

Transcript
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Craft Talk - Writing Through Trauma
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I'd like to begin, as many of these talks do, with a quote. In discussing trauma, in particular, collective trauma, psychoanalyst Angela Connolly writes:

“The result of this type of massive, extreme trauma is the creation of a rupture at the heart of the psyche such that a void is produced in which any representation of the experience becomes impossible due to ‘the collapse of the imaginative capacity to visualize atrocity....The terrifying experience of this void is expressed in images, such as ‘the black hole’ or ‘the empty circle, ‘a magnetic core of nothingness’, that eclipses life and leads to a disorientation that cannot be overcome. When the trauma is massive, prolonged, and deliberately inflicted, as Jung puts it, ‘whole tracts of our being can plunge back into unconsciousness and vanish from the surface for years and decades. In such situations, the initial affective reactions are ones of terror, depersonalization that then give way to feelings of depression and guilt. Gradually, even these feelings become deadened and the dissociation is now so profound that even survival becomes a matter of indifference. In the end, the individual is precipitated into a state of living death that can best be expressed by the image of the walking dead” (“Healing the Wounds of Our Fathers” 609).

Though Connolly in this quote, and elsewhere in her essay speaks specifically to the experience of individuals who have suffered traumas on a national level, I would like to extend this analysis to trauma at the level of the individual as well. She goes on to discuss the difficulties inherent in attempting to articulate trauma and she states:

“Narrative requires to capacity to use metaphor in order to fashion the experience into a form that will be comprehensible and meaningful to others, but [as Laub and Auerhahn point out] because of the radical break between trauma and culture, victims often cannot find categories of thought or words for their experience” (610).

This difficulty in locating the appropriate category of thought or of words is where I would like to situate this discussion of writing through trauma. Articulating trauma, whether it is inherited trauma or trauma that we are in the midst of experiencing at this very moment, is difficult. Often, we may not feel ready to speak to our trauma, and processing that trauma non-verbally can be its own form of self-healing.

In the black community (and this can very well apply to many families, but I can only speak to my own experience), there are familial traumas that we NEVER speak about. They happen, they shift the entire trajectory of the family history, and yet they are never, ever discussed even years later.

At the same time, there is an assumption that the trauma that is not spoken is suppressed. Suppression, however, in its very nature, requires a denial of the thing itself.

What I mean to say is that for many of us who have experienced traumatic events, those traumas sit beside us at every moment, and in some moments, their pull is stronger than others.

I've told stories about my childhood and adolescence, stories about things that have been done to me and around me to friends, people I've dated, and colleagues, most of whom have at some point or other said to me, "you should write a poem about that!"

When asked why I won't, or don't, that answer is sometimes "it's still too hard," but more often than not, my answer is "I don't know what to say about it."

So much of poetry is metaphor. It is finding new and original ways to describe the already-known. It is seeking out the 800th way of conveying the beauty of the sun rising over the trees in the morning. And what do you do when the trauma has impacted so many aspects of who you are, but articulating it as a straightforward narrative feels like the only way of approaching it? What do you do when there is no metaphor for the particular terror or trauma that you've experienced? Or so you feel.

The "pain as a scar" analogy is overwrought and cliché, but there is something about it that feels exactly correct: a scar, a mark on the body that no longer hurts but holds within it a painful story. Where and how we choose to tell that story is troubled by the cultural discourse that presumes a certain kind of "trauma narrative." One where the trauma occurs, the victim goes through a difficult time, but ultimately, learns from the trauma and moves forward. However, very rarely is the lived experience of trauma so linear or so easily conveyed.

I want to be clear here in that I do not wish to discount the importance of giving testimony to one's experiences. Understanding that others have experienced trauma similar to your own and/or that others can feel a sense of compassion for your experience is incredibly valuable.

At this moment, I think it is important to underline the distinction between “empathy” and “sympathy”:

Sympathy being, *I hear you. I see your struggle.*

Empathy being, *I know that feeling.*

What we, as poets and writers try to do with our words, for the most part, is to appeal to our reader in ways that trigger empathy. What is the point of metaphor if not to translate the individual experience, or the experience of the self into an image or a series of images that open up avenues for our reader to engage and connect with a speaker or a character.

Similarly, we are most often drawn to texts where we feel, in some way, a sense of empathy. I don't know exactly what it means to lose a parent, yet, but I know the feeling of losing someone that I love quite dearly. We seek empathy of emotion, if not empathy of experience.

Returning to the idea of “trauma narratives,” they are used often during therapy and counseling as a way of helping survivors of trauma and people suffering from PTSD. Studies have shown that writing the story of your trauma, as disjointed and temporally confusing as it might be, assists in the emotional processing that is a large part of your healing journey.

However, as writers, because we understand the necessity of empathy of experience or emotion, we can often feel hindered by an inability to articulate the thing in ways that we know would be digestible to an outside audience.

In the past I have found myself railing against this very point. I feel conflicted about the idea of having to fit a narrative about the abuse that I've experienced, or about my depression, or about my suicide attempts into something that can be packaged and distributed.

In addition, I think that for many artists who write or create not just as a form of self-expression, but with an aim toward parlaying their craft into some semblance of a career, there is a concern that we're “playing a card” (a phrase that has been directed at many, many writers who write about their own traumas) or that by writing about the trauma, the trauma itself will become the signature by which we're known; something that many of us have worked very, very hard to push against or prevent for ourselves.

Because of this fear, instead of writing about trauma, I've continued to say "I don't know what to say about it."

As writers, how do we convey the near-incommunicable? Further, how do we talk about traumas that we may not have experienced personally, but whose effects we still bear witness to?

In my own work, scholarly and creatively, I am interested in the ways that the inherited trauma of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade still ripple through African-American families today. Yet, gesturing backward toward that trauma is difficult, in that I can sympathize with the experiences of my ancestors, yet I can only empathize with those around me who are also still in the wake of that history.

I feel that it's important here to offer up that there are a variety of poets who I believe have written about traumatic experiences (either autobiographically, or from the perspective of a speaker) to great effect. Ocean Vuong's poem, "Telemachus" comes to mind. It begins:

Like any good son, I pull my father out
of the water, drag him by his hair

through white sand, his knuckles carving a trail
the waves rush in to erase. Because the city

beyond the shore is no longer
where we left it. Because the bombed

cathedral is now a cathedral
of trees. I kneel beside him to show how far

I might sink. *Do you know who I am,*
Ba? But the answer never comes. The answer

is the bullet hole in his back, brimming
with seawater. He is so still I think

he could be anyone's father, found
the way a green bottle might appear

at a boy's feet containing a year
he has never touched. I touch

his ears. No use. I turn him
over. To face it. The cathedral

in his sea-black eyes. The face
not mine – but one I will wear

to kiss all my lovers good-night:
the way I seal my father's lips

with my own & begin
the faithful work of drowning.

The tone here is somber, yet also matter-of fact. At no point does the speaker themselves convey fear, disbelief, or pain. Rather, the voice is one that recounts, part by part, each of these moments. *I seal my father's lips with my own & begin the faithful work of drowning.* A statement said with such certainty, that it dares the reader to question its logic.

Compare this poem to, for instance, Max Ritvo's "Poem to My Litter" which details living with Ewig's sarcoma. In it he states:

My genes are in mice, and not in the banal way
that Man's old genes are in the Beasts.

My doctors split my tumors up and scattered them
into the bones of twelve mice. We give

the mice poisons I might, in the future, want
for myself. We watch each mouse like a crystal ball.

I wish it was perfect, but sometimes the death we see

doesn't happen when we try it again in my body.

My tumors are old, older than mice can be.
They first grew in my flank, a decade ago.

Then they went to my lungs, and down my femurs,
and into the hives in my throat that hatch white cells.

The mice only have a tumor each, in the leg.
Their tumors have never grown up. Uprooted

and moved. Learned to sleep in any bed
the vast body turns down. Before the tumors can spread,

they bust open the legs of the mice. Who bleed to death.
Next time the doctors plan to cut off the legs

in the nick of time so the tumors will spread.
But I still have both my legs. To complicate things further,

mouse bodies fight off my tumors. We have to give
the mice aids so they'll harbor my genes.

I want my mice to be just like me. I don't have any children.
I named them all Max. First they were Max 1, Max 2,

but now they're all just Max. No playing favorites.
They don't know they're named, of course.

They're like children you've traumatized
and tortured so they won't let you visit.

I hope, Maxes, some good in you is of me.
Even my suffering is good, in part. Sure, I swell

with rage, fear—the stuff that makes you see your tail
as a bar on the cage. But then the feelings pass.

And since I do absolutely nothing (my pride, like my fur,

all gone) nothing happens to me. And if a whole lot

of nothing happens to you, Maxes, that's peace.

Which is what we want. Trust me.

In both poems, the narrative itself offers up opportunities for both empathy and sympathy through its addressal of the traumatic experience. Whereas "Telemachus" takes place directly within the moment of trauma, "Poem to My Litter" discusses the trauma from the perspective of a speaker who has had a greater amount of time with which to come to terms with the trauma, and enough time to look outward and beyond the narrative itself to point us toward greater conversations about suffering, fear, and death.

Another poem, one that I find deeply affecting, "The Last Thing, or Song for When They Take It All Away" by Patrick Rosal. The poem, a systematic accounting of all of the items removed during a storage facility eviction process, vacillates between everyday items and abstractions, between the innocuous and the imperative. The speaker states:

They take
the dim shots
of my brothers'
young faces beside mine
They take away
the clean sheets folded
among the soiled ones
the hand towels
stained with fevers and shit
and official notices of all my debt
stuffed
in a box
with three dead flies
oh!
and the tangled brush of a woman whom I loved
for one whole week
which
remembering her
makes me
lift my hand
as if to propose half a prayer

or to illustrate
the best way
to answer a deaf king
is to drop
a fist on a heavy table
in place of blasphemy's
last syllable
They take it
all
from a cold
rented
five-foot space
and
when I can't pay
they cross out my name
double- shackle
the gate
fill every
proper form
and price
the pitiful lot
for the block
They call me
to cough
up
over
and over
say: explain yourself: I don't
have the cash
Shame
is like you're made
of 10,000
beautiful doors
and every day
you try to keep them
all
from flying open
at once

I think what Rosal says here about shame is important. It feels very similar to the ways that artists and writers who have experienced trauma attempt to keep a handle on it in their writing, while also being vulnerable and authentic enough to let it in. That's a tough balancing act, but one that I feel is worthwhile.

One of the most disheartening and frustrating aspects of being a writer who does (or desires to) write about one's traumatic experiences, is the fear of being met with irritation and annoyance at best, and complete disregard or abjection at worst. Imagine being vulnerable enough to speak to your trauma in your own writing, and to share that with an audience of your peers, only to be sneered at, called "cliche," or encouraged to write about "more interesting or original" topics.

Unfortunately, this is the experience of many artists who write about trauma. Melissa Febos has a wonderful essay in *Poets & Writers* about her own struggle with this topic. In this essay she addresses the ubiquity (and absurdity) of the phrase "real writing isn't therapy."

This phrase is bizarre to me, because what is it really saying? "Real" writing is serious, but therapy isn't?

I think what people mean to say when they say this is that it is presumptuous and uninteresting to write your story as though it is a story that others haven't experienced, or, if it is a story that others have experienced, then there are writers who have written about it before, and what could you possibly have to add to the numerous narratives out there about things like abuse or death or loss?

We force writers into an unwinnable scenario wherein if we write about a trauma that feels very specific to who we are, then it does not have a certain "universal appeal" (an idea that is incredibly problematic, and one that can be taken up later) OR if we write about traumas that have been experienced and written about by hundreds of other authors, we're precluded from writing about them as well.

What you're really saying when you say that "real writing isn't therapy" is "Because I cannot empathize with what's on the page in front of me, I will choose not to even try and sympathize enough to give you constructive feedback."

Also, if we're going to play into this idea that "real writing isn't therapy" or that "poetry isn't journaling" then stop trying to sell me the unreleased letters and journals and scrap doilies of Emily Dickinson. Keep that same energy!

In addition to being a writer, I have also worked with writers of all ages, and I, myself, have been guilty of conflating and de-legitimizing the work of writing trauma and “real” writing. I have been a part of perpetuating this binary in the past. This comes, in part, from what I was taught and told as a young writer, but in larger part, it has come from many workshops that I have been a part of as an adult. Not only workshops in which my own work has been critiqued, but also in workshops where I’ve participated in discussions about others’ work.

In thinking very deeply about this exact subject over the last few years, and in trying to lend credence to the legitimacy of all kinds of narratives, it has been helpful for me to come up with some guidelines for myself as a workshop leader, participant, and as a writer. I would like to offer these up to you all as well. This is not to suggest that you *must* take these guidelines into your next workshop, or that generative, productive workshops cannot be had without them. Instead, it is to suggest that there is a way to empower others and yourself to write about, within, and beyond trauma.

1. Encourage writers to simply get their story down on the page. By suggesting that there is a division between “trauma narratives” and “real writing” we imply that there is no discernible value in writing down one’s story. This could not be further from the truth, and by gatekeeping the kind of writing that is allowed in workshop, we discourage people from even attempting to figure out methods of articulating their stories.
2. During workshop (and this goes against pretty much every traditional method of workshopping) ask the writer: “What is it that you want me (or us) to take from this piece?” This does not mean “Explain the narrative to me” or “Tell me what you meant by this line.” Rather, it is to ask the writer what they hope their reader will leave the piece with. This can be a sense of closure or satisfaction (or the opposite, perhaps). It can be a feeling that they aren’t alone, or a desire for connection. It can be any number of goals! Conversely, if they don’t have an answer, or they don’t know, or the answer is simple “I just wanted to get it all out there.” That is also valid, and we can honor that by acknowledging that perhaps it is a piece that they don’t intend on sharing in the future OR that it is a piece that can act as the genesis for another larger work OR that now that they have gotten something down, they can start working with it and molding it and shifting things around (if they so choose!)

3. I listened to an interview with Terry Crews in which he compares your life to a table. He says that the people in your life, the things you've experienced, your traumas, your fears, they're all creatures that are sitting at your table. Most of us, for much of our lives, are sitting at the table just letting our creatures run rampant. Feeling empowered is when (in this analogy) you recognize that this is *your* table, and that you have, at any given moment, the ability to invite creatures to your table or dismiss them from your table. This is an analogy that I use in my own writing to regulate how I write. Sometimes I want to call all the creatures to the table and write with complete abandon. Other times, I only want one or two at my table so that I can have a deep conversation with just them. I find this is a useful way, for me, of finding ways of starting to address certain traumas, and when I'm ready, I can invite other creatures to my table.

My hope here, and moving forward as a writing community, that we can continue to create spaces where writers feel emboldened to share their experiences and their work with each other without judgment in a world where compassion is so rare, and so difficult to come by.

I also want to put out to the group a few questions:

1. How do you deal with or feel about writing traumas in a workshop setting?
2. What suggestions or recommendations do you have for writing through and beyond trauma?

<http://www.forwardartsfoundation.org/poetry/telemachus/>

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/poetpatrickrosal/poem-the-last-thing-or-song-fo-r-when-they-take-it-all-away>

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/06/27/poem-to-my-litter-by-max-ritvo>