabeth Dewberry sees writing as “an act of worship” (64) and “an act of compassion, of empathy, of generosity of spirit” (65), especially when the stories we tell involve a risk of losing home and everything. After publication of her first novel, Many Things Have Happened Since He Died, Dewberry’s memories of being

molested by her grandfather began to surface, and she eventually confronted him—a confrontation that cost her a considerable inheritance and family connections: “The loss of my sisters and relatives, and even in some probably unhealthy way my grandfather himself, is still painful to me. And although I continue to heal, although I continue to transform that pain into art, I don’t expect ever in my life not to feel it anymore.” She concludes that “writing is an act of faith, faith that if I tell a story honestly enough it will resonate into the lives of people who haven’t lived these things . . . an act of love and rage and sacrifice.” Like Dewberry, many of our students need to compose their losses into poems, narratives, or researched essays that serve a healing function for them and their readers, for those who have suffered similarly and those who will face loss in the future. Although such writing and sharing may be painful and risky, the process of attending sorrows leads to a more peaceful, creative classroom and community.

In Already Home: A Topography of Spirit and Place, Buddhist author Barbara Gates chronicles her conscious explorations of her Berkeley neighborhood alongside treatment and recovery from breast cancer. She moves back and forth between descriptions of her childhood home in New York and her multicultural, ever-changing neighborhood in California, her health and her illness, her relationships with parents, husband, and daughter in an effort to deal with the personal and collective desire for home. As she uncovers the history of her house and neighborhood, Gates realizes she is “already home.” Likewise in Wild Card Quilt, Ray reminds us that we often “falter in our attempts to rely on each other and to be reliable,” and this becomes problematic over time because “the more isolated we become, the less sympathy we have for the common human condition” (106). And the less sympathy we have, the more likely we are to

disrespect human life and commit violence—problems educators should be working to prevent.

Writing about family, neighbors, and home, then, becomes a way of creating a whole life in a fractured world. Writing home, like writing the self, is never finished, because both are always evolving: “the self is not something there, finished and set in place, ready merely to be described but something the writer is shaping. That shaping changes, in turn, the self that shapes the writing, in an ever-recursive act until pen is put down or computer turned off” (Allister 14). By encouraging our students to write from their experiences, we enable them to experience the dynamic processes of making meaning through embodied language and to discover the power they have in reconstructing their lives and homes through writing, revising, and leaving their stories and lives open to change.

As I approached the final stages of revising my dissertation, I traveled to south Alabama to visit relatives and found myself seeing with new eyes. The idea for a poem about my home state came to me as I stood in line at a convenience store behind a woman eating boiled peanuts from a small, brown sack. The poem embodies my attempt to work through my own grief, shame, and yearning as a white southern lesbian, or through what one writer calls “the history-haunted sense of loss that imprints so much of the South and its literature” (Horwitz 1). It took months to write an ending I could live with, as it will surely take a lifetime to work through the layers of longing and sorrow accumulated by myself and my ancestors, known and unknown. Here’s the poem, “Home State:”

Driving across south Alabama

through threadbare, boarded-up towns where
 dying service stations proclaim "Under God" and
 "Boiled Peanuts--Jesus Loves U" and "Islamic Center of the USA"
 I'm a foreigner in my home state, wandering

Catching sight of a brown-skinned woman at sunset
 walking a red dirt road off 82 outside Montgomery
 in straw hat, flowered shift, and flip-flops
 her head down, expression empty
 I wonder where we've been, where we're going

Eating blackberry cobbler at Mother's house
 competing with cable TV and childhood memories
 we loiter in the kitchen, drinking coffee from ceramic cups
 bearing the state motto: "We dare defend our rights"
 I remain adrift, set free somehow but yearning

Taking the two-lane back to my lover in coastal Georgia
 speeding past peanut farms, hay bales, and soybean fields
 I return home to the cypress swamp and college town whose
 courthouse Sherman burned in his drive for unification
 I suspect my home state and I share fluid boundaries, ever transgressing

Seeping into each other, leaking grief and desire at every turn
 ever estranged, I pay homage to a place that never was
 yet I carry it still, or it carries me, through moments of groundlessness
 and reaching upward from Baptist roots through Buddhist branches
 I want, I want to welcome what is, now

Woven through the poem are hints of racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and poverty—of
 my desire for integration and peace in myself and my neighbors. I have moments of
 awareness, but then I forget what I know and become lost in the past until something
 wakes me up again. Instead of clinging to the past or flinging it to the wind, I want to
 accept what it offers and allow room for what is happening now, in this moment, which is
 all we have. Why waste today on regret or blame for what is lost when we can find hope
 here and now?

In addition to coming to voice as a writer, I have found a home in teaching and

am simultaneously inspired, heartbroken, and haunted by the stories my students bring to class every semester. In twelve years of teaching composition at a public university in southeast Georgia, I often marvel at the courage of students who choose to write about the mothers or fathers they miss; I am moved by their commitment to education, and I am privileged to witness their resilience in rescripting their lives after catastrophic loss. Their determination to not only survive but thrive, despite or because of their losses, inspires hope: not the fairy-tale, magic-wand kind, but that described by oncologist Jerome Groopman in The Anatomy of Hope: “Hope can arrive only when you recognize that there are real options and that you have genuine choices. Hope can flourish only when you believe that what you do can make a difference, that your actions can bring a future different from the present,” and “you are no longer at the mercy of forces outside yourself” (26). In writing their grief, my students seem to be saying they are ready to name what hurts them and to take responsibility for their lives. Some of them keep in touch through email or reach to hug me when I see them on campus or in town, voluntary moves that reinforce the long-term benefits of embodied grief writing and sharing in a composition class.

The Benefits of Balance or “Going on Being”

Although orphaned students represent a small portion of our population, college writing teachers deal daily with the consequences of unparented children in search of a self or identity: those who grew up with one or both parents missing or with parents whose attention was either extremely overbearing or extremely neglectful. The work of British child psychologist, D.W. Winnicott, illuminates the consequences of such a childhood; his theories are referenced in the work of compositionists Nancy Welch

(“Other than Oedipus: Sideshow Tales of Dissertation Authority” 34) and Nick Tingle (Self-Development and College Writing) and are explored in depth by psychotherapist Mark Epstein, M.D., in Going on Being. Interpreting Winnicott, Epstein notes: “Children who are forced to cope with intrusive or ignoring parental figures develop a compensatory self that manages their parents’ needs or neglect. This self develops out of a need for survival, but the price that is paid is a high one” (214). In response to meeting the needs of parents who are either very intrusive or consistently absent, the child loses his or her sense of “going on being,” a state Winnicott describes as “a stream of unimpeded awareness, ever evolving, yet with continuity, uniqueness, and integrity” (Epstein 31). This state of going on being does not imply a “fixed entity of self” but involves a person interacting with others in healthy ways with neither a contracted or reactive ego.

Winnicott found that the ability to go on being is sacrificed when a child takes on the responsibility for meeting the parents’ needs, as many children in splintered families are forced to do after one parent dies or disappears. The surviving parent often withdraws into silent grief or transfers his or her needs to the oldest or most capable child, whose own needs go underground. As a result of losing the capacity for going on being, Epstein notes, “the child loses confidence in himself or herself. Falseness and unreality replace aliveness and vitality” (214), and a chronic sense of self-estrangement, unworthiness, and shame may result, making it difficult for the child to succeed in school, relationships, or work.

Through the power of awareness—a power strengthened through meditation, writing, and a nonintrusive/non-abandoning relationship such as psychotherapy—an

adult child of such parents may begin to change the reactive patterns that once enabled her to survive but are now preventing her from engaging fully in the world. Becoming more aware of words, images, senses, and ideas also fuels good writing, something we teach in first-year composition. Writers need attentive readers, just as students need attentive teachers: “What I seem to be learning about teaching and about parenting is that the most important aspect of either practice is learning to be attentive: to see clearly the concerns of someone else and to respond to those concerns, rather than imposing my own concerns upon my children or my students” (Jessup and Lardner 194). Learning attentiveness, like learning to listen, requires conscious effort and practice, especially for those who have limited experience in being attended to or heard.

As a Harvard-educated psychiatrist and practitioner of Buddhist meditation for more than twenty years, Epstein views meditation as “an effort at re-parenting” (214). By sitting still and paying attention to one’s breath, posture, and thoughts, we retrain the mind to notice and contain whatever arises—to stop the habitual patterns of reacting and running away. Rather than interfering or abandoning, as the problematic parent-child relationship reinforced, “the reactive mind gives way to a vast holding capacity” as the person practices holding conflicting thoughts and emotions, embracing ambivalence (214). Epstein learned that “change did not come from trying to get rid of [his] problems or from going into them more deeply. It came from accepting what was true about [himself] and working from there” (23). Sustained meditative practices such as sitting meditation or journal-writing tend to strengthen what Epstein calls the “healing power of awareness,” whose fruits are “buoyancy, pliancy, adaptability, and proficiency of mind and body” (215)—fruits which allow the person to regain balance in an ever-changing

and often unfriendly world. Perhaps our students are reaching for balance and composure when they bring their grief to our attention in their texts; like Epstein, they are accepting what is true about their lives and writing new scripts for their futures.

Becoming aware of how we're constantly reacting to life instead of tapping into the grace of "going on being" is crucial to breaking the patterns of self-loathing and shame that result from feeling abandoned, invisible or unwanted. Like Epstein, I have learned, first-hand, the long-term benefits of having both a positive therapeutic relationship and a daily meditation practice supported by a community of practitioners. Equally beneficial for me has been writing, a practice I have used intermittently since my third grade diary and more deliberately in recent years at the urging of my therapist. After years of anxiety and alcoholism rooted in and reflective of what Buddhist psychotherapist Tara Brach calls "the trance of unworthiness," I discovered that writing to my therapist—in the middle of the night, pages and pages and pages—enables me to speak the unspeakable and to survive having someone read it and know, someone to help me bear and bare the load of grief and fear. While writing itself may be physically and emotionally restorative, the act of releasing it to a real audience, especially a trusted reader, is key to the process of transformation and healing.

Despite unprecedented advances in technology and communication worldwide, millions of people live in fear of violence in their homes, neighborhoods, schools, and cities. In their concern for local and global peace, scholars across the disciplines are exploring the chronic distrust that threatens human survival. While their nomenclatures vary, each discipline describes the dangers of disharmony and the benefits of practicing internal and external balance as we respond to what arises in our lives: gain or loss or the

vast gray area in between. For instance, neurologist Antonio Damasio refers to the importance of human balance, or state of well-being, as “homeostasis” and links it to the cellular level via thoughts, feelings, and visceral reactions—something he says we should attend more closely if we want to be healthy (35, 271). Similarly, Quaker educator Parker J. Palmer asks teachers to embody a state of grace as we teach toward wholeness, healing, and empowerment (25). Sports psychologists agree that grace is also necessary for entering “the zone,” the state in which athletes (and writers) forget themselves and exceed their boundaries: “One defining characteristic of the zone . . . is that it is effortless and unpredictable, a kind of state of grace. You cannot get into the zone through an act of will; you can only prepare the ground for it to happen” (Cooper 5). To prepare the ground, athletes must cultivate skill, devotion, and immersion similar to that practiced by writers devoted to embodied writing. As they practice running or writing or shooting hoops, they develop a passion for detail and concentration and momentarily transcend themselves when they enter the zone, as John McPhee illustrates in his book about U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley’s basketball career at Princeton (Cooper 6).

Psychologists and compositionists extend the definition of this state of harmonic convergence and its value to writers. Several decades after Winnicott documented the benefits of “going on being,” Chicago psychology professor Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi wrote Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. Csikszentmihalyi defines “flow” as a human condition of deep concentration, superior performance, emotional buoyancy, and lack of self-consciousness (Cooper 1). This state of flow or intuitive knowledge may emerge from “felt sense,” the body-mind connection that fuels thought and language and is accessed by paying attention to our visceral reactions (Perl 2). Noticing our “felt

sense” may facilitate the creative condition known variously as McPhee’s zone, Csikszentmihalyi’s flow, Winnicott’s going on being, Parker’s state of grace, or Damasio’s homeostasis. In every discipline, these harmonic conditions yield memorable performances and arise as a consequence of attending to body, mind, and spirit.

Whatever we call the balance, such harmonic conditions are not constant. They are triggered, variously, by things falling apart, a real or perceived fall from grace in a particular community, a real or perceived loss of home or parent, or a state of exile that reminds us we are human and vulnerable and therein connected to other beings. Theorists across disciplines agree that intermittent conditions of “groundlessness” are ideal for learning and growth and that most first-year composition students enter college in this hallowed but harrowing space. For one who loses a mother or father before college, “the solid ground beneath one’s feet no longer exists, and that which held things together and made them solid and secure is gone” (Harris 14). Sharing their losses in a college writing class allows bereaved students to exit the silent ground of grief and join the common ground of story-telling.

Writing Toward Faith and Forgiveness

“There is no magic answer to loss . . . But loss is transformative if it is met with faith. Faith is our chance to make sense of loss, to cope with the stone that rolls around in the hollow of our stomach when something we loved, something we thought was forever is suddenly gone.”

Rabbi David Wolpe, Making Loss Matter, 6

Story-telling keeps the dead alive and connects the survivors to each other by enabling them to create new ways of living, especially in war-torn communities. In two decades of interviewing survivors in Mozambique and other war zones, medical anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom has found that telling their stories of traumatic loss to

listeners who can absorb and act on them provides a creative lifeline—a pathway forward—for bereaved family members (15). When telling is impossible, writing serves the same life-saving function for those ravaged by war: “stories can save us” (O’Brien 225). After author Tim O’Brien returned home from fighting in Vietnam, he never spoke much about the war in “ordinary conversations” but he “talks about it nonstop” in his writing (157). Telling and writing stories “seemed a natural, inevitable process, like clearing the throat. Partly catharsis, partly communication, it was a way of grabbing people by the shirt and explaining exactly what had happened to me, how I’d allowed myself to get dragged into a wrong war, all the mistakes I’d made, all the terrible things I had seen and done” (158). While he does not see his work as “therapy,” he has realized in recent years that “the act of writing [has] led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse. By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself.”

A similar process happens with students and grief writing: in describing their lives before, during, and after a traumatic loss, they gain some distance from the actual event and begin to see their lives differently. Natifa wrote an essay comparing the war zones in Bosnia and Germany to her ghetto neighborhood in Atlanta, where she lost her father to AIDS and her brother to murder. Reflecting on her earlier writing, Natifa notes: “I’ve learned a lot in writing about my life and my parents. If I didn’t write,” she says, pausing and sighing, “I probably wouldn’t know anything. I’d be living or thinking blindly. I wouldn’t have clarity on things that were happening.”

Without story-telling, we tend to forget our ties to our ancestors and deceased family members whose life stories might inspire and balance our own if only we

remembered. We tend to forget that surviving loss requires faith, which Wolpe defines as the “counteragent” to despair (12) and “the assurance that there is a dream and a purpose in life that each person can fulfill” (71). Surviving great loss depends on our ability to remain open to love and trust, our willingness to develop faith in ourselves and in others so that we work together to create more healthy, productive communities.

Responding with faith in periods of loss, for Zen writer and meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg, has more to do with courage than with religious beliefs: “Whether faith is connected to a deity or not, its essence lies in trusting ourselves to discover the deepest truths on which we can rely” (xiii). In her 2002 book on faith, Salzberg details her journey from a childhood triply traumatized by the disappearance of her father when she was 4, the sudden death of her mother five years later, and the silence imposed on her by grandparents who never spoke of the deceased parents. Salzberg awakens as an adult to the joy of living in the present moment and practicing mindfulness meditation with others on similar journeys. To live and act with faith means learning to care about people so that understanding and loving are not diminished in the process of letting go (88).

Considering the often unspoken losses that college students bring to a writing class, what may we do to practice and encourage balance, to facilitate equilibrium in a violent, fearful culture? What words and gestures may we offer our students and each other in the face of grief, knowing that faith and hope waver and that writing—according to Elie Wiesel, Elizabeth Dewberry, Hurlbert and Blitz—is an act of faith? Of courage? Of love?

Resentment, self-blame, and regret related to grief tend to rob us of what is happening in the present moment, but it may be difficult in the midst of mourning or its

aftermath to feel anything else. Revisiting the scene of traumatic loss emotionally or physically may move us closer to the forgiveness and grace that reconnect us to living. At first, it seems impossible to appreciate the traumatic groundlessness that sometimes triggers a state of grace, defined by American author Anne Morrow Lindbergh as “an inner harmony, essentially spiritual, which can be translated into outward harmony” (18). Orphaned students often experience a disjoint between their inner, abandoned self and their outward, academic appearance, and if they feel safe enough to revisit their grief as part of a composition class, they may find ways to forgive the lost parent and return to a state of grace.

If we view grace as a state of “devotion and integrity, of living harmoniously, of being looked at not as someone who is perfect, but as someone that others trust and respect,” then we may consider a “fall from grace” a failure (Some 21). Falling means losing a part of ourselves, “but this is the process by which we make space for the birth of something new, something more true to ourselves” (22). Echoing DeSalvo, Some insists that a breakdown leads to new life: “Something needs to be broken in order for a new state of grace to be born. It is the natural cycle of our spirit.” In order to achieve our life’s purpose or become self-actualized human beings, “we must be willing to fall out of grace and accept its lessons. When we feel righteous about ourselves, or deny our brokenness, we are fighting against higher states of grace that await us” (22). She sees losing someone we love as “an initiation” into a different life, because losing a loved one forces “all our relations with other people and ourselves” to shift as we “become a new person” (140). Even as our hearts are breaking, the spirit of the departed remains, and “through that spirit love continues to flow, helping to show us the way, if we allow it, to

the higher states of grace and wisdom we were born to reach” (140). Allowing students to return to their past and revise it through writing may initiate for them an awareness of the spirit that remains and put them in touch with the wisdom within themselves, as Chaja discovers in her poem to her mother.

Experiencing loss, failure, or other setbacks can be a gift that jolts us awake. Instead of clenching against sorrow or trying to repress it, the poet Rumi wants us to welcome “the crowd of sorrows” that comes uninvited to wake us up, to embrace them in faith that they will bring new insights or delights (Kornfield xix). Most of us take life for granted when living in a state of harmony; falling out of grace shakes us up and reconnects us to the larger universe. Coming in and out of grace is not just an individual journey, for the work of coming back into grace requires the participation of others.

For those who lose a mother or father during childhood, forgiving the parent becomes integral to developing self-awareness and empathy as an adult, as Caplan found in three case studies in the early 1990s. Being more forgiving allows the adult survivor to stave off residual anger and to preserve what is left of the relationship with the deceased parent or period of life. As Alice Walker reminded her Georgia audience at a “Writing the Rural” conference in 1997, she would not have been allowed as a young, black woman in her 20s to enter the Baptist university chapel where she was now standing at the podium as an honored speaker. To return to her home state of Georgia at age 53 and speak from an educational space that she had been denied earlier, she had to practice forgiveness: “If you don’t forgive, you can’t fly.”

In her award-winning memoir about surrendering her newborn son for adoption at 16, creative writing professor Karen McElmurray describes her own mother loss at age

14 and her lifelong struggles with grief, depression, drug abuse, and a desire for wholeness. Throughout the story, McElmurray references the healing power of memory and of writing and how she suffered as a teenager before she learned the power of putting words on paper. She notes the “grief that won’t let go” and her tendency to “always write about home” (198), although she says she is “not entirely sure where home is in space and time. I’ve begun to suspect that home has an amorphous definition, akin to blood and bone, as insubstantial as ether” (220). After surviving a serious car accident in her 40s, McElmurray discovers forgiveness and grace, which she defines as “a divine virtue coming from God; it is mercy, pardon; it is a privilege, a reprieve, a breath-fine moment before we are forever lost” (235). Soon after this realization, she reconnects with her relinquished son after his fiancée sees McElmurray’s book on the Internet and emails the author to inquire about the details of his birth and adoption. The two reunite and continue to write and visit today.

When a home has disintegrated due to death, divorce, abuse, or neglect, the consequences may seem insurmountable. Like the motherless narrator in The Secret Life of Bees who depends on her nanny and the beekeeping women for comfort, we find surrogates. I did the same as a troubled teen in a small town, taking refuge in the wooded retreat of my teachers who did not have children of their own but made space for me for many years. When we fall from grace, we survive with the encouragement of caring others. A healing web of support often remains out of reach for those who are isolated and unable to tell or write their traumatic stories—another reason for college writing teachers to create spaces for such telling.

On Teaching, Testimony, and Crisis

“Teaching in itself, teaching as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps *not truly taught* . . . In the era of the Holocaust, of Hiroshima, of Vietnam—in the age of testimony—teaching, I would venture to suggest, must in turn *testify*, make something happen, and not just transmit a passive knowledge, pass on information that is preconceived, substantified, believed to be known in advance, misguidedly believed, that is, to be (exclusively) a *given*.”

Shoshana Felman, “Education and Crisis,” 53 (italics hers)

Invited or not, sorrows well up and seep into students’ talk and texts, and writing teachers face choices about how to respond: Will we pretend we didn’t hear? Will we silence the stories that make us uncomfortable and in so doing, compound or reenforce students’ traumatic experiences? Will we discourage such writing and telling, trying to avoid crisis in ourselves and our classrooms? Or will we acknowledge, in theory and practice, that education at its best focuses on *what is* and on what is *relevant* in students’ lives and in the world—which for many students is fear, loss, illness, violence, poverty, or discrimination—knowing that such a focus may be unsettling, temporarily, for students and teachers?

I am convinced that we have an ethical obligation to listen and respond to our students’ stories, no matter how difficult. If we do not feel “properly trained” to handle what arises, then we need to broaden our understanding of psychology and seek further preparation. Historians do not shy away from teaching the horrors of the Holocaust or the sadistic nature of slavery because it makes people uncomfortable, nor should writing teachers shy away from the sad or traumatic stories of our students’ lives. The way teachers create spaces for and react to students’ embodied stories of loss may initiate

healing and transformation among individuals and groups. Writing and telling what they have lost or suffered gives students a chance to bring their griefs to light and to reconfigure them in ways that may be transformative. Such writing and telling should be a student's choice and not required, for "the quest of finding meaning in suffering can only be undertaken oneself; to prescribe this quest to others is arrogance" (Frank 180). The challenge for teachers, then, is to create safe spaces for disclosure so that students who choose to bring their traumatic losses to light may do so, while those who are listening may witness and respond to these students and their testimonies in ways that feel safe and contained.

When students choose to disclose their experiences of death and other traumatic loss, transformation may be set in motion both for them and for those who are listening and bearing witness—those who, as psychiatrist Dori Laub suggests, become "a co-owner of the traumatic event," for "through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself" (57). While the listener may "come to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels," he also is "a separate human being and will experience hazards and struggles of his own, while carrying out his function" of listener/witness of traumatic testimony (58). The teacher and students who are listening to someone's traumatic loss must remember that they are "overlapping" with the survivor's experience but will not "become" the survivor if they are paying attention to both the person's testimony and to their own inner conflicts in the process. The result, then, is bearing witness to the process of bearing witness, something teachers and peers do in writing classes every day as we listen to each other's stories and silences—as we wait for what is not yet spoken or written—and as we notice our own

embodied reactions to what we are witnessing.

When the loss is significant, as in the literal or symbolic death of a parent, students may need to reconstruct their past and re-imagine their sense of home and identity in order to express their grief and begin to find hope. Such expressions tend to be incomplete and belabored in fits and starts as testifying to traumatic memory tends to be a tricky process; patience and attentive listening are essential to enabling testimony. Undertaking the reconstruction of home or identity in a class with others who have overcome similar struggles helps students begin to integrate their past and present circumstances, a process which facilitates hope and healing. Without hope, their chances of surviving or thriving in college and beyond are slim, for “hope and other emotions powerfully influence thinking, impact perceptions and decision-making” (Groopman 194). True hope “brings reality into sharp focus” (198) and “tempers fear so we can recognize dangers and then bypass or endure them” (199). Without hope, we and our students may be ill-equipped to meet whatever arises as we are preoccupied with old (and often inaccurate) scripts of homelessness and abandonment, or we suffer from dead mother syndrome, which is common among college students who are struggling with real or imagined fears of leaving home and losing not only their parents but themselves.

If we allow students to write narratives of any sort, we are ethically obligated to meet, humanely, the stories they offer, to teach the whole person just as Harvard Medical School now educates doctors to treat not only disease but “the sufferer's soul” using “the medicine of friendship,” as Groopman advocates in *The Anatomy of Hope* (93, 135). We are obligated to respond not only to a student's texts but to the student herself, to not turn away from her pain, and to remain aware of the ways in which our own ungrieved losses

are triggered when we read the losses of others. Because grief is recursive, we should remain mindful that the process of transforming it and finding hope and home requires an ongoing, collaborative effort—something that cannot be done in isolation but requires faith and empathetic witnesses.

Implications for Composition Studies and Future Research

Now that my dissertation is drawing to a close, I can see more clearly the contribution it makes to the field of composition: this is the first comprehensive, interdisciplinary review of current research on the subject of writing and telling grief and the first to offer reflections, years later, from orphaned students who chose, in first-year composition, to write and tell of their losses. My dissertation gives writing teachers access to much of the literature they may not have seen otherwise and contextualizes it within the scholarship of our field and the practical realm of our classrooms. Because my study is both embodied and theoretical—describing the physical situations in which grief writing occurs and the psychological and physiological consequences of such disclosure for students—it offers teachers insights into the potential benefits of encouraging such writing, despite our discomfort. It identifies for readers the broader cultural and academic locations of grief before moving in to reveal the ramifications of welcoming or silencing sorrow in the composition classroom and in individual students' lives. In taking grief out of the closet and into the academic spotlight, I normalize it; in showing how writing and telling traumatic losses often leads to a healthy sense of home, hope, and identity, I integrate the intellectual and therapeutic processes that facilitate wholeness.

Since loss and grief are inevitable and articulating them usually leads to healthier lives and relationships, I think teachers should prepare themselves to meet such

stories as they arise. Students should not be required to write about their grief but should be encouraged to write from their lives and to choose their own subjects, ever aware that their texts will be read by peers and assessed by teachers. As a result of my research, I am better-equipped to deal with the traumatic memories and fears that surface in my students' papers; I do not try to fix them, as I trust the process of self- and group-healing that happens when students immerse themselves in embodied writing and emerge with revised texts that they feel compelled to share as a means of testifying to what happened, is happening, and may happen yet. This process of writing, telling, and transforming sorrow is as common as the processes of composing we have taught for years and should be accepted and embraced as such. It is as common as the cycle of composting that happens continually in nature, where magnolia seeds become buds and then bloom, die, decay, and fertilize the soil for next year's fragrant blossoms.

In light of these findings, I offer the following suggestions for the discipline:

1. Graduate students in English Studies at both the master's and doctoral levels should receive more intensive training in theories of trauma, narrative, psychology, and sociology as part of the required curriculum. Incorporating these interdisciplinary readings into courses such as "Teaching Writing" or "Assessing Student Writing" or "Theories of Writing and Healing" would prepare composition teachers to meet the stories of loss and violence that surface in a writing class. In the current climate of war and terrorism, such preparation becomes critical if we are to teach our students how to use writing to help themselves and others. Such training will expose future teachers to the benefits of witnessing loss and the many options for assessing and responding to students' personal stories of loss and survival.

2. Writing program administrators should encourage embodied teaching and writing—the kind that acknowledges, without shame or apology, the bodily realities of students’ and teachers’ lived situations—in an effort to integrate the learner’s body with his or her mind. Such teaching and writing makes learning more relevant and real. When a writer and/or teacher takes into account his or her own physicality and position(s), the results are often more convincing, credible texts. In addition to teaching rhetorical devices and revision strategies, we should be asking students to explore the gaps between what people say and what people do, between the words people speak and the behaviors that follow. Emphasizing only the intellect at the expense of the body can be dangerous, even fatal business, and writing teachers are in a position to model a more integrated approach to learning by bearing witness to body, mind, and spirit.

3. College writing teachers and teachers-in-training should practice more reflective, self-exploratory writing to uncover their biases, unprocessed grief, and prejudices. If left unattended, these silent sorrows and stereotypes will interfere with their abilities to relate to students with equanimity and respect. To develop self-reflective habits, teachers might keep a daily or weekly journal about our teaching lives and share our reflections with trusted colleagues via email or regular coffee breaks. We might practice free-writing with our students in class and occasionally read aloud our unpolished writing, allowing students to see how we, too, struggle for understanding and meaning. Instead of blaming or dismissing students who are habitually tardy, sullen, or disruptive, we might brainstorm a list of possible reasons for their behavior and for our resistance or hostility to them. Reflective writing enables us to open ourselves to multiple options for teaching hard-to-reach or hard-to-manage students.

4. Professional conferences and academic journals should encourage the conversation among teachers of writing, in kindergarten through graduate school, regarding the health and psychological benefits of writing and telling. The leaders in our discipline should acknowledge the historical moment in which we are teaching—the global and local climate of fear, terrorism, and war—and embrace theories and strategies of teaching that facilitate trust, equanimity, and peace. Journal editors could invite submissions for special issues devoted to writing, reading, assessing, and revising grief and other traumas in academic settings. Organizers of regional and national conferences could feature keynote speakers in the burgeoning, interdisciplinary area of writing and healing and urge participants to present papers that explore the physiological and psychological benefits of writing grief and other emotions. Such conversations could lead to more research, which could lead to enhanced theories and practices and more meaningful learning opportunities for students, many of whom are suffering silently.

As I conclude my study, I recognize the need for more research in several areas related to writing, assessing, witnessing, and responding to grief and other emotions in the composition classroom. I would like to see more studies in the following areas:

- explorations of the long-term academic, emotional, and physical consequences of college students writing about injury, illness, rape, and other forms of trauma;
- careful analyses of students writing about grief, identity, and home(lessness), looking specifically at how race, gender, and ethnicity influence their situations and whether or not certain assignments feel like pressure to some students and relief to others;
- examinations of the short- and long-term effects on students and teachers of

bearing witness to traumatic narratives in whole class workshops or peer review groups;

- analyses of the ways in which war, incest, poverty, gang activity, and other forms of cultural violence influence the academic performance of college students who have experienced or witnessed them;
- studies of resilience among first-generation college students who have lost a parent due to divorce, neglect, or abuse to determine how their writing and other factors influence their success in and beyond college, and
- embodied research that explores how the physical environment of a writing class—movable vs. immovable furniture, computerized vs. traditional classrooms, rows vs. circles, tables vs. desks—influences the sense of safety and/or community among students and teachers and the psychological and intellectual risks they are willing to take in the learning process.

Linking Individual and Cultural Grief

Scholars agree that one person's healing or hurting is never just his or her own, for no matter how isolated or hidden an action may be, its consequences reverberate outward in immeasurable ways. In her essay, "Champion of the World," Maya Angelou refers to the historical roots and cultural ramifications of a white woman slapping her maid or a black man being named heavyweight champion of the world; Kubler-Ross asserts that peace between nations depends on individuals coming to grips with their own mortality; O'Reilly reminds us that "personal pain is connected to ancient insult; the wounds of history—racism, war, homophobia, cruelty of all kinds—fester unhealed" (Radical Presence, 38); Brazier suggests that "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); Chodron says that when we learn to respect and be kind to ourselves, “it isn’t just ourselves that we’re discovering. We’re discovering the universe” (75). Nye finds that writing enables people “to sort out and order their experiences and to discover that they share universal feelings” (395). Bleich believes that when individual stories become collective, students and teachers come closer to finding solutions to violence, poverty, and oppression.

When college students enter a class and are encouraged to speak and write from their lives, and to listen to and read the stories of other lives, the potential for individual and cultural transformation becomes real. In her essay forthcoming in the journal Transformations, Lori Amy asserts that the importance of a classroom where students testify and bear witness to each other’s traumatic stories “exceeds its potentially therapeutic value for any individual” and works to transform society (2). Through dialogue and testimony, students open themselves to that which is beyond their own first-hand experience and move beyond that which is familiar as they begin to listen, instead, for unfamiliar images and ideas that tend to disrupt what they know and make room for “new knowledge, new possibilities for seeing and feeling” (2). Citing Kelly Oliver and others, Amy acknowledges that such disruptions may be painful, chaotic, and difficult to contain, but they are necessary in classes where the goal is to wake up and work together to make the world a safer, healthier place for all—something she and I advocate in our article on “Teaching for Peace” in Women’s Studies Quarterly (Amy and Milner).

As a teacher of women’s and gender studies as well as composition, Amy finds

that analyzing oppressive power structures and social inequalities “invokes the individual and cultural traumas present in varying degrees in our communities, states, nations, world – and hence in our students’ lives” (3). The insidious but often invisible forms of violence in American culture—domestic and sexual violence, discrimination, poverty, political and economic inequalities—influence the lives of many of our students. Therefore, “when we ask students to read, think, talk, and write about these issues, we are asking them to do more than analyze the symbolic and structural violences we are studying; we are asking them to encounter these violences in their own and their classmates’ lives” (3). Amy is astounded at the number of students who disclose for the first time, in the context of reading, thinking, and talking about cultural violence, their own traumatic stories:

This speaking about traumatic experiences in and through the public space of the classroom, *for the first time*, is not a rare occurrence: it happens every semester. In the last year and a half, I have had six students speak *for the first time* about rape and gang rape, four about incest, three about anorexia (one of whom, at 83 pounds, broke down in my office . . .), five about abortion, four about sexual orientation, two about self-mutilation, and three about race and poverty issues. And, every semester, there are students in class who could not have imagined that the kinds of things to which their classmates testify really happen in the world. (4)

The knowledge that evolves from these dialogues cannot be separated from the students or the testimonies that inspire it. When we assign texts and invite testimonies about personal and cultural violence and traumatic loss, we must prepare ourselves and

our students for the painful but transformative process of bearing witness to trauma. As Steele reminds us in We Heal From Memory: “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 . . . enables a reconnection between people in the present . . . [and we allow] ourselves to be healed from the past through a healing relationship with another in the present” (9). A first-year writing class in which students are free to choose their subjects for writing creates a fertile environment for such healing connections.

My former students and other adults orphaned as children insist that connecting with people who have similar histories is part of the work of transformation. Grief never goes away, but is transformed if shared. Studies of the long-term benefits of writing and talking with others who suffer similar problems indicate the healing potential for writing groups; such studies have positive implications for exchanging stories in a college classroom, especially in cases where teachers allow students to select the subjects, sources, co-authors, and genres for their writing projects. Although the first-year composition class is not a self-selecting community in the spirit of a 12-step support group, students do share common literacy practices and educational expectations and are drawn to each other through their writing topics.

Orphaned students and other survivors may suffer in isolation and silence until they find someone who can serve effectively as witness, someone who can hear the story of the event and participate in the reliving of it so the survivor can regain her sense of having an internal listener, a “you” inside yourself who cares for you (Steele 9). A silent survivor who has not reconstructed or worked through the trauma may find that her silence “contaminates her life, distorts the memory, makes it—the memory, the life—

evil.” Such contamination may manifest in feelings of separateness from others, an unworthiness or lack, a cold-heartedness, or self-blame for the initial traumatic event, something several students in my Writing and Healing courses mentioned feeling as a result of having been raped, molested, or neglected as children and being unable to tell anyone until now. In their final letters to the class and their evaluations of the course, several students articulated what researchers across the disciplines are insisting: that breaking silence becomes a first step toward healing, physically and emotionally, and toward connecting in healthy ways with others, a step we should invite our students to make when they are ready.

My research reinforces that listening to students’ stories is an act of love, an attempt to save lives, and work worth doing. For hearing a survivor describe the day her mother died enables listeners to reflect on their own attitudes toward life and relationships and to realize that after a parent’s death, everything changes irrevocably. While recollecting the details of death and its aftermath may be difficult, it is also cathartic, comforting and transformational for both writer and witnesses. Communal grieving leads survivors to feel less isolated and more peaceful and creative—something education at its best promotes. In the process of creating something, whether a poem or basket or painting, we focus on something outside ourselves, initiating a “spiritual alchemy” that promotes healing and eases the weight of sadness, as Alice Walker explains in To Hell With Dying. By the time we finish the poem, the basket, or the picture, we feel better, and when we share our creation with others, we open ourselves to more healing connections for the future—a move that could have far-reaching consequences for all of us, in and beyond the writing classroom.

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