

# The Heart-Work: Writing About Trauma as a Subversive Act

by Melissa Febos

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In a recent nonfiction workshop I taught at Sarah Lawrence College, a female student cringed when I suggested she include more of her own story in an essay. The narrative experimented with form, suggested a history of sexual trauma, but quickly shifted into a more lyrical and analytic musing on the general subject. She frowned. “But I don’t want to seem self-absorbed. You know, *navel-gazing*.” The rest of the room—all women—nodded. It is a concern I have heard from countless students and peers, and which I always greet with a combination of bafflement and frustration. Since when did telling our own stories and deriving their insights become so reviled? It doesn’t matter if the story is your own, I tell them over and over, only that you tell it well. We must always tell stories so that their specificity reveals some universal truth.

And yet. How many times have I been privy to conversations among other writers in which we sneer at the very concept? We compulsively assure one another that writing isn’t about enacting a kind of *therapy*. How gross! We are intellectuals. We are artists. And the assumption is that these occupations preclude emotional self-examination or healing. “I mean, you can’t expect people to be interested in your diary,” a friend and fellow teacher recently exclaimed. I nodded. What kind of monstrous narcissist would make that mistake?

I am complicit. I have committed this betrayal of my own experience innumerable times. But I am done agreeing when my peers spit on the idea of writing as transformation, as catharsis, as—dare I say it—therapy. Tell me, who is writing in their therapeutic diary and then dashing it off to be published? I don’t know who these supposedly self-indulgent (and extravagantly well-connected) narcissists are. But I suspect that when people denigrate them in the abstract, they are picturing women. I’m finished referring to stories of body and sex and gender and violence and joy and childhood and family as “navel-gazing.”

At a recent writers conference, during a panel of literary magazine editors, a female audience member posed a question about the potential audience for her story of trauma survival. One of the male editors rolled his eyes and shrugged. “I mean, I’m not sure we need any more of those stories.” The other panelists nodded in consensus: Stories like hers belonged on Oprah’s talk show, not in the hallowed realm of literary prose. Everyone knows we don’t need another one of those. The genre of victimhood is already so crowded. So gauche.

Later that day, while serving on a panel of memoirists, I polled the audience—a room packed with a few hundred readers and writers. I asked for a show of hands: “Who here has experienced an act of violence, abuse, extreme disempowerment, sexual aggression, harassment, or humiliation?” The room fell silent as the air filled with hands.

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In response to a surge of popular memoirs, William Gass, in a 1994 issue of *Harper’s*, asked, “Are there any motives for the enterprise that aren’t tainted with conceit or a desire for revenge or a wish for justification? To halo a sinner’s head? To puff an ego already inflated past safety?” He went on: “To have written an autobiography is already to have made yourself a monster.... Why is it so exciting to say, now that everyone knows it anyway, ‘I was born...I was born...I was born?’” It is an argument that has been made for centuries, and that I have heard all my writing life.

It is the reason that I did not want to write a memoir. At twenty-six I was an MFA student in fiction, deep into what I believed was a Very Important Novel about addiction and female sexuality. Then I took a nonfiction craft class for which we were asked to write a short memoir. Though the content of my novel drew heavily from my own experience, I had never written any kind of nonfiction. The twenty-page essay I drafted about my years as a professional dominatrix was the most urgent thing I had ever written. When he read it, my professor insisted that I drop whatever I was working on and write a memoir.

I cringed. Who was I, a twenty-six-year-old woman, a former junkie and sex worker, to presume that strangers should find my life interesting? I had already learned that there were few more damning presumptions than that of a young woman thinking her own story might be meaningful. Besides, I was writing a Very Important Novel. Just like Jonathan Franzen or Philip Roth or Hemingway, those men of renowned humility.

“No way,” I told my professor. I was determined to stick to my more humble presumption that strangers might be interested in a story *made up* by a twenty-six-year-old former junkie sex worker.

Do you see how easy it is to poke holes in this logic?

But the story wouldn't leave me alone. So I wrote it. And it was urgent, but not easy. In order to write that book, I had to walk back through my most mystifying choices and excavate events for which I had been numb on the first go-round.

That book was about being a sex worker and recovering from heroin addiction. It was about desire, shame, bodies, drugs, and money. It was an intellectual inquiry into these topics as much as it was a psychological and emotional reckoning. In hindsight, I can say that the compulsion to write it was an expression of my need to understand what the connections were among those things. To answer my own questions about why a girl from a loving family ended up shooting speedballs and spanking men for a living, and how the power of secrecy could become a prison. I wrote it because I wanted to show the strangers who shared those experiences that they were not alone.

I didn't write a memoir to free myself, though in the process I did.

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In the 1980s, social psychologist James Pennebaker conducted some now famous studies on his theory of “expressive writing.” Pennebaker asked participants in his experimental group to write about a past trauma, expressing their deepest feelings surrounding it. In contrast, control participants were asked to write as objectively as possible about neutral topics without revealing their emotions or opinions. Both groups wrote for fifteen minutes for four consecutive days.

Some of the participants in the experimental group found the exercise upsetting. All of them found it valuable. Monitoring over the subsequent year revealed that those participants made significantly fewer visits to physicians. Pennebaker's research has since been replicated numerous times and his results confirmed: Expressive writing about trauma strengthens the immune system, decreases obsessive thinking, and contributes to the overall health of the writers. And this is after only *four days* of fifteen-minute sessions.

Let's face it: If you write about your wounds, it is therapy. Of course, the writing done in those fifteen minutes was surely terrible by artistic standards. But it is a logical fallacy to conclude that *any* writing with therapeutic effect is terrible. You don't have to be into therapy to be healed by writing. Being healed does not have to be your goal. But to oppose the very idea of it is nonsensical, unless you consider what

such a bias reveals about our values as a culture. Knee-jerk bias backed by flimsy logic and bad science has always been the disguise of our national prejudices.

That these topics of the body, the emotional interior, the domestic, the sexual, the relational are all undervalued in intellectual literary terms, and are all associated with the female spheres of being is not a coincidence. What I mean is, this bias against “personal writing” is a sexist mechanism, founded on the false binary between the emotional (female) and the intellectual (male), and intended to subordinate the former.

That is, Karl Ove Knausgaard is a genius, a risk-taker, while all my female graduate students are terrified to write about being mothers for fear that they will be deemed (or, that they already are) vacuous narcissists. Or, as Maggie Nelson, in her latest book, *The Argonauts*, says of a man inquiring how she could possibly pen a book on the subject of cruelty while pregnant: “Leave it to the old patrician white guy to call the lady speaker back to her body, so that no one misses the spectacle of that wild oxymoron, the pregnant woman who thinks. Which is really just a pumped-up version of that more general oxymoron, a woman who thinks.”

I suspect I could write something relevant and dynamic and political and beautiful and intellectual about my own navel. And I don’t think it’s a stretch to wonder if the navel as the locus of all this disdain has some faint thing to do with its connection to birth, and body, and the female.

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Acknowledging all of this will not get your book published. Being healed by writing does not excuse you from the insanely hard work of making art. There are plenty of mediocre memoirs out there, just as there are plenty of mediocre novels. I labored endlessly to craft my memoir. But after it was published, I still fielded insinuations that I had gotten away with publishing my diary. Interviewers asked only about my experiences and never about my craft. At readings, I would be billed on posters as “Melissa Febos, former dominatrix” alongside my co-reader, “[insert male writer name], poet.” Even some friends, after reading the book, would write to me to exclaim, “The writing! It was *so* good,” as if that were a happy accident accompanying my diarist’s transcription.

Writing about your personal experiences is not easier than other kinds of writing. In order to write that book, I had to invest the time and energy to conduct research and craft plot, scenes, description, dialogue, pacing—all the writer’s jobs, *and* I had to destroy my own self-image and face some unpalatable truths about my own accountability. It was the hardest thing I’d ever done. It made me a better person, and it made a better book.

Navel-gazing is not for the faint of heart. The risk of honest self-appraisal requires bravery. To place our flawed selves in the context of this magnificent, broken world is the opposite of narcissism, which is building a self-image that pleases you. For many years, I kept a quote from Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* tacked over my desk: “The work of the eyes is done. Go now and do the heart-work on the images imprisoned within you.”

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Listen to me: It is not gauche to write about trauma. It is subversive. **The stigma of victimhood is a timeworn tool of oppressive powers to gaslight the people they subjugate into believing that by naming their disempowerment they are being dramatic, whining, attention-grabbing, or beating a dead horse. Believe me, I wish this horse were dead. To name just one of many such statistics in a grossly underreported set of crimes: The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey recently found**

that 46.4 percent of lesbians, 74.9 percent of bisexual women, and 43.3 percent of heterosexual women have been the victims of sexual violence.

But we shouldn't write about it because people are fatigued by stories about trauma? No. We have been discouraged from writing about it because it makes people uncomfortable. Because a patriarchal society wants its victims to be silent. Because shame is an effective method of silencing.

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I have just finished writing a second book about my own experience. It's called *Abandon Me*, and it's about having a sea captain father, about loving women, about being annihilated and invented by love and sex. It is an exercise in applying my intellect, and the intellects of other thinkers—philosophers, psychologists, holy people, poets—to the raw matter of my own abandonments. It is about having abandonment issues.

This sort of admission might make you cringe. But white straight male writers are writing about the same things—they are just overlaying them with a plot about baseball, or calling their work fiction. Men write about their daddy issues constantly, and I don't see anyone accusing them of navel-gazing. I am happy to read those books. I just wish that male authors—along with the greater reading populace—were not discouraged from reading such books by women. That women were not discouraged from writing them.

The new book is a collection of linked essays, and I have never worked so hard, sentence by sentence, image by image, on anything. But I struggled with the title essay, which, at over 150 pages, is more than half the book and tells the story of a time when I lost myself in love, acted in ways I would never have believed until they happened.

I showed an early draft of the essay to a close friend. After reading it, she said: "This is a very pretty story, but this is not what happened. If you want to tell the real story, you are going to have to be more honest." My heart sank. I knew she was right. I had included only the parts that I felt safe revealing. I had hidden the ugliest parts. When I thought about taking her advice, a cold fear surged through me. "I am not allowed to write this," I thought. "No one can know how profoundly I lost myself." But I knew that she was right. So I rewrote it. I faced the truer version that I had tried to avoid. Because it was a better story, and because I wanted to be free.

What I'm saying is, don't avoid yourself. The story that comes calling might be your own, and it might not go away if you don't open the door. I don't believe in writers block. I only believe in fear. And you can be afraid and still write something. No one has to read it, though when you're done you might want someone to. One of the epigraphs of my book is a quote from the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott: "It is joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found." The book I've written is about secrets, too. About my father's father, who terrorized his family; about my mother's father, who was mad. About my biological father, his father, and his grandfather—who lied on a census and said he was Polish, instead of native. It's about the legacy of those secrets, how they ruined us for generations, how they have formed me.

To William Gass's argument, "To have written an autobiography is already to have made yourself a monster," I say that refusing to write your story can make you into a monster. Or perhaps more accurately, we are already monsters. And to deny the monstrous is to deny its beauty, its meaning, its necessary devastation.

Transforming my secrets into art has transformed me. And I believe that stories like these have the power to transform the world. That is the point of literature, or at least that's what I tell my students. We are

writing the history that we could not find in any other book. We are telling the stories that no one else can tell, and we are giving this proof of our survival to one another.

What I mean is, tell me about your navel. Tell me about your rape. Tell me about your mad love affair, how you forgot and then remembered yourself. Tell me about your hands, the things they have done and held and hit and let go of. Tell me about your drunk father and your sister who lost her mind. Give them whatever names you want.

Don't tell me that the experiences of a vast majority of our planet's human population are marginal, are not relevant, are not political. Don't tell me that you think there's not enough room for another story about sexual abuse, motherhood, or racism. The only way to make room is to drag all our stories into that room. That's how it gets bigger.

You write it, and I will read it.

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