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Encountering Autoethnography

Of Fragments and Drawing Blood

It's not always possible to draw lines between events, to link the moments. We try because continuity, however fabricated—as in *made*, not as in untrue—connects us to our/selves; and it connects us to a sense (however fabricated) that we are / "selves."

We make these links in hindsight, in tentative, provisional stories—ours but not ours –that we piece together.[1] It's like re-assembling fragments of a broken vase someone we love has dropped. If we are bold, we allow the fragments' sharp edges to draw blood.

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It's 1980. I am in Dr. Moody's office on the first floor of the English faculty at the University of York. His window overlooks the lush gardens that surround the campus lake. (The famous campus lake, known for the discarded detritus hidden in the murky shallows into which my friend, Andrew, and I leap when the impulse takes us. Standing in the water with jeans soaked up to our thighs, we laugh each time at our daring. No one else finds it amusing, nor intrepid. No one even stops to watch.)

It's the middle year of my three-year undergraduate English Literature degree. Dr. Moody and I meet to discuss how I'm getting on—with studying, with life at York, with whatever I need to bring. We do this at the beginning and end of each term: he, eminent Ezra Pound scholar and my personal tutor, and me, his doubting, struggling student.

I am demoralized. It's been dragging at me for weeks. I say, "Every poem, every novel, everything I have to read here on the course, I have to pretend it doesn't affect me. Or I have to ignore that it does. I read, but then I'm only allowed to analyse. I have to break a text down, explain, talk about the character development or the rhyming scheme or whatever. I can't go to seminars and talk about what I *feel*. I can't write about what a text does to me. How I connect with it."

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Those were not my words at the time—late middle-aged sensibilities placed into the mouth of an earnest, energetic, despondent twenty-year-old—but the affective resonance of that time remains in me. I remember the disillusion and disappointment, the sense of being pushed away both from the text and from my body; of only my head being welcomed into tutorials and seminars and onto the pages of my handwritten assignments. (It's true to say, though, that it wasn't only studying English Literature that pushed me away from my body.)

That day I told Dr. Moody I wanted to leave university, or take a break, or change my course. Dr. Moody was kind. He listened. I felt understood. I stayed. I left with a degree I barely deserved.

Dr. Moody and I remain in occasional contact. He is encouraging and tells me to not be too hard on myself about my York years.

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Autoethnography begins with fragments. In scratches across the page that begin as nothing, or imagined nothing. They might begin with "I don't know what to write. I don't know how to begin." Or with, like now, "It's early afternoon, late May, and the radiator is on" and—there—the writing has begun, the body is beginning to be present on the page and in the writer. The act of beginning beckons another fragment—there, see it?—no, not yet?—wait: a memory, a longing, a sense of affect that, again in hindsight, we give a name to: rage, fear, delight, despair, desire, more.[2] The fragment becomes a letter, a word, a phrase, then another—there, do you see it now?

A story maybe. Fragments assembled and re-assembled, seeking to draw blood.

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I teach research. Sometimes I talk to students about autoethnography and its histories. I give students readings of autoethnographic scholars' work, which tell stories of personal and cultural experience. Stories we might call "critical" stories that work at something—stories that do not take themselves for granted.

I ask students to consider what those stories do. I ask them to begin with how the texts they have read affect them, with where those stories take them. I invite them to notice what happens in their bodies, their affective responses. I invite them to trust their bodies.

I give them texts by scholars who challenge and question what's meant by "personal," "cultural," and "experience," and we ask how stories elide, erase, obscure.

I invite students to write. There and then: no time to prepare, no time to make the desk tidy or make tea. Let's write, I say. They spread themselves around the room, on the floors, at tables, alone, alongside others. They write for twenty minutes. Bodies writing; a writing-class-body. I try to write too, but I never can. I am summoned into what else is happening, by the writing-class-body energy and its writing struggles.

When we return together, disentangled, most are reticent, their writing nervous and raw, newly formed, and their relationship with it tentative. Their relationship with

themselves as writers is also nervous, raw, newly formed, tentative. Most speak *about* what they have written. A few read their writing aloud.

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"Drawing blood" is not causing harm, either to ourselves or others. The blood that's drawn from assembling our fragments is necessary. It's a sign of life. It's about making, seeing, permitting, life. *Drawing* blood: creating, making, painting blood. Lifeblood. It emerges in and through the rawness, the way words open up onto the new and into the unthought of writer and reader. The crafting, the careful shaping and assembling, of such fragments into whatever it becomes—the process Spry calls "practiced vulnerability"—does not cover the wounds nor deny the fractures.[3] It doesn't smooth over or avoid them. It allows the (life)blood to flow, to take shape, to be seen. Autoethnography is writing that is blood-full, not bloodless. Life-full. Body-full.

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I began writing a journal during the time my English literature degree disillusion set in. Most evenings I would write in my green notebook about what was happening and what I was feeling.

I sometimes wrote about what I was reading and how it affected me.

I sometimes wrote about jumping into the lake with Andrew.

I wrote. I started to assemble fragments. I wanted to feel myself alive.

I didn't think of myself as a writer, but I began to be someone who writes.

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It's September, 2003, and my father dies. He had been ill for a long time, but we had not expected this to happen now. Yes, we knew he was worn down by insistent, unforgiving illness. He said so in those occasional private moments when he let that stoic, cheerful guard down, and his body told us as he lifted a cup to his lips or as he slept leaning back in his chair at the window. We knew. We know we knew. Nevertheless, his loss comes as sudden and shocking.

Over the next few days I write his eulogy. I tell his and our stories. I tell our stories of him. The following week, I stand and read those stories to a church full of those who knew and loved him. I feel him in my chest and arms, in my feet planted on the ancient flagstone floor. There, my father in my feet, treading stories between family and friends, leaving fragments between us as we assemble and re-assemble the man we thought we knew.

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Autoethnography trusts writing.

It trusts writing to bring us truths we have never met. It trusts writing to confront us with truths we need to contest.

Autoethnography finds connections we are seeking but can't yet trace. It casts shadows of necessary doubt, can find the lurking, elusive stories we are afraid to hear.

Autoethnography trusts writing is forged not only in our heads but in our hearts, in our guts and in our hips, in our sinews and on our lips.

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A different course, a different university, a different time, a different tutor: the professional doctorate in "Narrative and Life Story Research" at the University of Bristol in 2004, a few months after my father's death. The tutor is Jane Speedy. Ken Gale, who will become my longtime friend and collaborative writer, sits opposite me. We started the course together at the same time in February.

Jane is opening us to approaches to research that "[are] about taking people by surprise, capturing their attention, their hearts even, and providing different spaces from which to ponder the world or ponder the same spaces with different eyes."[4] The readings (Bochner, Ellis, Rambo Ronai, Pelias, and more) offer me a way of being a scholar I had never imagined possible.

I send a draft text to Jane in which I am telling stories of my father and of his death. I worry the text is not scholarly enough. I worry it is too fragmented. I worry there is too much of me in it. I worry it is too much.

She writes back, some days later, during which time my worries have become more acute. But, she says, the fragments of stories, assembled, make something. They draw her tears, she says. They draw life and loss. Blood.

I realize I can stay. I realize my body is not being pushed away from either reading or writing.

I realize I don't have to find a shallow lake to jump into. ■

NOTES

1. Mark Freeman, *Hindsight: The Promise and Peril of Looking Backward*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
2. Erin Manning, "Always More than One: The Collectivity of a Life," *Body & Society* 16 (March 2010): 117–127.
3. Tami L. Spry, *Body, Paper, Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography*. (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press. 2011), 167.
4. Jane Speedy, *Narrative Inquiry and Psychotherapy*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2008), 44.