

## On Fists, Faith, and Forgiveness: Turning Chaos into Craft

- Kelly Beard

“Why are you writing this memoir?” The question dogged me from the moment I’d started to write it, three years before entering the Master of Fine Arts program at Vermont College of Fine Arts. I’d attended a writers’ conference that summer. The workshop, titled “Spiritual Memoir,” was run and attended by mostly privileged white women. Two men were in our midst. One was a Baptist minister; the other was a 30-something-year-old. He and I were the only ones who hadn’t grown up middle-to-upper-middle class. We were outliers. He was a trust-fund legatee who’d grown up in a mansion he compared without apparent irony to the Coliseum. I’d grown up in first-world poverty. He’d written about leaving Wall Street (after making several million dollars as a hedge-fund manager) to marry a beautiful psychiatrist, and “giving it all up” (the hedge-fund job, not the trust-fund, presumably) to move to the beach and write his memoir. The workshop leader gushed at his story. “I see this in the bookstores now!” She said. The other women enthused with her. I felt a churn of envy but also annoyance, as he nodded, utterly unsurprised, wholly deserving of the adoration.

When I read a paragraph from my work aloud - something about eating Crisco and sugar sandwiches on white bread or speaking in tongues – my situation placed me both literally and metaphorically on the opposite side of the table from the trust-fund writer and the teacher. No one said anything for thirty seconds or so. Finally, the workshop leader took a breath and said, “So, Kelly, can you tell us why you’re writing this memoir?”

Of course I couldn't. I didn't know what I wanted to say, let alone why I wanted to say it. Instead of answering with what I knew to be true, I hid behind motherhood. Maybe it was just for my daughter, I said. The other women nodded, understanding the need to communicate a shrouded past to the person loved best. It wasn't the truth, although I thought it was truer then than I do now. The truth would mean exposing the drive to put my lived experience on the page, a drive that shamed and confused me. It seemed arrogant. Why would anyone in our glamour-glutted culture care about a story of first-world poverty, a story shot through with a hard faith and violent family? Especially when the story offers no rags-to-riches fable or belatedly discovered royal heritage?

I'd unwittingly accepted the perspective famously attributable to literary critics Susan Sontag and William Gass, both of whom caustically derided memoir written by "nobodies," and bemoaned with erudite acidity the absurdity, the gall, of people without privilege, celebrity, or prodigious accomplishment treating the genre as some populist endeavor. In his craft book *To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction*, Philip Lopate calls writing a "monstrously arrogant act." This apparently pervasive perspective on writing may be one reason bookstore shelves stay crammed with celebrity memoirs but are nearly devoid of memoir written about experiences similar to mine. It kept me from the page for decades.

Despite having absorbed the implicit sanction against "nobodies" writing memoir, I couldn't escape the bone-deep need to capture my experience on the page. The need prompted me to another year ignoring the "why" question, focusing instead on trying to learn the craft. I deconstructed dozens of memoirs, took on-line courses, and read craft

books. Vivian Gornick's *The Situation and the Story*, in particular, helped me begin to understand the distinction between what I'd been writing and what the genre demanded. I'd been writing scenes, what Gornick calls the "situation" without writing the "story." Still, I couldn't find a way to bring my "emotional experience ... the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say[,]” onto the page. The genre, as Gornick described it, essentially required me to capture that elusive answer on the page. That realization allowed me to glimpse the connection between learning the "how" and the "why" of the genre. At that point, I decided to enroll in an MFA program.

During my first residence at VCFA, my workshop leaders were Sue William Silverman and Robert Vivian, talented writers who addressed a plethora of problems I shared with many of the other students around the table. Most of us wanted to say something important without knowing for certain what we wanted to say. Few of us seemed entitled to write our stories, if viewed from the Sontag/Gass perspective. Some of us worried about invading others' privacy. All of us struggled with how to deepen our work with the kind of emotional resonance and wisdom typically designated the "reflective voice" in memoir.

As I learned more about reflective voice, it reminded me of my first week in law school. I remembered sitting with dozens of other neophyte law students trying to learn how to apply the "IRAC" formula (the acronym standing for "Issue, Rule, Analysis, Conclusion") when writing legal briefs. The instructor provided increasingly complicated fact patterns and conflicting case law after which students had to write legal briefs using the IRAC formula. In short, we figured out which facts were relevant and

which were extraneous, found the applicable legal rule, then wrote why we thought the rule applied to the excised facts in a particular way to compel our conclusion. It struck me that the analysis portion of the IRAC formula somewhat parallels reflective voice in memoir. The analogy isn't perfect, of course, but seeing the similarities helped me grapple with reflective voice.

As I continued to tackle the task of writing with reflective voice, I read Sue William Silverman's craft book, *Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir*. Silverman distinguishes between the situation (scene) and the story (deeper reflection) by designating the former as the "Voice of Innocence" and the later as the "Voice of Experience." She illustrates this distinction with the metaphor of a person staring out a dark window at night. The person staring out the window sees her own reflection, Silverman writes, but it is not simply her own reflection, she also sees the larger world beyond her reflection: "Memoir is not simply a mirrored image of oneself. Rather, you, as the memoirist, examine yourself as if in the glass of a window: yes, you see yourself, but you also witness a larger world outside – one that's superimposed over your reflection."

During my first semester at VCFA I worked with a brilliant writer-and-teacher, Cynthia Huntington. She also posed the "why" question, but at that point it no longer seemed to carry an implicit sanction, or perhaps I simply heard it differently after the residency's lectures and craft books I'd consumed. I heard it as a reminder of what the genre requires. In large part, the writer answers the "why" question for herself and the reader through her crafted use of reflective voice. The alchemy of memoir occurs when

the writer does more than pin the facts of her experience to the page; the magic happens when we, as readers, see the writer's lived experience through the eyes of the *other* – the greater world, as well as her own older, wiser self.

My reading led me to observe that as a general rule, memoirs about early trauma or deprivations tend to focus on shorter temporal periods. Additionally, they tend to contain less reflective voice than memoirs about more privileged pasts. For example, on one end of the spectrum, Mary Karr's bestselling memoir *The Liar's Club*, and Frank Conroy's acclaimed *Stop Time*, contain relatively little reflective voice, while at the other end of the spectrum, Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation of a Memory*, and Edward Said's *Out of Place*, are so saturated with self-reflection as to slip occasionally into self-absorption.

When I happened upon *Townie*, by Andre Dubus III, I discovered a compelling story of early trauma and class deprivation infused with unobtrusive reflective voice. Dubus doesn't shrink from showing the ugly underbelly of his early experience, yet the work carries as a counterweight throughout the long-range perceptions of a mature narrator's insight. Although Dubus arguably had a rags-to-riches story to tell given the success of his fictional works during the decades prior to writing his memoir, that wasn't the story he told. Instead, he'd written a coming of age story about growing up working class in a Massachusetts mill town. Temporally, he focused on his life as a teenager and young man, with a fast-forward at the end to his father's death nearly two decades later. He wrote about developing a "near pathological drive" to protect his siblings and mother after his writer-father Andre Dubus semi-abandoned his family, resulting in the family's decline into poverty and struggle to negotiate an insistent violent environment. Dubus

III's self-loathing and drive to protect himself and his family – despite being little more than a child himself – prompted him to engage in a regime of bodybuilding, boxing, and punishing physical exercise in his quest to become his stranded family's protector.

The changes in his physique were reflected in his psyche. What began as a desire to protect himself and his loved ones from being victimized morphed into a secretly harbored infatuation with violence, and turned the young Andre from fearful victim and witness into a perpetrator of violence. While at the time he rationalized his behavior as necessary to protect the more vulnerable, his victimization of the victimizers became increasingly violent, changing him into someone nearly unrecognizable to himself – someone who'd destroyed faces and lives with his fists, who'd nearly killed several other young men in the course of his ostensible vigilantism, and who finally came to recognize the deadening effect violence was having on his life and the lives of others trying to survive the brutality of first-world poverty.

Dubus threads *Townie's* cinematic narrative with the Voice of Experience in a seamless and unobtrusive weave. He uses metaphor that resonates as organic and uncontrived; reveals private pain – his own and his family's – without seeming invasive or voyeuristic. He reckons with the spiritual dimension without sounding didactic or having his work marginalized. The desire to learn more about his approach and technique prompted me to send him an email asking if I could interview him. He graciously agreed.

We met at VCFA during the Postgraduate Writers Conference. Before beginning the interview, we chatted off-tape a bit. I asked about his writing practice, his approach to writing memoir, and whether he viewed writing as an act of arrogance.

*Dubus: Writing is an act of humility. The writing is larger than the writer. Whenever I've set out to say something, I've strangled it, reduced it, minimized it. My writing has always gone better – whether it's creative nonfiction or fiction – if I just let it go where it needs to go. Which means that almost immediately I have to let go of my desire to say something, my desire to make it what I want – it's like having a kid. You can't make the kid be someone he or she isn't. So that's my larger philosophical belief, which comes not from reading about it, but from doing it my whole adult life daily, and I haven't swayed in my belief about this in over thirty years of writing. It's not about the writer. It's not about what you want. It's about what starts to happen under your pencil. And so, my approach is to get daily into as receptive a state as possible.*

*Q: How do you do that?*

*Dubus: I read an essay by poet William Stafford about this where he said that a poet, before writing, must put herself into a state of openness and receptivity. He said in this essay, you know you're being receptive when, number one, you accept anything that comes, no matter what it is, which is easier said than done. And number two, and this is downright un-American, we must also, in order to be truly receptive, we must be willing to fail. Americans aren't geared that way. We're taught to have goals. We want to be successful. And so it's very important, I think, to go into the writing with a sense of*

*recklessness and abandon and nerve. Let go of any hope for a worldly reward or financial gain. You must let go of that shit.*

As I'd worked through editing and generating my own material during my tenure at VCFA, I'd glimpsed this truth as well. I'd started to realize, without quite articulating it, that my desire to say something of consequence doused my ability to do so. If I didn't learn anything else from interviewing Dubus, I'd be grateful for this lesson alone. It serves as a lovely reminder to start each writing session with a sense of humility and gratitude, to pay attention to the work rather than my ego, and to accept failure with grace, recognizing it as the truest teacher.

Writing memoir requires grappling with character development in ways similar to yet distinct from other genres. Similar to writing fiction, we want to reveal our characters' complications and contradictions. Distinct from fiction, however, our characters are *real* people. At the very least, this fact raises legal implications. For most of us, however, the legal analysis provides an incomplete governor. Instead, particularly in coming of age memoirs, writers struggle with the Gordian knot of family secrets. In my own work-in-progress, for example, I'd struggled over a scene about my sister. Legally, I believed I was entitled to include the scene. Morally, I felt conflicted. I asked Dubus about this dilemma.

*Q: How did you decide how much you reveal about your family?*

*Dubus: My friend Richard Russo helped me with that. I was turning 50. Richard Dreyfus, the actor, said that when a man turns 50 he's probably closer to his grave than his high school graduation. So I thought, well, maybe this won't even be a book, but for years I've been trying to write about this material -- growing up in a mill town, single mom, early seventies, Vietnam limping to a finish, the drugs, the alcohol, the violence -- for years, I've been trying to write about this but it never worked. Okay, now it's coming. I don't want to write this, though. But, you know what? My kids can read it. My three kids. They can read it when they're ready. They'll know more about their old man, they'll know more about their family. So I finish a draft, and by the time I'm done, I've put so much work into it, I think, I don't know, maybe it should be a book. So I send it to my editor and she said, "Well, it's very interesting, all this violent stuff, but didn't you live with people?" "Uh, yeah." "Why don't you write about your family?" I said, "I don't want to invade their privacy." She said, "But isn't it your story, too?"*

*I knew she was right. A week or so later, I was at a literary event with Richard Russo and I told him about what my editor said. I told him I knew she was right, but I was torn about where the line is. It's one thing to shine a light on my own privacy, but it's something else to shine it on someone else's. He gave the greatest advice. He said, "If it were me, I'd ask myself whether I was trying to hurt anybody with this book? Am I trying to settle any scores? If the answer's 'yes,' I wouldn't write it. Or, I'd write it but I wouldn't publish it. If the answer's 'no,' I'd go ahead and write it." As soon as he said that, I knew I could write it, because I was older. I was no longer mad at my dad for leaving, or my mother. I didn't feel sorry for myself, wasn't mad about the childhood I'd*

*had. There are lots worse, all over, at all times. I just felt compelled to paint it before I'm dead. I've got to capture what it was like to be in that fucking mill town, as a kid with a long pony tail and leather jacket, only looking up to bad asses, with a writer-professor father over the river and a depressed mother.*

*So, what was I leaving out? I was leaving out that my sister was gang-raped and dealing drugs. I left out that my brother was being sexually used daily by his middle-school teacher, and that he was suicidal and tried to kill himself many times. I left out that my little sister had a padlock on her bedroom door at age 12. That my mother was holding on by her fingernails. I'd left it all out. So then my strategy when I went back was, all right, I'm going to bring in my family because that is a more honest book, but I'm only going to write about their experience where it intersects with mine.*

*Q: That's a fascinating [and helpful] distinction. Would you explain it a bit more?*

*Dubus: If I'm standing outside my brother's bedroom at four o'clock on a Thursday afternoon and I hear the sexual moaning of a grown woman on the other side of the door, I'm going to put in the moans, because that's part of my experience. But the other side of the door? That's his business. I'm not going to write about the details of him fucking his teacher at 13. That's his story. And so, then I was able to write a much more honest book.*

This distinction helped me decide how to deal with the scene in my work. Although I wasn't writing it to settle a score or hurt anyone, I knew it would damage my

sister. This recognition, combined with the fact that the scene described only tangentially intersected with my lived experience, prompted me to delete it.

As noted earlier, learning how to work with reflective voice remains one of my biggest struggles. The plethora of craft books on the topic suggests my struggle is shared. I've come to understand that without reflective voice memoir is something of a Frankenstein – it may be alive, but it has no soul. Early drafts of my memoir amply illustrate the deficit. Indeed, much of the early work I submitted in my first semester at VCFA had little, if any, reflective voice beyond a few prescient metaphors. During my year-plus at VCFA I've work on this deficiency by studying a number of notable craft books, including Meg Files' *Write from Life*, Phillip Lopate's *To Show and Tell: the Craft of Literary Nonfiction*, Judith Barrington's *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*, Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola's *Tell It Slant: Creating, Refining, and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*, Sven Birkerts' *The Art of Time in Memoir*, Vivian Gornick's *The Situation and the Story*, and Sue William Silverman's *Fearless Confessions*. Given Dubus III's masterful use of nearly all the techniques in these craft books in order to unobtrusively infuse his scene-driven coming of age story with his mature narrator's perspective, I wanted to focus his attention on this aspect of his work.

*Q. Townie is rich with metaphors that seem completely organic to the work. Would you talk a bit about the metaphors you used in Townie? I'm thinking especially about the opening scene where you're a 16-year-old kid running with your father. You're wearing your sister's shoes because you don't have any other than your Dingo*

*boots. Her shoes are too small, but you never say a word about it; instead, you just run after your father, trying to keep pace, trying to catch him, no matter how punishing it is to do so. I know it was a literal scene – but it did so much work metaphorically in the book, the echoed feeling of this kid chasing after his absent father, trying to get his father’s attention, approval. Then, there’s the Merrimack River that does so much work as well. The way it serves to separate the two worlds – the father on one side teaching at a privileged school, the kids, you, on the other living in, as you called it, first-world poverty. Were these metaphors consciously constructed?*

*Dubus: First, let me say that I try not to be conscious of anything metaphorical when I’m writing anything. Sometimes I can’t help it. I’ll feel even while I’m writing, this is more than just a tree or just a Chevy. Metaphor means to carry it further. So, I am sometimes aware of them as I’m writing, but I try not to inject them. Like most writers, I find them organically, from the inside out.*

*Q. How does that happen?*

*Dubus: I always begin with the image. Another great line of Flannery O’Connor’s, “There’s a certain grain of stupidity the writer can hardly do without and this is the quality of having to stare, of not getting to the point all at once.” She goes on to say that much of writing is about waiting. I’ve learned to wait for the image. I always trust the image. The image became – which is nowhere in the book – driving by a Little League field in New Hampshire when I was nine, with my newly single mother, looking out at that little league field and not knowing what it was. We’d moved so much, we’d lived in the woods so much, we didn’t have a T.V. I was out of it. I didn’t know what*

*baseball was. So I was already starting late as an American kid. So I had that image and thought, okay, I'm going to write about my ignorance of sports, some stories about coaching my boys' Little League team without knowing how to play baseball, and I'm going to write a funny thing that will be a nice little contrast in this essay collection.*

*Five hundred pages and three years later, I'd written Townie. That's what I was doing instead of writing the essay I'd intended. But I can tell you that when the old man started to come into my story, I resisted it. I said, "Get out. I can't go into a bookstore without seeing all of our books intertwined like incestuous lovers. I can't go into a fucking library without seeing them all mixed up like we're one guy. I'm stuck with you for eternity, and when it comes to writing my own little boyhood story, you fucking dominate it? No fucking way."*

*I resisted him. But the writing knows the way. I had to practice what I preach, because the deeper I got into putting back the pieces of my boyhood, my father's absence in our daily lives became a huge presence in the book. The truth is, that's one of the things writing memoir taught me. I'd never considered myself fatherless. I just thought my folks were divorced. The truth is, my emotional memory was nothing but boyhood absence. I do think that if I'd been teaching that memoir in a course, it'd be hard not to talk about the theme being the son's need for a father. That's certainly a theme. But it isn't what I wanted to talk about; it's what wanted to come. I had to allow it.*

Another way in which Dubus suffuses *Townie* with reflective voice is by his facility in capturing his early experiences with a depth of compassion unavailable to the

immature narrator. The result is a memoir infused with an unobtrusive reflective voice. The work doesn't shy away from showing the reader a multitude of scenes that reveal the deep wounds caused by his father's abandonment, yet these same scenes reverberate with a tenderness that can only be accessed through hindsight's more forgiving frame. In my own work, I've been trying to light some darker passages with a similar filament of forgiveness, and have found that light weakest when dealing with characters lost to me (through death or choice) before facing them with the trespass. I was curious about his ability to access such forgiving retrospection.

*Q. That last night with your father, you write that you had the urge – a recurring urge – to finally tell him what it was really like for you growing up, what the fights were really like, the dehumanizing aspect of it. In Townie you make clear that your father was unwilling to recognize or admit the pain he'd caused you, the rest of your family. You wanted to get him to see you, to finally understand and apologize for the damage he'd caused when he abandoned you. But you didn't tell him that night.*

*Dubus: You're right.*

*Q. That was your last conversation with him. He died unexpectedly two days later. I'm wondering how you reached the sense of forgiveness evident in Townie, when the person who needed forgiveness was beyond your reach, no longer available to hear the truth or say he was sorry?*

*A. First, I have to say that I do believe if we had had that conversation, if he would have listened to me – I just always felt that he never quite saw or understood how*

*we really lived. He romanticized it. He was a smart, sensitive guy, and an artist who wanted to believe a lie. I wanted to say, "Look here, man, this was not some fucking happy situation." But I didn't. And you know what? If we'd had that conversation, I wouldn't have written Townie.*

*In many ways, Townie is the conversation with him I never had. So, in some ways, I'm grateful we didn't have that talk. On the other hand, if I could choose between having had that conversation with him or writing the book, I would choose that conversation. I would have been closer to my old man before he left the planet.*

*But to the forgiveness question -- it seems to me, and I'm no expert, I'm just talking about how it was with my old man -- forgiveness starts to happen when you start fucking up yourself. Sometimes you're making the same mistakes your parents made, and it puts you in a much more empathetic place remembering their fuck-ups. So part of it was moving on, having kids myself, seeing that I'm not perfect, although I did get to be a much more present father than mine was, and it has to do with getting older. Ideally, as we get older, hopefully our heads move farther and farther out of our own asses, and we start looking more objectively at the world.*

*The kind of fiction I love most is character-driven stuff written with compassion and empathy, where you can feel the writer working really diligently to try to become someone else. There's a great paragraph in Eudora Welty's Preface to her National Book Award winning Collected Stories. She says, "I have been told, both in approval and accusation, that I seem to love all my characters. What I do in writing of any character is to try to enter into the mind, heart, and skin of a human being who is not*

*myself. Whether this happens to be a man or a woman, old or young, with skin black or white, the primary challenge lies in making the jump itself. It is the act of a writer's imagination that I set most high."*

*Q. That's terrific.*

*Dubus: I have to say, that's the leap I hold most high as well. It's the same leap you have to make in creative nonfiction. Memoir. Personal essay. Because you're stepping into the skins of other people. They're just as far away from you as any fictional character. In so doing, you have to be receptive. You have to be willing to fail. You've got to become this other person.*

*Q. Even when that other person is your own younger self?*

*Dubus: It's interesting. By putting myself back into the shoes of my younger self, I was able to see my father. Because the guy who was putting himself in the shoes of his younger self, was older than the old man for most of that book. When I was writing it, I was older than my father was at the time I was writing about. That helped me look at it sideways in a way that I think let forgiveness come. You know? Life's a shit-storm.*

*There's a great Flannery O'Connor line, "A writer's beliefs are not what she sees but the light by which she sees."*

*Q. That's gorgeous.*

*Dubus: Right. When I did the audio-book for Townie, about six months after it came out, I was a year away from the final edit, half a year away from the book tour, and so I was really reading it as a reader for the first time. When I finished taping it, out in Oregon, I realized one theme in the book – I'd never realized – one theme in the book*

*was about people. I do believe that 99% of the people across the world, whether you're getting up in the morning out of your king-sized bed, or off a dirt floor, that everybody is trying to have the best day they know how to have. Right? Even the alcoholic under the bridge is trying to get the best drunk – everyone is trying to have the best day they know how to have. It's not the same as having the best day they can have. That's a profound difference. So, when I look at my mother, my young father, I do believe, given the tangled web of their own life trajectories, that they did the best they knew how to do. Could they have done better? Hell, yeah. Can I do better? Yes. But that's where growth is, right? That difference between what we can do and what we do. That's something I learned too, and that helped me forgive my father.*

In a similar vein, I wanted to ask whether he'd found writing about his traumatic childhood a transformative experience. The question made me uncomfortable. While I was struggling with the scene about my sister's abortion, I'd let her read the scene and offered to let her decide whether to delete it. She became hysterical, crying, screaming. Even after I told her I would delete the scene, she demanded to be excised from my story entirely. When I wouldn't promise to do so, she stopped talking to me for months. Finally, she called to ask me if I'd found the writing "cathartic." The question annoyed me. I recoiled at its reductionist implications, and knew the answer (no) would be unsatisfying. From my perspective, therapy and writing memoir were distinctly different endeavors that I didn't believe could result in similar outcomes. It seemed a question worth raising.

*Q. In that scene describing your first experience of writing fiction, you wrote that writing gave you a new way – as opposed to violence – to “express a wound.” Did you find that writing memoir affected you, or allowed you to express a wound differently than writing fiction does? I think I’m trying to ask if writing memoir was transformative or cathartic in some way? Does that sound ridiculous?*

*Dubus: No, no, no. Not at all. It’s not. I’m sure your hesitance to use words like “transformative” and “cathartic” comes from the queasy feeling that it’s a lot like asking -- and this is a question a lot of novelists or people who write dark material get – the question, “Was the writing therapeutic for you?”*

*Q. Eesh, yes.*

*Dubus: It’s such an American question, right? And I want to say, uh, no, it felt like sticking my face in a fire. It felt like jumping into a Porta-Potty sewage dump and swimming in it with my mouth open. What are you talking about? You know?*

*Q. Absolutely.*

*Dubus: The truth hurts. Well, let me go way back to my first book, there’s a story called “Duckling Girl,” and it begins in a dumpster with this young girl being anally raped by her father. I wanted to kill someone the day I wrote that. It came from a story I heard from one of the inmates in the halfway house. It’s such a dark tale. I felt so disturbed – for weeks and weeks after writing that story. I’ve never been suicidal, but I felt a hint of that impulse after writing that. Same with House of Sand and Fog, I was traumatized by it. I felt like I had just seen a snuff film and I couldn’t get it out of my*

*head. And ironically, I wrote that at the happiest time of my life. I had a beautiful wife, three beautiful babies. I was building things with my hands, you know? We were poor, but we were happy.*

*Townie was different, though. Townie was full of dark, harrowing shit. But it was my life. There was something diametrically different about writing it. I needed to get that shit off my chest. There was something that was, frankly, cathartic about stepping into my own history, trying to honestly express it, although very subjectively because my emotional experience is not my brother's, or my sisters' – although the ones who have read it agree with its emotional palette. They have the same memories of that time. You know, catharsis means to purify or to cleanse. I did feel something shift in me by reliving the violence, by reliving the absence of the old man, by reliving the despair and the emotional absence of my mother. Here's something I learned from my own damn book: I'm not a big guy, I'm not a strong guy – I'm a lot stronger than I look, and I'm still in good shape, and I still know how to fight, psychologically especially – but I don't. Except for one relapse. It was in a bar in Maine, and some guy was in my face, and I lost it. But, I got whisked away by my nephew and I didn't have to finish. But I haven't been in a fight. That moment in the train was real. I did shift, change, and I've been able to follow the higher part of me ever since. I also stay away from where there's trouble. But my point is, writing Townie taught me where the rage came from. I thought I was effective as a fighter because of all this pent up rage from being a weak little boy. Wrong. Wrong. Writing Townie taught me what was really going on. Oh, I couldn't protect my sister from being raped by men at knife-point, I couldn't protect her from the scumbags*

*she was fucking who would never love her, I couldn't make her stop selling drugs, I couldn't protect my brother from this woman who was preying upon him, I couldn't keep him from wanting to die, I couldn't keep my little sister from closing off, I couldn't pick my depressed mother up off the floor, and I couldn't get my father to come over to the house. That's what these little fists were doing, wailing into those faces. It's what I understand about violence. I see it. There's a real soft spot in my heart for the ghetto boys, the gang-bangers who kill each other, all that bullshit.*

In the way of things, a few weeks after asking that question, I came across the work of Dr. James Pennebaker, Chair of Psychology at the University of Texas in Austin. In his most recent book, *Expressive Writing: Words that Heal*, Pennebaker explores his decades-long research into the whether and how writing about trauma affects the writer. He discovered that writing about trauma in an unreflective manner (strictly fact-based or journalistic) can actually cause greater harm to the writer's psychological and physical well-being. At best, it has no effect. In contrast, Pennebaker's research documents a direct link between expressive writing about past trauma and the writer's demonstrable improvement psychologically and physically (8-11).

Pennebaker's research revealed four essential components to the type of expressive writing most likely (although not universally) inuring to the writer's benefit: (1) the writer openly acknowledges the negative and positive feelings felt during and following the trauma; (2) the writer makes a "meaningful story" out of the trauma and explains how it affects her (i.e., it must be a coherent narrative); (3) the writer is able to

see the trauma through others' eyes and not just from her own perspective; and (4) the writer expresses herself "openly and honestly" in "a voice that reflects who [she is]" (17, 18).

Pennebaker's description of expressive writing echoes descriptions of reflective writing in the cited craft books. Silverman's description, in particular, holds the parallel: the Voice of Experience must endeavor to make sense of the trauma through a measure of hindsight unavailable to the immature narrator. The "catharsis" or "shift" Dubus admits feeling after he completed *Townie*, may have had much to do with his deft use of reflective voice in telling the open and honest facts of his lived experience. While Dubus deleted experiences (e.g., a significant romance) in order to craft a cohesive narrative, he did not fabricate facts in order to craft a more compelling narrative. The rigor required of the memoir writer who seeks the literary truth within the literal truth appears to be a necessary part of Pennebaker's expressive writing framework. The reader in me has long rankled at the notion that in order to find the literary truth memoir writers are entitled to manufacture facts, particularly without alerting the reader to the falsity. When I read Mary Karr's recent craft book, *The Art of Memoir*, I had to laugh out loud at her singular response to Vivian Gornick's attempt to justify fabricating facts when writing memoir:

In her recent interview in *The Believer*, Vivian Gornick claims to falter at truth telling, even in putatively nonfiction forms.

"Things happen, and I realize that what actually happens is only partly a story, and I have to make the story. So I lie. I mean, essentially – others would think I'm lying. But you understand. It's irresistible to tell the story. And I don't owe anybody the actuality. What is actuality? I mean, whose business is it?"

Well, if I forked over a cover price for nonfiction, I consider it my business. While it's great she owned up to her deceits, it's hard to lend credence

to any after-the-fact confession, especially one as vague or self-justifying as this one. It's as if after lunch the deli guy quipped, "I put just a teaspoon of catshit in your sandwich, but you didn't notice it at all." To my mind, a small bit of catshit equals a catshit sandwich, unless I know where the catshit is and can eat around it."

As distasteful as eating a catshit sandwich may be for the consumer, Karr suggests the greater cost may be exacted from the purveyor. Pawning fabricated facts off as lived experience prevents the memoir writer from the personal liberation that comes with living an examined life. "But whether you're a memoirist or not, there's a psychic cost for lopping yourself off from the past: it may continue to tug on you without your being aware of it. And lying about it can – for all but the most hardened sociopath – carve a lonely gap between your disguise and who you really are. ... It's hard enough to see what's going on without looking through the wool you've pulled over your own eyes."

By writing openly and honestly about his lived experience, by foregoing fabrication in favor of scrutinizing his painful history, Dubus gave the reader an honest work of memoir. Not incidentally, he also gave himself the chance to experience the genre's transformative power. The genre's cathartic potential fascinates me, but another possibility strikes me as even more fascinating: could it be that a reader/writer synergy exists in relation to reflective voice and truth-telling? Could it be that the reader's desire to read honest memoir woven with the warp and woof of reflective voice springs from a subconscious understanding of the transformative potential for the writer who manages the feat?

On a less esoteric level, I'd been struggling with a particular structural question in my work. I'd been using a chronological approach but thought it slowed the pacing. In her craft book *Write from Life: Turning Your Personal Experiences Into Compelling*

*Stories*, Meg Files addresses the concern. In short, she advises using chronological order when writing memoir unless there's a compelling reason not to do so. (170) When I read memoir using alternative approaches (e.g., Nick Flynn's braided technique in *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, Jo Anne Beard's linked essay approach in *The Boys of My Youth*, Joan Wickersham's lovely mosaic structure in *The Suicide Index*), I worried that my straightforward chronology seemed uncreative. Still, the majority of coming of age memoirs about childhood trauma or deprivation (including most of my favorites) were written chronologically. Dubus had chosen to write *Townie* using a relatively straightforward chronology as well, so I asked how he'd come to that decision.

*Q. I'd like to ask a couple of questions about the structure of Townie. You used a pretty straightforward chronological structure, and I'm wondering if you considered any other structure?*

*Dubus: I did. In fact, the draft I sent to my editor was totally different. It didn't begin with the run. That came in the editing, and I thought it was a good suggestion. But it began with that scene in my early twenties working in a half-way house in Colorado – that scene where the director calls me in and kind of chews me out because the inmates like me too much. It was because I identified more with the inmates than I did with my college-boy-and-girl colleagues. I began with that, because I thought I'd keep reading to find out why did this guy identify more with the killers? Isn't he a college-educated white boy? So it began there, and then it flashed back – way back – and it was my editor, Elene Mason, who is just a genius, and she said, "I don't know. I think that run is great*

*opening scene, and one readers can sink their teeth into.” This is why everyone needs a good editor. It’s sad when good, talented writers self-publish on the internet. They miss the editor.*

*I love the distinction Janet Burroway makes between story and plot. She says the story is a sequence of events with a beginning, middle, and an end. The plot is how we arrange it. So I actually wrote it chronologically at first, and then in the plotting, arranging those scenes, I started in the middle and worked back. But it ultimately worked better chronologically. So I went back to that.*

*Q. Which seemed so perfect, the way the chronological structure allowed you to bookend that opening scene with the closing scene, where you’re burying your father. Did your editor suggest that as well?*

*Dubus: No, that was intuitive. Back to where we began. This underscores my love of writing and my belief that it’s full of divinity and mystery. I have written in the opening moments of a story or something longer, seeds that blossom four hundred pages later. Which I find remarkable – and they become inevitable if you are truly letting the story write itself. I didn’t know where it was going to end. Again, back to resistance. Back to Blaise Pascal, “Anything written to please the author is worthless.” I didn’t want the old man to come in. We share a name. I’ve got that clunky III in my name, and now he’s taking over my memoir, damn it, I don’t want him in my memoir, Jesus Christ, I think it’s a lot about him, and him not having been around. And then, I just learned to trust the causality, right? I just let it write. And then. And then. And then there’s that moment in the half-way house, where this tough kid’s putting a knife to his throat, and I*

*talk him down. The only reason I could help him that night was that I was that guy too. Everyone else is telling him, “No, you’ve got to stop your violence, your language.” But I found myself saying, “Brother, no, man. You might need to kick someone’s ass. You don’t have to stop doing it. You just have to find another way to be, too.”*

*So one thing led to the next and the next, and before I know it, my dad’s run over. The next thing I know, we’re burying him. And then I knew it was over. But I allowed causality to take over, and the story to emerge, even though I didn’t want it to go where it was going. That, again, felt remarkably like writing fiction. I love it. I love stepping into the unknown. It takes such nerve to do it. Sometimes I lose it. I’ve been talking about this all summer at all these conferences I’ve been teaching in. I keep saying the same thing. You just have to show up and trust the voice will lead the way. You have to surrender. We Americans, we’re good at controlling, making things happen. We’re not good at surrender. And I do think that’s what it’s about.*

*Q. That’s fascinating.*

*Dubus: Here’s a great one, by the way, from the Chinese. “If the mad dog comes at you, whistle for him.” Isn’t that great?*

Although nearly every craft book about writing memoir covers reflective voice, structure, and metaphor, so far I haven’t found a single one that includes a section on spirituality.<sup>1</sup> In part, this may reflect the genre’s overall dearth of contemporary memoir containing any recognition of a spiritual dimension. Indeed, most contemporary memoir

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<sup>1</sup> This observation excludes the few craft books devoted to the topic of “spiritual memoirs”.

eschews any sustained look at the spiritual elements of the writer's lived experience. The contemporary writer's pro-forma pledge of allegiance to atheism seems particularly unsatisfying (and unlikely) when the memoir's central theme involves inexplicably tragic loss, such as in *Still Point in a Turning World*, Emily Rapp's memoir about the loss of her son to Tay-Sachs, or *The Suicide Index*, Joan Wickersham's gorgeous, heartbreaking memoir about her father's suicide. With the exception of Joy Harjo's memoir *Crazy Brave*, none of the dozens of contemporary memoirs I've studied contain more than the merest glance toward a spiritual or mystical dimension. In *Townie*, Dubus took the risk of including a sustained scene in which he experienced a spiritual conversion and reckoning with the infinite mystery of the spiritual dimension. When we chatted, however, Dubus denied believing in God. His denial initiated the following question, and his charmingly inconsistent response.

*Q. Given so much of what happened to you in Townie, it's surprising to hear you say you don't believe in God.*

*Dubus: I don't. I believe in the divine. But I don't think there's a God who loves me. I think there are angels. Spirits. But I don't believe in a head honcho. Because if there's a head honcho, I'm pissed at him. No, I am. I've had wicked arguments with my wife about this. She's saintly patient with me about this, but I've called God all sorts of horrible names. If there's a God, what the fuck is He doing? I get mad. There's no God. But I do believe there is the divine.*

*Q. It's so interesting that you make that distinction.*

A. *I do. Writing daily has given me this belief more than anything. And, of course, the deaths of loved ones, the births of my children. I do believe in the desire to create art – there’s a wonderful line from “The Magic Show,” this essay by Tim O’Brien. He says, “Writers tend to be the kind of people who want to enter the mystery of things.” Isn’t that gorgeous? “Enter the mystery of things.” Of course, Flannery O’Connor has that great essay, The Nature and Aim of Fiction, where she says, “The job of the writer is to make actual the mystery of our position on earth.” These are very spiritual ways of looking at writing. I identify strongly with this word choice. I do feel that there’s something larger at work. When the writing feels like it’s going well, I feel like I’ve stepped into some underwater stream that’s carrying me. It feels the same way it felt when I met my wife and knew I was going to marry her whether I wanted to or not. It’s the same way about all sorts of things that are deep and beautiful. But I don’t believe in a head honcho at all. And I frankly detest organized religion. I’d like to see all the temples burned to the ground. That said, I go to church anytime my wife wants me to, and I’m always glad I went.*

Q. *How about that conversion scene in Townie? Or the scene in the train? It’s hard not to read those as anything other than divine intervention.*

Dubus: *You know, until I wrote that scene, I didn’t know how epiphanic that moment was. When my wife read the first draft of Townie, and she read through those scenes – I mean, look, if this is not a religious experience, I don’t know what is. I’ve spent my whole life in fistfights, boxing, beating people up. I have a dream I’m going to die a violent death very soon. I wake up, I reach over to find something to read to calm*

*me, and the only thing around is my wife's New Testament. We're in this old stone cottage in the Cotswolds, it's the middle of the night, there's no light anywhere. I open the Bible, and the only thing I can see is the line, "Love one another." And I can't see anymore?*

*Q. You couldn't get by with that in a novel.*

*Dubus: No, it wouldn't work in a novel. And when my wife read that she said, "How can you still not believe in God?" I just don't. But something big happened.*

Dubus had other commitments to attend to; as our scheduled time lapsed, I knew I'd been less in control of the interview than I'd intended. I'd spent weeks reading and rereading *Townie*, drafting and redrafting questions. I'd worried he might not feel talkative, that the interview would be dull. I hadn't expected his off-the-charts extroversion, his love for the craft, or his big-hearted generosity when working with newer writers. But it was time to let him go, and my brain couldn't pick the most salient question from the dozens I hadn't asked. The best I could do was thank him and ask if he had any parting words of advice for people writing memoir.

*Dubus: Don't try to say anything. That's really my only advice to anyone writing memoir. You heard yesterday in the craft talk Joan Wickersham and I did, that the opposite of remember is not to forget; the opposite of to remember, is to dismember. Chop, chop, chop. That came to me, that definition, as I was writing Townie. It really felt like rediscovering the fragments. So, that's my advice. Just write the fragment.*

*Make that fragment as whole as you can, because, guess what? It's going to open the door to another one, and another one, and another one. And then – talk about the divine and the mystery – you find yourself with a narrative arc that's organic, one that creates itself once you knit the fragments back together.*

His answer conjured that recurring question: *Why am I writing this memoir?* I may never be able to answer the question fully. Like life, it's complicated. Changeable. Part of the answer springs from a mid-life desire to examine the past, to see what sense can be made of it. Maybe, as Dubus found, a hint of divine order will emerge from the chaos. If I tend to the task of examining my particular experience in the reflective light of mature narrator, elusive truths will surface on the page, infusing the narrative with depth and texture. Increasingly, I believe the answer may lie in the process as much as the product. It may be that by weaving the raw silk of the past with the finer threads of the present, more than the work will be transformed into something lovely and whole.

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