



Section One: Narratives about Genre

Getting Personal

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A few years ago I was introduced to an art form known as the personal essay. I call it an art form because the genre can elicit emotions and bring about an awareness as real and as moving as any play, painting, or musical composition. Its purpose is an exploration of self written by and for the author, and when done well, engages readers by including them in the journey. Readers identify with the pain or the joy of the piece, and while the author may not find an answer to the question posed, we all find enlightenment from the effort. That to me is art.

My purpose here is not to offer instruction on how to write the personal essay, but instead to examine what the personal essay has taught me about writing. The uniqueness of this genre is that it allows one to explore one's own strengths and foibles, as well as those of society. It requires the author to implicate herself as well as the reader. That is to say, the personal essayist examines how she is responsible for her own dilemma and also what role society plays in shaping that dilemma. As a result, she must be able to walk the fine line between self-pity and the recognition of forces outside one's control.

I find the examination of self and society, regardless of topic, requires a willingness to be honest with myself as well as the audience who



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reads my work. Unless that honesty makes both the reader and myself uncomfortable with its implication of the role we play in our own fate, then I haven't yet met the criteria of the personal essay. That is the real challenge of this genre—a willingness to explore what we'd rather leave alone and to expose readers to what they may not want to see in themselves but find they are ready to consider when it is presented in a fine work of art, the personal essay.

Of Scott Russell Sander's personal essay, "Under the Influence," Phillip Lopate writes:

His quiet Midwestern modesty and sense of privacy, seemingly at odds with an autobiographical genre that normally attracts flamboyant, self-dramatizing egotists, accounts for some of the essay's tension—as though he would rather not write about himself, but the form demands it. The reflective personal essayist is obliged to dig deep into his psyche and reveal the results, and Sanders shows he is equal to the challenge. (732).

He would rather not write about himself, but the form demands it. This goes to the very essence of the essay. It is a genre that demands writers be willing to write about themselves in a direct, exposed forum, without the cover of the fictional characters and situations one finds in novels or plays.

If I want to discuss what the personal essay has taught me about writing, my inclination is to choose my best work as an example. But it was my essay, "Denial," that opened my eyes to the responsibility that comes with writing. When the personal essayists experience discomfort at starting a piece, they can be well assured they are on the right track. But once you choose a topic, you must be willing to commit yourself completely. If not, your paper becomes a narrative, a recounting of events, and no matter how riveting, it is not a personal essay if you are unwilling, or unable, to explore it in depth.

I finally let go of the job I had struggled so long to keep. There's something about being a member of the working class and finding yourself among the working poor that puts your life in perspective. You have little time to recognize or even cope with the loss of a job. Your first priority is to meet your financial responsibilities in any manner available to you. When I left my job I had no options for work save the world of temp services—minimum wage, no benefits, and no long-term security.

The recounting of my experience as a victim (yes, VICTIM) of sexual harassment in the work place was little more than a narrative of events. As much as I tried to implicate myself, as much as I wanted to hold

accountable the societal norms that allowed harassment to continue, I could not go beneath the surface. Twenty-five years later the wound was too raw to expose, and I failed at meeting the criteria of the genre. Writing is about commitment to your purpose. It's about meeting the expectations of your readers, making them feel it was worth the effort to spend their time with you. There are many avenues I could have used to recall that time in my life, but the personal essay was not the genre I should have chosen because I wasn't willing to dig deep enough into the experience. The time of the reader was ill spent, and the end result was to ask, "Why did I read this?" I know this to be true because I'm the one asking the question three years later.

As a genre of composition, the personal essay is a means by which writers may grow by building trust in themselves. The most polished composition skills will mean little to writers who do not believe that their own views and value system are worthy of expression. I know for me the result of studying this particular genre was a new found trust in my ability to express myself in a clear and coherent manner.

The Personal Essay and Me

I've used the personal essay as a means of exploring my own issues from the loss of a parent, to struggles with self image, and stagnation in the workplace. But the essay goes beyond what one would find in one's personal journal or even in a narrative recalling a particular event. The personal essay considers how issues relate to the reader. It looks at where to take responsibility for our actions as well as looking at how forces outside our control impact the decision-making process. My essay, "Last Week," was more than a recounting of events that took place during the last week of my mother's life. It was an exploration of the guilt I felt for not grieving more, for *not* being devastated by the loss.

I learned early that death is inevitable, and as a consequence, the thought of my mother's death was with me throughout my life. I believed my life would crumble without her in this world. I imagined the circumstances of our final days and hours together. I would be at her side, holding her hand as she quietly drifted away. I would have "monstrous bruises on my knees from falling on them after I walked into [her] room and first saw her dead" (Strayed 291). The very core of my being would be irrevocably damaged. I would feel this constant physical ache. That's how I expected it to be, how I knew it should be for someone who lost the love of her life. But instead, I was asleep next to my lover, already starting my new life without her.

I wanted to understand my reaction to her death, but I also needed to look at the people around me, what I expected of them, when they met my needs, and when they failed me. This was not a piece about blame; it was about coming to an understanding of the healing process, what

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it means to grieve, why it is acceptable to expect what you may never receive because society and family, may not, cannot always be there for you.

I called my brother from work. I could hear my mother moaning in the background. I laughed, not a nervous laugh, certainly not a ‘that’s so funny’ laugh, but a ‘now you know’ laugh. You’re with her now, doing the right thing—filling the role I’ve filled for the last 15 years. Giving me relief from the responsibility of caring for her, but it’s too late. There’s a part of me that doesn’t want you there. You should have been there before, when she would have known it was you, when she would have known that even if I wasn’t with her, someone else who loved her was. And now it’s too late for both of us, and so I laugh.

This essay worked because I committed to the piece. I wrote, not just for me, but for the reader as well. I gave readers a reason to spend their time with me.

Drafts and Revisions

Titles are important to me. I find my best work always has come from the title. I should rename this piece “Second Draft.”

After reading my first draft, I was given one revision, “Rewrite this. You argue that the personal essay has taught you to trust yourself and then proceed to spend over half of your paper quoting other authors.” Although I argued that writing is about more than stringing together quotes and conclusions from published works, the piece ended up being what I thought others would want to read rather than what I wanted to say. Following is an excerpt from my first draft where I expound on the work of Scott Russell Saunders’ essay, “Under the Influence.”

Sanders writes, “I do not wish to compete for a trophy in suffering. I am only trying to understand the corrosive mixture of helplessness, responsibility, and shame that I learned to feel as the son of an alcoholic” (734). He doesn’t stop with an exploration of his own issues. He implicates the reader as he recalls society’s moral condemnations of the evils of drinking as well as its abandonment of alcoholism’s victims.

Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink, wrote Isaiah (737).

We saw the bruised children of these fathers clump onto our school bus, we saw the abandoned children huddle in the pews at church, we saw the stunned and battered mothers begging for help at our doors (739).

Sanders implicates himself when he acknowledges that recognizing his flaws has not meant that he could repair them. He sees his son taking on the same burden and adapting the same behaviors he did at that age in response to his father's addiction. "I write, therefore, to drag into the light what eats at me—the fear, the guilt, the shame—so that my own children may be spared" (744).

While I learned early on the skills I need to write correctly—grammar, punctuation, referencing, I never learned to trust myself as a writer until I was exposed to the personal essay. For all this genre has to offer the reader, its absolute requisite that we trust ourselves as writers is its most valuable contribution to the field of composition. Ironically, I still believed the only way to show the value of the personal essay was to look at an author who had already proven himself. I didn't trust my own skill to make the argument that we as writers must trust ourselves. That changed with this revision. I went back and pulled those quotes from writers such as Pickering and Sanders and replaced them with my own work. (And if you think that was easy, you are over-estimating the size of this person's ego.)

Writing is about risk. It's about trust. It's about our willingness to put our thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions out there for the world to see. The personal essay is a genre that expects, even demands, nothing less than our full and personal commitment to the process.

When I was an acting student, I confessed to my instructor that I had based my performance on the work of the actress who played the role on stage. He commended me saying, "a good actor is one who is willing to take and learn from the great actors." In that vein, here are the works of some of the essayists who had the most profound impact on me as a writer. They include Jo Ann Beard's *The Boys of My Youth*, Lucy Grealy's "Mirrorings: A gaze upon my reconstructed face," Ann Patchett's "Love Sustained," Adam Gopnik's "Bumping Into Mr. Ravioli," and David Sedaris' *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. I encourage you find these authors and revel in their words. From that will come your finest work.

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