FLESH, BLOOD, AND WORD: CREATIVITY AND WRITING 
AS PHYSIOLOGICAL PHENOMENA

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sitting in a graduate seminar one day, a girl said: “All good writers are substance abusers.” In response, others attacked, including myself, arguing that many writers are not. The professor entered the debate saying that many writers and artists want the feelings associated with an altered state of consciousness. Some are just weird enough to get this experience without the dope or alcohol, and others feel they need it. He continued, strongly advising anyone who is an aspiring writer to stay away from the stuff. However, the conversation kept me thinking long after it was over. Why do people with creative tendencies tend also towards drugs, suicide, and mental illness? Many creatives suffer psychological anguish to the point of taking their own lives: Ernest Hemmingway, Virginia Wolf, Sylvia Plath, Richard Brodigan, among others. Indeed, suicide and mental illnesses are often associated with creative writers; but, what other, less bleak, destructive relationships exist between creativity and the body? Why did my own moods affect my writing? How did hormonal changes (such as pregnancy), which alter brain chemistry, change my creative impulse? Why was a good run a sure way to provoke my creative juices—moving ideas a bit faster, emotionally sensitizing my body and mind? Understand, it wasn’t so much the illness or addiction that interested me as much as how each altered the state of the physical body and how such alteration may have enhanced or
hindered creativity. How did changes in the physical body impact creativity? Or, did they? What was the relationship between writing and the body?

Alice Flaherty is a neurologist and author who suffered a miscarriage, which changed the chemistry of her brain. In the wake of a post-partum brain state, she became hypergraphic (she couldn’t stop writing). This condition made her react differently to life. Her “mood disorder,” as other physicians named it, resulted in her thinking in a different state of mind. She was at the same time terrified and elated with her sudden mental change. The experience led her to research physical changes in the brain and the impact on creativity; specifically, she studied the relationship between the physical brain and the creativity of writers.

She found that the mind’s temporal lobe and limbic system were responsible for the creative impulse. While popular research divided the brain into simple left and right spheres, Flaherty explained that creative people, such as writers, use both sides of the brain. Furthermore, her studies revealed a correlation between emotion, drive, and meaning—both literal and philosophical. She also noted the affects of mental illness (such as mood disorders) based on one’s temporal lobe and limbic system.

In short, the writing process is affected by brain chemistry. Hormonal shifts, manic and depressive brain states, and even one’s level of endorphins produce good or bad moods that affect brain chemistry, which in turn influences the creative impulse. Altering brain states can serve to inspire prolific writing as well as to close a writer down—blocking her ability to communicate her ideas, frozen in panic. For example, a manic, or “high,” elevates one’s ability to write (though in an uncontrolled fashion when severe) while the counterbalancing “low” or depressed brain tends to deflate the
enthusiasm a smooth flow of ideas requires. Many writers suffering with manic-depression attest to the exhilaration of mania and the oppression of depression and its implications on writing. Writer and psychologist Kay Jamison shares that like slowed thought and verbal expression, “[f]atigue, lassitude, and a marked inability to exercise will are part and parcel of depression” (23). As a result, one may find it nearly impossible to communicate thoughts, feelings, ideas, despite the need and desire to do so. The reverse is true in manic states. In mania, speech and thought quicken. Impulsivity and acute senses avalanche a writer into a frenzied state of action. John Ruskin writes:

I roll on like a ball, with this exception, that contrary to the usual laws of motion I have no friction to contend with in my mind, and of course have some difficulty in stopping myself when there is nothing else to stop me. . .

. . . I am almost sick and giddy with the quantity of things in my head—trains of thought beginning and branching to infinity, crossing each other, and all tempting and wanting to be worked out. (29)

The creative impulse is useful in motivating a writer. It is a valuable channeling of energy that, when neglected, may produce anxiety and psychological, even physical detriments. Is it possible to negotiate brain states (like highs and lows) in order to maintain a steadier flow of creativity? How does emotive writing utilize both positive and negative emotions to inspire the creative, or does it? Alice Flaherty’s examination of the physical brain helps one see the organic nature of creativity and, in doing so, consider ways to prepare the body to write.

Flaherty’s work originates a fascinating connection between the physical body of writers and the process of writing, a connection that much of current composition theory
either ignores or disdains. Though engaging and valid, theorists such as Patricia Bizzell, David Bartholomae, Kenneth Bruffee, and James Berlin have maintained a primarily social focus in their composition studies, reflecting the current and dominant climate of the field. Such thoughtful considerations have lead compositionists forward in understanding the act of writing and creating effective pedagogy. Yet, I was left questioning the role of the individual’s body. Where did one’s physiology fit into theories of creativity? How would a better understanding of the body and its relationship to writing—if only as a Burkean terministic screen \(^1\)—enhance our understanding and teaching of writing?

I am interested in exploring theories of creativity that discuss neuro-physiological activity, the influence of biological brain and mind states on creativity and writing. I am interested in organic brain processes and creativity. My life as a writer and teacher draws me further into my quest: What is creativity? How can I inspire writing? What effective, pragmatic pedagogical approaches are at my disposal to develop a clearer connection between the body and writing? How important is an understanding of this paradox? I want to know more about the neglected relationship between the body and writing because my personal experiences as a writer and writing instructor lead me to believe that there exists a provocative and influential correlation.

For example, on most days before I begin writing I walk, infuse my morning-mind with coffee, and write a minimum of one page in my journal asking God for wisdom like Solomon. For years, I’ve assumed my routine and branded myself as simply “structured,” or, with less kind evaluation, anal retentive in my obsessive-compulsive tendencies. Yet, my routine persists. I write best under these conditions. There are
varying degrees of brain states, of course, and scores of variables which affect mood. I believe it is possible to influence one’s state of mind, actually altering brain chemistry, through simple things such as exercise, emotional encouragement, and a balance between tension and creative freedom.

My intentions for this thesis are three-fold. In section one, I give an overview of leading composition theory and evaluate how each envisions creativity. Drawing on the pragmatic tradition, I evade epistemological questions and offer a body-creativity connection based on a value-and-use paradigm that constructs a hybrid of theory and practice.

In section two, I offer a fluid definition of creativity discussing ideas from scholars who have written on the nature of creativity: Denise Shekerjian, Jane Piirto, Terry Dartnall, Linda Melrose, and Charels Anderson and Marian MacCurdy. I also consider creativity and its relationship to the body and implications for writing. Specifically, I focus on Alice Flaherty’s *The Midnight Disease* and her perspective on the creative brain. Flaherty’s personal experience with altered brain chemistry and creative production reveals that the brain is physiologically connected through chemical reactions, not separated by cognitive functions. She found, that emotion and logic cooperate. A neurological justification for creatives’ personalities illumines the role of emotion in the creative brain. She argues we have a need to communicate our emotional realities, that we construct meaning in doing so. And, in writing our bodies, writing through our emotions (as physiological brain states) and bodily pain, we establish and share a sense of self. I lead into a discussion of the need to write memoirs and personal narratives as a meaning-making and communicating tool.
In section three, I explore how neuro-physiological realities affect (or might affect) the ways personal narratives are currently used both inside the writing classroom as well as by published memoirists. We live in an age of memoir, which, I believe, is in response to the radical social construction of recent times. People want to be individual as well as identified with by others, and our personal narratives are an overt cry for this. I discuss how language is a metaphor for the body. I share what writers Flaherty, Scarry, Cameron, and Lowell say about the power (and powerlessness) of language. Also, I look at today’s bestselling memoirs (Frank McCourt, Kay Jamison, Augusten Burroughs, Anne Lamott) and discuss how these texts demonstrate that writing the body is persuasive and effective. Finally, I share how writing our personal narratives extends far beyond criticisms that construct it as mere navel gazing and weeping over the sagas of our lives. A brief look at my own texts and students’ illustrates the critical analysis, meaning-making, and agency building that becomes possible through personal narrative writing. Writing about our lives—and the pain inherent in them—constructs our sense of self and helps us make meaning in an age of meaninglessness.

Endnotes

1Kenneth Burke’s notion that life is only perceived through representational reality. We understand what is (or reality) metaphorically. One’s terministic screen is the lens through which his or her understandings emerge.
CHAPTER II

COMPOSITION THEORY AND THE CONCEPT OF CREATIVITY

In short, the theory doesn’t matter as much as the practice itself does. What you are doing is creating pathways in your consciousness through which the creative forces can operate. Once you agree to clearing these pathways, your creativity emerges. In a sense, your creativity is like your blood. (Julia Cameron xxiii)

Language communicates. While this fact is indisputable, what our words communicate and how they do so is heavily disputed. James Berlin argues that all writing pedagogies share the same concerns—“writer, reality, reader, and language”—but the differences in teaching theories are more than “mere cavils about which of these features to emphasize in the classroom” (233). Berlin argues that writing pedagogies differ because of “different rules about what can be known, how it can be known, and how it can be communicated. To teach writing is to argue for a version of reality, and the best way of knowing and communicating it” (234). If Berlin is right, the field of composition has gone through many versions of reality, from the late 1960s expressivist movement, to the 1970s cognitivists movement, to the 1980s social epistemic movement, and later to a concentration on cultural studies. In the 1990s, postmodernism entered the field with devastating critiques of all previous theories: be they social, cognitive, or personal. There began a deconstruction of these former camps and an evasion of their debate over the location of possible foundational truth and, thus, the source of good
writing: in the self, for the expressivists; in the brain, for the cognitivists; and in society, for the social theorists.

Writers teaching writing heralded the expressivist movement as the most radical shift in writing. Attention to the writing process emerged and changed, but not without consequential dissention. Bizzell asserted:

Composition scholars agree that the composing process exists or, rather, that there is a complex of activities out of which all writing emerges. We cannot specify one composing process as invariably successful. Current research in the field is beginning to draw a detailed picture of these composing processes. (175)

Expressivism thus had lasting implications on composition studies, legitimizing the process nature of writing and the usefulness of personal narrative.

Some leading figures in expressivism were Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, among others. Shifting the focus of studies to pedagogy, creativity, and individualism, the expressivists believed in fitting the academy to the student. Pedagogy became student-centered and writing about personal experience became a means through which students found a place in the academy—their stories allowing them voice and personal authority. Emotions and social differences opened the door for cultural expression. Standards and form came second to an organic processing of ideas where the final product was less important than the individual steps students took, progressing uniquely.

Murray merged the roles of teacher and professional writer. According to John Boe and Janet Marting, "Murray has demonstrated that students are most effectively
taught using a pedagogy based on the experiences of professional writers. Indeed, Murray has shown generations that teachers should be writers and writers can be teachers.” Murray explained that using personal narratives is “a growth of what we’ve found in teaching writing, that people have stories to tell and now that they’re allowed to tell them we’re finding them all over the place” (7). Bizzell said that composing became a means whereby students liberated themselves with unique, personal style. Students’ own perspectives on the world were as “valuable as the student’s own humanity.” She continued to argue that this philosophy served political ends as writing teachers encouraged students to create their own standards, instead of conforming to oppressive standards of the institution (180).

The expressivist movement also reconceived the discourse of the academy, particularly as figured in first year composition. The purposes of academic discourse became accounting of “the writer’s perceptions and feelings” as well as “analysis and generalizations” (Bizzell 180). Elbow redefined academic discourse as a personal rhetoric that gives reasons and evidence, “as a person speaking with acknowledged interests to others—whose interest and position one acknowledges and tries to understand” (142). This rhetorical shift invited the person behind the pen to step out and pull his reader into his experience.

Ken Macrorie places the self at the center of communication:

[T]he first requirement for good writing [is] truth; not the truth (whoever knows surely what that is?), but some kind of truth—a connection between the things written about, the words used in the writing, and the author’s
experience in a world she knows well—whether in fact or dream or imagination. (5)

Berlin explains that Macroric “constantly emphasizes ‘Telling Truths’ by which he means a writer must be ‘true to the feeling of his experience.’ His thrust throughout is on speaking in ‘authentic voice’ [...] indicating by this the writer’s private sense of things” (240). With such a focus, the writer owns her words, possessing a sense of power.

“Discourse carries power” (Elbow 135) and when students believe in their stories, their words, their ability to use language, it becomes easier to create original and valuable writing.

Expressivism thus opened the door for stories to engage students on a deeply personal level with the intricacies of language, communication, and thought—clearing the way towards creativity. Perceiving writing as a dialogic activity birthed an emotional relationship to the language, thus inspiring creativity. While expressivism focused on the individual and creativity, the concerns were mostly existential—the writing spirit, the inspired artist, the mystical, magical, and capable artist. The body as a physical reality was not the expressivists’ interest. The expressivists would not disagree with the shift I make—examining creativity and writing in regards to the physical body—because such a view does not deny the mystical, magical capacity of the individual. In fact, it validates it in concrete, measurable ways. The brain is wired to communicate, and brain chemistry influences our creative impulse. Meaning—emotion—creative impulse has an organic biological correlation, which supports the creative spirit advocated by the expressivist movement.
While cognitivism studied the brain, the movement rejected the spiritual nature of writing, expressivism’s organic process of creativity. Cognitivism left room for the individual but the frame became psychological and developmental. Cognitivism’s abstract studies of charts and diagrams made studies of composition mechanical. Writing was perceived not as a mystical, creative endeavor but rather as a reflection of the writer’s cognitive ability. Writers became subjects of cognitive and psychological study. Bizzell explains:

Some researchers have attempted to make the examination of working writers more rigorous by borrowing methodology from the social sciences. Composition scholar Linda Flower and her colleague, cognitive psychologist John R. Hayes, have pioneered the use of protocol analysis, a cognitive psychology research technique, for studying composing. (184)

Consequently, the writer’s mental processes were studied along with the writing. Cognitivism emphasized meaning-making in contrast to creativity; such studies were perceived as more functional.

Cognitivists interested in pedagogy such as James Britton, Janet Emig, Linda Flower and John Hayes used the developmental theory of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky to broaden the field of composition with cognitive, psychological studies. For example, James Britton shared Vygotsky’s emphasis on psychology and writing: “Only by understanding the entire history of sign development in the child and the place of writing in it can we approach a correct solution of the psychology of writing” (129). Britton explored the psychological relationship individual students assumed in their writing and reading. He considered active, engaged (participant) learning versus passive (spectator)
learning in regards to writing. He concluded that writing is more than motor skills, that writing is “a particular system of symbols and signs whose mastery heralds a critical turning-point in the entire cultural development of the child” (Vygotsky, qtd. in Britton 142). We learned to organize the world, to piece together perceptions as we wrote, according to Britton’s theory. He considered it man’s biological quest to shape perception through writing and talking of experiences (150). Therefore, the act of writing psychologically makes sense of the world.

Flower and Hayes considered the cognitive activity they believed occurred in the process of writing. Their theory explored thought processes and correlated the stages of writing with its goals. Flower and Hayes’ cognitive process theory stated:

1. The process of writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes, which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing.
2. These processes have a hierarchical, highly embedded organization in which any given process can be embedded within any other.
3. The act of composing itself is a goal-directed thinking process, guided by the writer’s own growing network of goals.
4. Writers create their own goals in two key ways: by generating both high-level goals and supporting sub-goals which embody the writer’s developing sense of purpose, and then, at times, by changing major goals or even establishing entirely new ones based on what has been learned in the act of writing. (265)
Flower and Hayes’ theory looked at writing as a fluid cognitive process, a developmental activity in which one established goals from “ongoing exploration.” Cognitivism was a process of self-discovery based on cognitive stages of development. Unlike the Platonic self-discovery of the expressivists that focused on “the inner and privileged immaterial realm”—oftentimes through personal narratives—the cognitivists’ interest rested in the biological, cognitive realm of the individual (Berlin 240). Cognitivism focused on “an individual psychology, equating the learner with that which must be learned” (Bartholomae 486). The flesh and blood of a writer fell out of the equation, replaced by mechanical examination of the structure of the brain and consequential cognitive processes.

Janet Emig’s studies looked at writing and learning strategies of the brain to discuss the relationship between learning and writing as functional. She said: “Writing represents a unique mode of learning—not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique. [. . .] Writing serves learning uniquely because writing as process-and-product possesses a cluster of attributes that correspond uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies” (7). Though Emig argues for the organic relationship between writing and the brain, she does so in respect to learning, not creativity. She argues for writing as a Mode of Learning, changing the cognitivists’ focus from writing as a reflection of the writer’s cognitive ability, to writing as an avenue towards developing cognition.

Social constructivists like Patricia Bizzell, James Berlin, David Bartholomae, and Kenneth Bruffee reframed composition studies by shifting the focus of attention to the social. Bartholomae criticized cognitivism:
At a time when composition could have made the scene of instruction the object of scholarly inquiry, there was a general shift away from questions of value and the figure of the writer in a social context of writing to questions of process and the figure of the writer as an individual psychology. If you turn to work by figures who might otherwise be thought of as dissimilar—Britton, Moffett, Emig, Northrop Frye, Jerome Bruner—you will find a common displacement of the social and a celebration of the individual as fundamentally (or ideally) congruent with culture and history. [...] School is secondary, instrumental, something to be overcome. And, in a similar transformation, writing becomes secondary, instrumental (to thinking or problem solving or deep feeling or unconscious imaginative forces). (485-6)

Theorists of the social constructionist movement sought to understand writing as a socio-ideological phenomenon, breaking away from expressivism’s subjective truth and cognitivism’s universal concern with mental processes. As a result, they argued writing was created by and expressed through cultural effects. Writing problems were a sign not of cognitive insufficiencies but of cultural differences. This socio-ideological position invited narrative and “personal” writing as a means to examine culture, and composition became cultural studies.

In this way, social constructivism pushed against a focus on the individual. Berlin explained how the teaching of writing is really the teaching of perception and invention, that “[w]e are teaching a way of experiencing the world, a way of ordering and making sense of it” (246). Unlike Britton’s explanation that writing was a way to shape
perception, to psychologically serve us, Berlin’s explanation turned to social, external awareness that ultimately made us more individually conscious of our position within society.

From Bartholomae’s notion that social concerns represented value and intellectual inquiry, to Berlin’s belief that the writing classroom was a way to shape perception, Bruffee’s notion that collaborative learning was critical in students’ intellectual development, and Bizzell’s push to restructure the field in terms of socially defined “contact zones,” the field of composition was laden with social considerations. Bruffee discussed collaborative learning, peer and group activities, as “social engagement in intellectual pursuits” that he considered a “genuine part of students’ educational development” (412). Bizzell, too, realized a very social climate in composition studies. She discussed multiculturalism and the need for “productive dialogue” (482) between varying positions within the field. She pushed for inclusive categorization:

In short, I am suggesting that we organize English studies not in terms of literary or chronological periods, nor essentialized racial or gender categories, but rather in terms of historically defined contact zones, moments when different groups within the society contend for the power to interpret what is going on. (483)

Though her approach shifted the focus onto a thematic concentration, social concerns continued to permeate the field.

Social constructionism was an advantageous theoretical point of view because it added to what influenced writing—social and cultural factors. Also, this approach softened the stigmatization of poor writing, as it was seen not as personal failure (on
account of stupidity) but a sign of cultural disadvantage. Mike Rose argued that students can suffer writers’ block when given rigid writing advice, especially when the “rules” are vastly different from one’s home discourse (395). Academic discourse changed to include students’ voices, inviting personal identity (perceived as a reflection of one’s various social influences) into one’s writing. Basic writers and minority students were given a place in the academy that they were often times denied because of their differences. It was argued that social constructionism maintained a political agenda, to master a version of academic discourse through which to change the academy. Bizzell says, “[I]f academic writing is still a weapon of political oppression, students who master it may be able to turn the weapon against the oppressors” (188).

The social sweep through the field of composition was liberating and empowering for these reasons, yet a totalizing effect closed out other possibilities. The social emphasis conceived of the body as a social construct, a conglomeration of various socio-cultural influences in place of an organic self. This refiguring concerns me because I believe it is more useful, more valuable to consider social, personal, as well as biological—physical—influences on writing. Social constructionism leaves out a consideration of the physical affects on writing begun by the cognitivists and narrows the lens through which we glance at creativity.

In the 1990s the postmodern movement swept in to sweep out former theoretical camps. Dominant figures such as Patricia Harkin, John Schilb, and Victor Vitanza critiqued social theory. Vitanza critiqued Bizzell, Bartholomae, Berlin, and Karen Burke LeFevre on the notion of social bond. Vitanza argued, for example, that social epistemic theorists have “neglected to continue to counterquestion their conclusions, that is, to be
suspicious, to drift enough” (157). He continued, asserting these theorists’ incipient foundational stance: “Though they point out that the self (the inventor) is constructed socially, they neglect to point out similarly that the social (or pathos or consensus) is itself previously (and insidiously and invidiously) constructed. […] They, like their predecessors, neglect to be suspicious of their ‘narrative of emancipation’ (157). These are feisty words. Vitanza used the self-same theory to demonstrate the postmodern notion that there were no transient answers, no absolute solutions, no single perceptions. Rather, suspicion and “drifting,” a continuing cycle of breaking a part, was the informed response.

To postmodernists, social epistemic rhetoric was too goal oriented, too rigid, too foundational. Jane Flax argued discourse could not be grounded in Truth, be it individual, cognitive, or social. Discourse did not reflect a universal narrative. Foundational “value,” “intrinsic merit,” “objectivity,” “rights,” “freedoms,” were all non-existent (48).

Postmodernism was reactive to modernism, where the world was seen as broken and fragmented. Yet, in modernism there was still the refuge of the self and the healing power of the artist. The world of Joyce, Kafka, Lawrence was in no way less fragmented, no less broken, no less frightening then that of postmodernism. The difference in modernism was a belief in the self as a refuge from the fragmentation and the agency of the artist to make something beautiful. Constant change and brokenness blurred the distinctions between categories, thus hybridizing composition theory and pedagogical practice.
Most importantly, postmodernism complicated agency to the point of paralysis. A person was a subject of language. Individuals did not use words but were created by them. Language was arbitrary. Social and biological concerns were metaphors because thoughts could not be experienced outside of language. The person was acted upon by her words; her ideas were *Fragments of Rationality*.

In light of creativity, postmodernism's openness allowed for possibility and range of perspective. The idea of fragmented self invited critiques of our individual humanity and the corresponding contradictions within us. However, while postmodernism enabled originality through its non-prescriptive non-foundationalism, it rejected the notion of "value." As I will discuss shortly, creativity without value can veer into nihilism, for some perhaps even insanity.

Where pragmatism considered that which was persuasive as a gauge for making things, postmodernism's deconstructive, non-foundational, complete openness suggests anything goes. Lester Faigley wrote of the deadlock inherent in postmodern theory and its influence on composition. Because there was no metanarrative in postmodern theory, there were few suggestions for a "positive program legitimated by authority" (Bizzell 20). The lingering foundationalism of the social epistemic movement was broken; therefore, Bizzell called for a positive program with a place for the subject that was "nevertheless non-foundational." Given the need for constructive, non-foundational approaches to writing and creativity, pragmatism opened venues to refiguring expressivism and possibilities of the body, positing value (that which is useful) and agency (we can affect our creative impulse).
Pragmatism as the Re-figuring of Expressivism: A Portal to Creativity and the Body

When we look to Dewey, we learn how our ideas about the student-curriculum relationship are rooted in our assumptions about experience, knowledge, and habits of good living. Thus, as we experiment with Dewey’s educational ideas, their substantial theoretical footing allows us to make more considered decisions in the ‘laboratory’ of our classrooms.

(Fishman 2)

John Dewey’s work has been used by figures such as Janet Emig, Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy, Thomas Newkirk, Lad Tobin, and Donald Jones to refigure the social climate of composition studies. Dewey explained at the turn of the century how the self and the world were not separate but necessary for one another. He shook loose the rigid boundaries set around personal versus social concerns and suggested pragmatism serve as the loop hole, the means to a negotiated end. Deweyan philosophy was fluid. What worked in practice took precedence over, even validated, theory. As the above quote suggests, however, the context was still social. What worked was based on social, ideological “experience, knowledge, and habits of good living.”

To John Dewey and his followers, reality was gray. He privileged breadth of analysis over distinct classification. In other words, science, tradition, religion, and all life experiences contributed to one’s knowledge. Dewey and his followers perceived the self and the world, or the social and the personal, as conditional. They cooperated, interacted. In this way, nested dualisms, or concepts that appeared mutually exclusive, blended and overlapped into complementary forces. For example, Dewey’s educational philosophy was a flexible, constructive endeavor:
Dewey’s educational goals focus on the development of certain habits and dispositions rather than on the acquisition of a fixed body of knowledge or belief. He maintains the world is changing. He calls it ‘unstable, uncannily unstable’ (*Experience and Nature* 38). [...] Dewey wants students to develop flexibility or ‘intelligence’—the ability to respond to novel situations, access their culture’s resources, reshape their plans, and take positive residue from these experiences. Of course this critical and constructive process must be done, if it is to be moral, in cooperation with others. (Fishman and McCarthy 346-7)

Different perspectives unveiled unique points of view. The same problem may have appeared practical, aesthetic, or moral, depending on the vantage point. Dewey explained how experiences were brought in the classroom and should be had in the classroom. He called this a need for active learning or a “reconciliation of tensions between the self and its surroundings” (19). In the writing classroom, this meant personal narrative because the personal experience transitioned into a dialogic, social activity as others related and reacted.

Perhaps the most influential proponents of Dewey’s theories written in the field of composition were Fishman and McCarthy. They revisited criticisms of expressivism that proclaimed the movement “dead.” Fishman defended expressivism against the notion of the isolated writer. He supported Peter Elbow’s use of expressivist pedagogy as a means to better understanding one’s self and, ultimately, society. Considering expressivism as rooted in German romanticism, Fishman explained that personal experience was not used for isolation but to identify with one another and restructure community. Elbow and the
German Romanticist Johann Gottfried Herder suggested writing was a social connection. In 18th Century German Romanticism, the people sought “unity through diversity.” The people didn’t trust one another and constructed a “social contract” to ensure protection: the trade of liberty for protection (William May 648). The contract united the personal and social—Elbow and Herder suggested we write to understand our own thoughts and to communicate with society, continually reshaping and reforming our social worlds.

Neo-expressivists or pragmatists such as Thomas Newkirk, Lad Tobin, Karen Paley, and Michelle Payne examined writing and writing pedagogy from a non-foundationalist perspective. They advocated use of the personal narrative for pragmatic reasons, but their focus remained dominantly social. Personal narratives were a pragmatic way to develop writers. Newkirk discussed students’ autobiographies, or essays, as narratives of development. Erving Goffman’s notion of “presentation of self” supported Newkirk’s belief that students strived to formulate their ideas, experiences, and understandings into acceptable form through their writing. As Goffman suggested, “in all public performances [. . .] we selectively reveal ourselves in order to match an idealized sense of who we should be” (4). Writing personal narratives was viable, explained Newkirk, because students saw themselves as learners, revised beliefs, learned narrative conventions of literature, celebrated self-discovery, and developed critical thinking skills.

Newkirk supported the narrative of development where a student grew and changed. Wise, learned, skeptical, Newkirk held a notion of the essay, derived from Montaigne, that was challenging and exploratory, open to inconsistencies that demonstrated critical analysis of the self and world. Personal student writing was criticized for cornering the teacher into the role of counselor, but Newkirk pointed out
that students who confess their intimate realities want to share and through the act of writing they become consoled. Students want to have their experiences treated as normal, and their texts allow them this right.

Personal narratives were criticized for their emotionality, but Newkirk affirmed the importance of emotion in real life. While the academy shies away from emotion, life requires it. There is a place for emotion in personal narrative, but Newkirk also addressed the need for reason and ethos. The most persuasive writing stems from personal, emotional concerns that are examined reasonably and presented credibly.

Tobin said emotion and relationships were essential in the writing classroom:

By attempting to edit feelings, unconscious associations, and personal problems out of a writing course, we are fooling ourselves and shortchanging our students. The teaching of writing is about solving problems, personal and public, and I don’t think we can have it both ways: we cannot create intensity and deny tension, celebrate the personal and deny the significance of the personalities involved. In my writing courses, I want to meddle with my students’ emotional life and I want their writing to meddle with mine. (33)

Classroom relationships shaped writing. Tobin addressed the expressivist shift of teacher authority, correcting the faulty assumption that teachers got out of the way so students could just write. This, he explained, was “one-dimensional.” Teachers were still the center of de-centered classrooms. In fact, the stakes were even higher with personal narrative and conferencing, which gave the teacher more authority. Tobin suggested the real key for student-teacher success was to develop good relationships.
Like Tobin, Paley worked with elements of expressivism to conceive a philosophy which proved useful for her. Paley redefined expressivism. Her definition was fluid and flexible, like plastic. She didn’t pigeon hole the genre, point of view, context, or social extent to which expressivist pedagogy moved the student. Paley called herself a social-expressivist and explained expressivism included, but was not limited to, personal narrative that used the writer’s experiences as the focus; first person was used; sometimes the individual consciousness was isolated, and sometimes the personal self represented one or more social contexts; the narrator may or may not relate to other’s experiences (13). Paley’s re-assessment of expressivism justified criticisms of the movement’s strictly personal focus. She called the personal essay “psychosocial” and explained that it could communicate social significance—not that it must or should, but that it could. This was an important pragmatic distinction because it opened the personal narrative genre to the social while not forcing the social into it indefinitely. She saw personal narratives as often representing gender, class, family, and ethnic group matters; thus, personal issues were social issues and social issues were personal.

Picking up on the potential of personal narratives, Michelle Payne examined personal narratives that explored physical pain, and surmised that we “stop seeing emotion, pain, and trauma as threatening, anti-intellectual, and solipsistic, and instead begin to ask how we might, like therapists, feminist theorists, and philosophers, begin to recognize them as ways of knowing” (30). The body, she argued by relying on Foucault, was not only a representation of the personal but a composite of the social. The body was “not our own anymore. Or, at least within the academic discussions of the body. It is more text than substance, more a product of language than a corporeal presence” (xxi).
We did not need to fear personal writing, but rather (as Foucault argues) should consider the implications of deviant identity, emotion, power, and discipline that writing about the physical body suggested.

Pragmatism is a constructive approach to creativity and writing. In evading epistemological questions (What is the body? Is the body a metaphor, a social construct?), I aim to enter the conversation not to prove one theoretical stance over another (such as social vs. personal vs. biological), but, rather, to discuss why I find a neuro-physiological approach to creativity and writing persuasive.

Pragmatism ties the validity of a concept to its usefulness. While I am not denying the social influences on writing and creativity (any more than I would deny the personal or mental), considering biological influences on writing (specifically the brain and creativity) presents useful possibilities. Writers, writing students, and writing instructors may re-conceive of one’s ability to write, understanding it as a cognitive activity but also a meaning-making, emotional experience. Perceiving creativity in regards to neurology may encourage writers to channel their emotional energy into their writing and encourage writing instructors to use emotive writing as powerful motivation. Neurological studies on creativity show that brain chemistry is affected by exercise, hormonal shifts, and changes in moods, caused by mood altering substances like, prescribed and illegal drugs, and good and bad moods. Knowing there exists relationship between moods and the creative impulse opens doors for the creative to engage in activities like exercise, change of environment, music, journaling, and sometimes medication necessary in balancing mood disorders. Furthermore, writers’ block is a bit less daunting when one considers physiological reasons behind it, instead of assuming
God has turned His back on you, or you have mysteriously, magically lost your *creative powers*. A neuro-physiological terministic screen implies all people are creative, all seek to make meaning, all experience emotion. Each human being needs to communicate to others.

Pragmatism’s non-foundational approach enables countless possibility, which is the heart of creativity. In addition, the critical, searching spirit of pragmatism encourages trying new things. A non-exhaustive, non-foundational, experimental, rather than anti-foundational, positive program is possible through pragmatism’s hybridity. In looking at creativity and the body in the spirit of pragmatism, I now turn to consideration of writing and the work of Alice Flaherty.
CHAPTER III
REVISITING CREATIVITY AND WRITING: A NEURO-PHYSIOLOGICAL TERMINISTIC SCREEN

Definitions of creativity are both fluid and multilayered. Indeed, writer and education professor Jane Piirto describes the scholarship on creativity as stressing creativity’s “uncommonness, unorthodoxy, [and] unconventionality” (8). Specifically, she sees “man’s capacity to produce new ideas, insights, inventions of artistic objects, which are accepted as being [of] social, spiritual, aesthetic, scientific, or [of] technological value” (8) as the essence of creativity. Thus, whether cognitive, psychological, social and physical (neurological), studies of creativity offer definitions that aim only to approximate the elusive act of creation rather than limit it. Accordingly, the descriptive analysis below illustrates variable perspectives rather than dissidence or endorsement.

Creativity scholar Linda Melrose defines creativity as a physical act that requires self-discipline and follow through, openness to mistakes and unusual perceptions, courage and flexibility, and a willingness to be free of other’s expectations. To be creative one must trust one’s body, relax, sweat out an idea and physically go through with it (268). She implies that all people are creative, but production takes determination and willingness to persist in the face of diversity. So, while all people are able to be creative, only some have the will to make their creativity to flourish.
Terry Dartnall, professor of artificial intelligence and logic at Griffith University, distinguishes between what Jesse Prinz and Lawerence Barsalou call mundane and exceptional creativity.1 Exceptional creativity is defined as ground-breaking form of expression, a combination of elements from different domains. It requires effort and deliberation. Mundane creativity takes little effort but is important to the creator even though it is not historically or socially significant (107). My childhood poems, birthed beside Nana’s Christmas fire, or the “books” I wrote to entertain my friends at sleepovers, even goofy nicknames that my friends and I originated, such as “fart-biscuit” for the recess monitor, are all examples of mundane creativity in that they are obviously for the simple entertainment of the creators (with no remarkable historical or social significance). Dartnall suggests degrees of creative vary significantly; however, all people have some creative potential.

Creativity scholar Denise Shekerjian studied McAurther Award winners (an honor given to the most creative geniuses) and her interviews and analysis led her to believe that creativity is just connecting things. This intrigues me because good writing is often associating unlike things. Literary devices such as metaphors, similes, personification work to illustrate particular images in the reader’s mind through unusual association: the cat’s sandpaper-tongue rubbed against my bare thigh like the meat grater at the deli, shaving thick slabs of irritation with every lick. Many titles also pair unusual phrases to grab the reader’s attention and symbolize a wealth of ideas behind the cover. For example, Ann Lamott’s Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son’s First Year metaphorically suggests a journey into motherhood that is complicated and vitally important. The words “Operating” and “Instructions” have connotations not typically
associated with learning to raise a child, but in using these words Lamott projects her unique meaning through her peculiar voice. In other words, creatives see things others don’t because they typically associate and synthesize things in a new way. The creative mind may look at clouds and find pictures—an image of a face, an animal, a mountain. Perhaps the image evokes a feeling that inspires the creative to transform a blank page—with paint, with words—to re-create a world that another can experience.

In addition, I think there is elemental pleasure in associating the divergent and a need to communicate the ideas that association enables. Relating two unlike things evokes particular sensations, communicating more of an image, an idea, an emotion through the relationship. For example, Lamott describes her love for her newborn, but instead of just saying I love him, she gives this picture: “None of us could take our eyes off him. He was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. He was like moonlight” (19). The newborn is one image, the moonlight is a separate image, and what she communicates goes beyond the literal—it becomes a feeling, a notion that can’t be directly communicated with words.

Shekerjian discusses the possibilities inherent in creative association:

I cling to the optimistic belief that the haphazard and the hopscotch, the creative that sips among many flowers, may actually come up with something. It’s finally an irrational belief in most cases, an unrealistic goal. But one holds to the sense that just sipping broadly enough, from enough flowers, strange and fruitful pollinations will arise. (Preface)

In other words, eccentricity, whether rationally verifiable or not, may aid creation because “strange” notions, unfinished ideas, unusual association may eventually work
into “fruitful pollinations.” Perhaps openness to multiple ideas and associations gives one hope that some (from these) are likely to be good. As I write this thesis, I see this theory in practice. My thesis started as an interest in the body and the affects of physicality in creating. As I continue with research on creativity, more and more intrigues me, takes me further away from the topic I began with and into an eclectic mess. All the while, I hope that some of my research and the notions it spawns will be useful. “Sipping broadly,” however, can be difficult to contain, to make cohesive and communicable.

While these and other scholars examine creativity from psychological, artistic, and even socio-ideological perspectives\(^2\), Alice Flaherty’s work concentrates on organic brain functions and corresponding creative impulses. She explores the biology behind our ability and desire to write. She found that there exists a relationship between the ways our brain handles emotion—drive—and creativity. Most importantly, this relationship illustrates that we have a need to communicate our emotional realities and in doing so we make meaningful our lives and serve the primary purpose of communication—sharing a sense of self.

Traditional studies of the brain divide it into the left and right hemispheres, delegating logic as a function of the left, creativity a function of the right. After suffering a miscarriage, Flaherty experienced a hormonal surge that altered her brain chemistry. She could not stop writing, creating ideas that spiraled into an intense creative-psychosis. She had post-it notes covering her office walls. The more emotional she became, the more driven and creative she became. Emotions, she argues, are physiological states, and her altered brain chemistry revealed this to her. The fact that her logical, analytical brain
still contributed to her way of thinking during this emotional upheaval helped her realize the relationship between the supposed halves of the brain. Thus, she complicated the popular divide between the emotional, creative brain and logical, analytical brain. The brain is more complicated, more interactive than that, she argues. Emotion, as a state of mind, can be logical, can be analytical, can be—also—motivating and thoughtful. The brain is physiologically connected through chemical reactions, not separated by cognitive functions.

Energized by her insight, Flaherty began studying the phenomena of hypergraphia (excessive writing) and writer’s block. She found that the physiological state of emotion contributes to one’s creative production. She found mood disorders (bipolar disease, temporal lobe epilepsy, Geschwind Syndrome) have corresponding creative cycles. Simply put, high or manic states enable more creative production, while deflated emotional states such as depression disable one’s creativity. In emotionally high states some individuals (such as herself) became hypergraphic, and when the depressed cycle ensued, writer’s block set in. These writing states have neurological conditions, which help put into perspective the realness in one’s creativity—creative ability is beyond a whimsical mood. It is a physical condition.

The key to Flaherty’s understanding of creativity and the brain’s left-right connectivity is her physiologically based concept of emotion. Addressing a tradition of opposition between reason and emotion in Western (Romantic) thought, she argues that “the same tradition is responsible for the way we speak of emotions as things that happen to us from outside (‘I was overcome by rage’), as if there were a rational me separate from the emotional me, an ego distinct from its id” (194). Emotions are a component of
our brains; they are physiological brain states. For example, “a truly rational person will have certain emotions as the consequence of proper understanding—it would be irrational for an American not to feel grief on hearing of the destruction of the World Trade Center” (195). Emotion and logic cooperate.

Flaherty argues the urge to write is a secondary drive that grows out of our primary drive to communicate. She believes that that which is emotionally significant is what we most need to communicate. When we write, then, we write with and through our emotions. She writes: “An economist who cloaks his deeply felt personal beliefs in dry technical prose might be at once more honest and rhetorically more effective if he let some of his passion show through” (195). Flaherty’s physio-neurological look at creativity reveals that emotion, meaning, and creative production are brain states.

In addition, she notes the connection between physiological mood disorders and the creative genius of writers both past and present—from Dostoevsky to Conrad, Sylvia Plath to Stephen King. Soren Kierkegaard even said, “A poet is an unhappy being whose heart is torn by secret sufferings but whose lips are so strangely formed that when the sighs and cries escape them, they sound like beautiful music” (208). Many writers attest to their moody nature, illustrating the correlation between mood and the creative brain.

But how do Flaherty’s findings affect the field of composition; specifically, how are they of value to a writing instructor who writes? I use the rest of this chapter to examine Flaherty’s personal story of a miscarriage and how it sparked her research into creativity and the influence of the limbic system and temporal lobes. I discuss her need theory, a notion that humanity has a biological need to cry out, to communicate what is on the inside, and that this need implies a creative potential in all people. The chemistry
of the brain directly correlates to one’s emotional intensity and drive to communicate. Thus, writing memoirs or personal narratives may serve as a therapeutic for creatives.

**Alice Flaherty’s Neurological Theory of Creativity**

The mind arises from the brain as a physical entity in evolutionary history; how such a discussion tells us who and how we are; the rightness of knowing how we know; how brain science helps explain learning; how the properties of language that the brain empowers us with make for change—[is] the very basis of healing. (Flaherty 202)

While in graduate school, Flaherty suffered a miscarriage. In the wake of a post-partum brain state, she became hypergraphic (she couldn’t stop writing). This condition made her react differently to life. Her “mood disorder,” as other physicians named it, altered her state of mind, and she was at the same time terrified and elated with her sudden mental change. The experience led her to research physical changes in the brain and the impact on creativity; specifically, she studied the relationship between the physical brain and writing.

She shares her personal experiences throughout her text:

On good days, ideas would wake me at four in the morning, tendrils of words coiling around me like some heady perfume. It was as if a door had opened onto a hot wind from the tropics, the sort of wind that propels ships carrying peacock feathers and rubies and apes and incense. On bad days, the words were like a charnel house through which I had to search for the bodies of people I loved. In either case, the desire to write was overpowering. (12)
Flaherty’s experience shows an obsessive desire to write triggered by an altered hormonal state. A month later, she was unable to write, at least near the same level of intensity. She was depressed and says her apathy was a relief from the emotional rigor she was locked into preceding it.

She eventually gave birth to healthy twins and experienced the same fluctuation in her hormones and consequent moods, noting their impact on her creativity. She began to wonder how her brain chemistry affected her writing, noticing her need to write intensified while manic and lessened at times when she was depressed. She tried a mood stabilizer, which decreased her periods of agitation and made her unable to write. Her head was filled with ideas, but she was unable to articulate them. She never had writer’s block in the excruciating manner she did with the drugs. Flaherty’s hypergraphic writing felt like a disease as well as the best thing that ever happened to her. Her obsessive need to write alienated her from family and friends—the world—yet she experienced such drive and emotional satisfaction in the act of writing while manic that she hesitated to label her power psychosis.

Flaherty also shares some alarming statistics: post-partum major depression occurs after one in ten deliveries, post-partum mania occurs in one in 1,000, and each state can come in complicated mixtures. One manic feature is hypergraphia. She explains how the brain is actually changed after severe manic states and how this affected her writing:

Even now, when I am writing well, my pulse speeds up, I feel gripped by something stronger than my will, and I have some of the delicious feeling I had at my most hypergraphic. When I can’t find an idea, I now much
more quickly begin to think that I am blocked. [...] Because my drive to
write has been so magnified and altered by illness, I think I see more
clearly how important are the emotions that underlie periods of writing
well and periods of block. The pleasure of writing and the pain of its
absence tells something crucial about the motivation to write and the way
it springs from our instinct to communicate. It is a feeling that is essential
both for our ability as writers and for our potential to interact as human
beings. (13-14)

Flaherty’s experience is a perfect illustration of my thesis: her brain physically changed,
causing an emotional change that altered her creative productivity. She connects science
and biology with emotion and creativity to shed amazing insight on the relationship
between neuro-physiological phenomena and writing.

Her studies help me make sense of the cycles I notice in my own creativity. I
have noticed a marked increase in my dreams. I do not know if these are on account of
increased anxieties, fluctuating hormones (I am eight months pregnant), or a more
shallow sleep due to frequent trips to the restroom throughout the night. In addition to
my interrupted sleep pattern, my moods and creativity have also changed since
pregnancy. Flaherty notes: “It is likely that pregnancy-induced mood disorders and
hypergraphia are linked to the wild hormone fluctuations that happen at birth (a similar
change may explain premenstrual syndrome, and estrogen can treat depression even in
men)” (13). I am not hypergraphic or suffering from acute mania or depression, but I do
experience a flip-flopping of mild manic and depressed states of mind every other day.
These moods correlate with how tired I feel and greatly affect my writing. When more
manic, I sleep less and have more energy, which feeds into my writing. I write more urgently, am less critical of my ideas, and produce more. On occasions I feel up, my words spread across the page like butter. I have confidence and energy that isn’t always warranted upon the next day’s review of my work. However, on the alternating days, when I feel down, my fingers are still against the keyboard and I second-guess every word pressed out. Sometimes, when persistent, I am a better critic of my work on these days and eventually move into a sober diligent mode of concentrated thought where I am usually able to produce something. Kay Jamison discusses possible significance in interacting mood states and writing:

Work that may be inspired by, or partially executed in, a mild or even psychotically manic state may be significantly shaped or partially edited while its creator is depressed and put into final order when he or she is normal. It is interaction, tension, and transition between changing mood states, as well as the sustenance and discipline drawn from periods of health [. . .] that ultimately give such power to the art that is born in this way. (6)

My mental states are far from the complicated conditions discussed above. However, my emotional state of mind affects my sleep, motivation, and writing production.

Writers, teachers, students, literary critics, psychiatrists, and neurologists may describe why they write differently, but one commonality is “the mind that writes is also the brain that writes” (1). In other words, creative potential, whatever else it is, is inherently biological; brain states affect our creativity.
Studying the creative impulse from a biological stance provides concrete, logical reasons for the mind’s abstractions (beliefs, convictions, emotions), yet it also reveals a painful potential dichotomy. As Flaherty argues:

the pain of the mind-body problem—the question of how mental states such as experiences, beliefs, and desires can relate to brain states such as neuronal membrane potentials, receptor densities, and writing diagrams—does not vanish quite as easily as the problem itself. However logically consistent it may be to believe that I write both because I choose to and because I am a chain of molecular interactions, to think them at the same time hurts [. . .]. (119)

As an artist and scientist, Flaherty uses her creativity and logic to blend dichotomies—but not to try and make them disappear. Her theory is ultimately useful not because she collapses binaries to argue for one view of creativity over another, but because she offers tangible evidence for the creative impulse.

For example, in The Midnight Disease, Flaherty intricately explicates the brain-creativity connection. The temporal lobes are located in the cerebral cortex behind the ears and are important for understanding word meaning and meaning in a philosophical sense. Changes in the temporal lobes can produce fluctuation in one’s need to write. The limbic system is the seat of emotion and drive. This section of the brain is responsible for the feeling of inspiration and is connected to the temporal lobes more strongly than any other region of the cortex. As Flaherty explains,

This strong link [between the temporal lobes and the limbic system] underlies the importance of emotion and drive to creativity—factors that
are anatomically as well as conceptually distinct from the cognitive
contribution of the rest of the cerebral cortex. The limbic system also
reflects the way mood swings can drive creativity. (5)

I often experience moods influencing my creativity and have seen moods have interesting
affects on my grandfather, father, and aunt. My aunt suffers with bipolar disorder. She
recently shared how within a single year she wrote her dissertation and a nutrition manual
while teaching and working two jobs. She explained how her manic state made her feel
there was no end to her exuberance, that she couldn’t expel enough energy. My
grandfather (also given to extreme moods) often gets emotional and philosophical when
he drinks. I see a correlation between the intensity of his emotion and the depth of his
philosophical conversation. My dad, as a taxidermist, paints replicas of fish. This is a
job he began about five years ago, and it has made all of the difference in the world for
him. Instead of the “nasty energy,” as the family calls it, dad now gravitates downstairs
to his workbench to create. He slips on his white mouth-mask and spends hours air-
brushing intricate designs on the plaster-fish. He has learned to channel his emotional
energy—or moods—into his creative production.

The relationship in the brain among meaning, emotion, drive, visualization,
action, judgment, and speech helps me understand some of what I go through in writing.
For example, I began this thesis, or ruminating about writing it, while in my second
semester of graduate school. As I thought about it, I began to feel annoyed. This
emotion intensified as the theoretical discussions about the social verses personal
conception of the writing “self” began to drone on and on. It also led to my desire to
make a personally meaningful connection to my studies. I needed to write out my
complaints—first in reading responses and later in prospectus drafts. I had to visualize, what I saw and then create another picture of a re-figured approach to composition studies. I acted through my writings and later judged my ideas as I discussed these with peers and professors.

What I noticed was this: the clearer my vision, the stronger my writing. The intensity of the emotion was there at the beginning, but my judgment, my conscious pounding out of ideas, improved the more I discussed (through internal and external dialogue and reading) my vision. Meaning grew the longer I pursued it.

In essence, Flaherty’s work on the brain and creativity reiterates what I experience as a writer: meaning, mood, and emotion, in the physical sense of these words, have tremendous implications on my writing. When writing on personally important topics (such as my thesis) my passion increases and keeps me more engaged in the processing of ideas and the creation of the text that communicates these. Conversely, when in a slump—or emotional low—I lose my sense of meaning, my overall purpose, and find it very difficult to write. At such times, I need to change my pace, physically move (go for a run), allowing my brain a break and a resurgence of new brain chemistry. Stepping away from the creative process for too long, however, sometimes makes moving forward difficult. In the course of writing this, I gave birth and enjoyed a too long winter recess from my studies. Returning to half formed ideas with dampened emotion derailed the entire process for a while. Perceiving emotion, mood, and meaning as neuro-physiological states validates their concrete, tangible affects by helping me understand these conditions are as real and cyclical as my body.
Many writers understand that creativity is affected by physical conditions. The body and mind relationship is obvious in many instances. For example, most undergraduate classes are only fifty-five minutes, an hour and a half at most. Some graduate courses are two and a half hours, with a mid-way break, but meet only once a week. There are biological reasons for this. The brain can only hold attention for so long, the bladder is only so large, one’s legs are idle for a period of time before they distract from learning. Many writers walk. Exercise pumps blood throughout the body, including the brain, and the limbic system and temporal lobes may be inspired to better respond under such conditions. A warm cup of coffee can comfort cold hands, inject one with a touch of energy, make a body and mind content. Overeating can distract the brain from creating (feeling stuffed slows me down), but hunger may do the same. (When hunger sets in, all I want is food. I cannot concentrate on communicating abstract meaning). Just as a vicious cold can crust up the creative capacities, a bad mood may make writing either possible (motivating one to reflection) or impossible (leaving one empty). Emotions, as physiological states, correspond to creativity, as do other physical conditions.

Flaherty notes the neglected relationship between mood and creativity in writing instruction:

Creativity has been more closely linked to mood instability than to cognitive traits such as high IQ. Of course, you need not become manic-depressive to write, any more than you need to develop temporal lobe epilepsy. Most writers do not have either trait—at least to the degree that they have had a diagnostic label pinned on them. Nonetheless, even in
normal writers, the neurobiology of mood and the limbic drive to write may be equally or more important than purely cognitive skills taught in most writing courses. (33)

Importantly, Flaherty does not dismiss the importance of teaching cognitive traits, but stresses that neurobiology shows a stronger connection between moods and creativity than between IQ and creative capabilities. What this means is more time should be spent addressing what drives our students to write, encouraging topics students may have emotional connections to, and sensitizing ourselves to the relationship between our minds and bodies. And, yet, how much time do we spend considering the physical aspects of producing writing? Where are physiological implications in our notions of the writing process? What Flaherty’s work suggests is that all people have moods, emotions, and a need to write. It is important to pay attention to these.

Though many more students than we like to imagine suffer from severe mood disorders, many more are working through less debilitating emotional states. I continually get narratives that share stories of abuse, love, heartache, and pain. Indeed, some composition theorists have dismissed personal narrative as a “Weepy World of Confessions.” Yet, as Flaherty points out, negative emotion often drives writing. Flaherty explains from a neurological standpoint why it is true that so much writing is inspired by suffering: “Suffering triggers limbic system and temporal lobe activity through their roles in emotion [. . .] and increases the desire to write and communicate” (42). She continues saying the most powerful writing motivation is unhappy love (a common freshman narrative) because such an emotional experience is a threat to our self-esteem. Other topics are external and require action, but we think our words can fix our
broken hearts. In this respect, a writer’s stories serve her. Thus, emotive writing, best enacted by personal narrative, draws on powerful neurological forces. It can serve as motivation, moving the student to explore ideas (not necessarily only emotions). For example, many students write of relationships—boyfriend / girlfriend, friendships, family relationships—and what naturally comes up are statements like: I love her; I hate him; I felt alone; I felt annoyed, happy, sad, mad, and the emotional statements wind their ways around every conceivable emotion. I ask students to explain, provide reasons, examples for why they feel as they do. I assign them to critically analyze what they feel; in this way, the emotion is a springboard in their quest for meaning, their exploration of ideas.

Finally, emotional states relate to one’s ability to concentrate. “Good” moods may distract from a more reflective, serious approach to writing because of the energy and confidence that comes in this state. Conversely, a more somber mood may focus an individual’s reflective abilities, grounding one in concentrated need to make meaningful a painful emotion. An instructor’s mood may, too, affect the students’ creativity. An upbeat or sarcastic or serious or flighty instructor may inspire some students, and not others. (I will discuss personality later.)

Hence, Flaherty’s findings (that brain chemistry affects creativity and hormones and moods affect brain chemistry) reveal that an important perspective in the field of composition has been neglected. We create from what we are and what we are cannot be understood largely from a social perspective. The brain is a part of the physical body and our moods and emotions are implicated in the ways our physical bodies respond. Creativity and writing are products of our brains and bodies.
Personality Characteristics of Creatives: Emotional Intensity

There is a fine line between the bizarre and the highly creative. As Flaherty points out, there is a distinction between value and novelty; that which is “unusual but valueless behavior” is oftentimes insanity (65). As Shekerjian explains: “It’s not that creativity and madness are necessarily linked, but rather that creativity and deviance (sometimes heroic, sometimes reckless) go hand in hand” (192). The risk in pathologizing the creative brain is in the stereotypical depiction of the crazy artist. While mentally ill people may become creative artists because of the novelty of their perspectives, she explains “severe mental illness tends to bring with it bizarre preoccupations and inflexible thought” (66). Thus, accomplished creatives may suffer mood disorders that make them appear wild, eccentric, mad, but when one is crazy (which is more accurately severely ill) he or she is usually unable to creatively produce.

Many writers suffer mood disorders that contribute to the notion of crazy artist. However, Jamison says there is artistic advantage to experiencing opposed emotional states: “A need to come to terms with such wildly disparate perceptions, experiences, and aspects of personality” offers one “a rich variety of experiences and sensations from which to create” (112, 128). Many writers discuss having highs and lows, myself included, and even the importance in these alternating moods. After giving birth, I was under a sort of manic spell. I felt I could handle anything. Even my newborn’s silent purple scream was nothing I couldn’t handle, despite the fact that it was two-thirty in the morning. I could jog, call every family member to share our news, and smile easily—too easily, I must have looked like a jack-o-lantern fool. Anyway, I wasn’t tired or stressed, or sad. I was high. While I was able to write with the same intense hypo-mania, I found
it wasn’t that the ideas were anything worth keeping, but it was the speed that excited me. I felt like I was flying through life. About six weeks post-partum, I had to deal with the slowed pace of my mind, body, spirit. It wasn’t a pleasant coming down, but I was able to appreciate the clearer perception I had for important things in my life such as being a mom and writing my thesis.

In addition to the tendency of creatives to be emotionally extreme, eccentric, or unusual, creative people are often emotional, impulsive, deviant, and resilient. The brain is wired to experience emotional intensity. Alice Brand explains how the amygdala (a small almond-shaped portion of the midbrain) gives affective significance to events. Some emotional experiences bypass the cortex or cognitive brain. She states: “[B]asic emotions from their initial sensory or internal phases yield information directly to the muscles and viscera for behavioral, autonomic, or humoral response, unmediated by the intellectual apparatus” (208). In other words, sometimes our bodies are compelled by the biological need to react before our intellect or conscious mind can judge, evaluate, and determine the best response. Such compulsion may be why many artists are highly emotional, impulsive, unconventional in their reactions.

Creative people also tend to be resilient, to persist with ideas and actions even if unusual. Take the work of Pablo Picasso, Stephen King, or my Aunt Caroline. Aunt Caroline was an art major. Now, she’s a flower queen. She arranges flowers in the most unconventional ways (and at the most unusual times—like three in the morning), but when she is finished her creation never warrants apology. As Shekerjian argues, one must have an “unshakable commitment to a vision of magnificent proportions. It’s a zealous undertaking fueled by a sober, serious passion” (94).
Jane Piirto attributes similar characteristics to the creative personality. She argues that writers have shared rituals and desires—taking walks, craving silence, intense feelings of inspiration, strong imagination, a hunger for solitude, and easily go into a state of revelry or flow. They fast, meditate, improvise, read and write self-help books when blocked (88). Piirto also believes that creatives possess a grounding in the body which often results in sexual intensity; they are physically active and emotional with strong verbal and emotional memory (37). Thus, the mind and body share intensity.

Flaherty cites experimental evidence that demonstrates writers fantasize more, are more easily hypnotized, and have more “mildly psychotic traits” (62). She also notes the personality traits of individuals with temporal lobe epilepsy or Geschwind Syndrome (a well-defined brain state causing high-level personality changes). These individuals tend to have elevated creative impulses. They are often hypergraphic, have a deepened emotional life (hyper-philosophical or hyper-religious), demonstrate emotional volatility (aggression), altered sexuality, and over inclusiveness (extreme talkativeness because of excessive attention to detail) (24). A lesser degree of similar personality traits applies to individuals without clinically diagnosed disorders but creative tendencies.

Shekerjian finds the following common denominators: creatives are driven, resilient, adept at creating environments that suit their needs, skilled at honing talents instead of lusting after an illusion of self. Above all they are risk takers who know how to follow their instincts (195). Her studies reflect upon creatives with renowned accomplishment. These individuals possessed confidence, organization, and self-awareness. Their creative capacity was an enabling rather than disabling force, as is often the case with creative individuals also suffering severe mood disorders.
Linda Melrose finds that creative personalities are individualistic (independent thinkers), courageous (needed for independence and divergent thinking as well as risk-taking), possessive of a sense of humor, dedicated to the task of creating. She asserts a high degree of creativity and sexual proclivity may coincide (171, 194). Even in childhood, creatives are meaning-makers and search for a sense of self and purpose. They push for independence from parents and perceive solitude as an oasis. Adversity is seen as an opportunity to develop and feared less with creative personalities (55, 112-114).

Our personalities affect how we perceive life. Only through the ways we are do we write; therefore, it is important we consider our personalities and how they affect writing. I have extreme need for solitude and social engagement. I can spend an entire day interacting with my own thoughts and writing. Eventually, however, I crave people or my reservoir of energy is depleted. I need time to reflect, or I feel just as dry and numbed by an excess of stimulation as by a lack of it. When I entered pre-school, my mom was very concerned I was becoming anti-social because I walked quietly over to the coloring books and sat down to work. I wasn’t interested in playing with other little girls and boys. As my school days continued, her concerns reversed. In parent-teacher conferences she quickly learned of my excessive talking with peers. I believe my childhood ways are not unlike my adult tendencies. People inspire me, offer me conflicting notions, challenge my thoughts, and enrich me with social experiences. Knowing and loving and, sometimes, strongly disliking aspects of others gives me material from which to write. It is in my moments alone, however, that I am able to think
through the material, to reflect on the meaning and create from it. Such contemplation is the source of my own personal narratives. I assure you, I need to write these.

Flaherty explains that self-expression and the artistic urge grows out of one’s biological need. Her theory suggests that communication is a means to satisfy an emotional, psychological, or physical need—that we achieve a sense of relief through a sympathetic audience. Most autobiography, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry clearly illustrate that we write out of an emotional need. Self-expression through language, written or spoken, is not just a broadcasting of personal tastes and characteristics, nor is it limited to learning about one’s self (205).

Our emotions teach us and continue teaching us. “Once our emotional system learns something, we may never let it completely go” (Anderson and McCurdy 209). Because of the persuasive power of our emotions and the realness of our bodies, personal narratives connect us to ourselves and others. I now turn to a discussion of memoir and personal narratives to see how these stories exemplify a means to connecting the mind and body.

Endnotes

1 For further discussion on mundane and exceptional creativity, see Barsalou & Prinz.

2 For discussion on multiple theories of creativity, see the following sources. For the cognitive theory of creativity, see Dartzhall. For discussion on the unconscious and conscious mind in creativity, see Flaherty. For discussion on the process theory of creativity and psychoanalytic theory, see Piirto. These theories on creativity each examine the mind and its relationship to creativity. Cognitive theory suggests ideas are representational realism and that our past experiences help us understand new
experiences. Creativity is a useful tool that generates understanding between the known and unknown schemas in the mind. Theories on the mind’s unconscious and conscious states discuss the interaction necessary between each state of mind for creativity that is valued and original. The unconscious is driven by desire, and the conscious acts as the governing judge. Process theory points to the cyclical nature of creation—the steps necessary to realize one’s creative potential and allow for the spurts of passion and desire that free creative unconscious. Lastly, the psychoanalytic theory discusses the power of opposition, placing disparate things together. Unusual or original relationships are created in this way. These theories look at creativity from a psychological and or cognitive stance. While they offer many interesting speculations on the ways the creative mind works, they do not discuss the creative brain.
CHAPTER IV
MEMIORS: RE-CONSTRUCTING THE MASTER NARRATIVE OF HUMAN BROKENNESS

I believe my students understand, intuitively, that when they read memoirs they are learning things that cannot as easily be acquired by reading fiction. They are learning quite explicitly how to construct a self, how to navigate the world, and—perhaps most usefully—how to gain some purchase on the world through the medium of language. The more they know about this process, its history and dynamics, the more tangible their education will have become. (Jay Parini, *The Memoir Versus the Novel in a Time of Transition*)

We live in an age of memoir. Memoirs top the best selling lists at local bookstores. Anne Lamott’s *Operating Instructions: A Journal of my Son’s First Year*, Augusten Burrough’s *Dry*, Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*, Natalie Goldberg’s *Writing Down the Bones*, Kay Jamison’s *An Unquiet Mind*, among many others, illustrate the growing popularity of memoir. In a digital world of hypercommunication and disconnected images, humanity is hungry to feel connected, not only with others, but with a sense of self. We are desperate to construct meaning, despite the coexisting tendency to deconstruct it.
The age of memoir is a response to the radical social construction of recent times. We yearn to be individualized but also identified with by others, to construct a self while deconstructing classifications of our selves. The personal essay allows us this ambiguous desire. Cynthia Ozick writes:

The essay—an essay—is not an abstraction; she may have recognizable contours, but she is highly colored and individuated; she is not a type. She is too fluid, too elusive, to be a category. She may be bold, she may be diffident, she may rely on beauty, or on cleverness, on eros or exotica. Whatever her story, she is the protagonist, the secret self’s personification. When we knock on her door, she opens to us, she is a presence in the doorway, she leads us from room to room; then why should we not call her ‘she’? She may be privately indifferent to us, but she is anything but unwelcoming. Above all, she is not a hidden principle or a thesis or a construct: she is there, a living voice. (xxi)

Often, the desire to connect to something real leads us to the body. Writing about the body has the potential, the productive power of reconnecting to a tangible, concrete reality. After all, what’s more real to us than our bodies? What speaks more clearly, more poignantly than physical pain?

Indeed, many memoirists write the bodily experience as the touchstone of authenticity, the means of agency in a fragmented age. Through their personal accounts of physical realities, often painful, often debilitating, writers create a sense of the real. Things like eating and mood disorders, drug and alcohol addictions, and sexual deviance or abuse are reconstructed, re-aligned by victimized hands. In memoir, one author’s life,
reaches a voice that brings with it power and even reverence for one’s inner strength and perseverance.

Many in the field of composition advocate students writing personal narratives as a means to write meaning into their lives. They perceive the enormous power in merging the mind and body—experience and flesh—through story. Compositionists such as Lad Tobin, Thomas Newkirk, Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, and Michelle Payne believe students may learn more and establish meaningful texts through personal narrative. More importantly, they tie this learning to a physical body. Payne argues:

At what point [...] is the body purely text? purely physical? neither? both? Like some feminists, I am unwilling to grant that there is no such thing as man or woman or that biological bodies do not exist as anything other than texts. When I read an essay about a young woman whose boyfriend has trapped her in her dorm room and beaten her repeatedly in spite of her orange belt in karate, I am reading about two people who act on the beliefs that there are biological differences between men and women that translate into subordinate power relations, and for whom the pain and blood of the body are real.

As Payne suggests, I believe students take their writing and move beyond abstract ideology and perceive the act of creating an account of their lives as real as their pain. Students want to share their stories perhaps more now than in other times. Perhaps this is because we live in a world that perceives dysfunction as the norm, and students don’t feel freakish in communicating their pain. Mental illness is less stigmatized today than it was a handful of years ago. Without as much societal ridicule, perhaps confession is easier.
However, personal narrative is more than mere confession. Inviting personal narratives into the classroom teaches students to take a step beyond confessional therapeutic writing to critical analysis of the personal experience—seeking after the pervasive, eternal question: what does the event mean? What lasting impressions, biases, and emotions consequently linger because I was avoided, lonely, insecure? Some students have experienced trauma from rape, tragic accidents, parental neglect, and other complicated experiences that befall life. Shouldn’t students explore reasons for their pain that satisfy our visceral need for purpose and meaning in life?

In my final chapter, I discuss the limitations of language as well as its liberating force in communicating pain. I discuss Elaine Scarry’s notion that pain deconstructs language and Flaherty’s belief that language is a constructive force. I explain why psychological and emotional pain is the subject of memoirs, which supports Flaherty’s physio-neurological position that emotion drives creative production and we need to share the meanings we make of our lives. Through McCourt, Jamison, Burrough, and Lamott’s memoirs, as well as a look at my own personal narratives and my students’, I validate using personal narrative to construct meaning, despite the critique that personal essays are dangerous, lack agency, and come across “weepy.” Through memoir, we are connected to one another—through story and flesh. Our differences are relatable in our human capacity to experience each other’s pain. In short, memoir is a metaphor for the body.
Stepping Outside of Pain: Writing and Reading Personal Experiences to Construct Meaning

My discussion of the body and language follows from Flaherty’s assertion that “everything in our personalities, sick or well, comes from our brains” (47). Our emotions and psyches are physiological brain states as integral to our bodies as our flesh and bone. Emotional and psychological pain is as detrimental as physical pain and results in the same deficits and benefits from writing as other bodily pain. Elaine Scarry discusses the body in pain and the limitations of language. She argues that physical pain is outside of language. There are no words to accurately describe a headache because “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (Scarry 4). In saying this, she suggests physical pain mutes description, obliterates the linguistic experience, and draws forth a primitive, universal cry.

Scarry’s argument about pain echoes Flaherty’s need theory—we cry out when distressed. Flaherty, however, sees language as stemming from this cry, directly correlating to our age-old reaction to pain. She argues that we are biologically wired to communicate our needs, which our cries alluded to before we knew language. Thus, Flaherty sees language as constructive, as a way to make meaning out of our pain, while Scarry perceives pain as a deconstructive force that escapes language. Scarry writes: “physical pain—unlike any other state of consciousness—has no referential content. It is not of or for anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language” (5). In other words, there is no
thing that pain can adequately be paired with, including the arbitary nature of words. Therefore, our pain deconstructs us. Pain un-makes the order and understanding inherent in our language.

While I agree that physical pain escapes words, that it cannot be felt in the physical sense of this word, I believe our pain also drives us to re-create the experience, to approximate what happened, and to construct meaning through language. While the audience may be incapable to physically feeling my pain, he may be persuaded to feel my psychological, emotional pain through my stories.

Even Scarry believes that though a person in pain doesn’t speak, or can’t speak for herself, another can speak on the sufferer’s behalf. For example, I recently gave birth. While in labor, many more inarticulate noises, groans, cries were uttered than actual words. A shake of the head, a hand gesture, a fluctuation in my tone all indicated what I needed more than my words. My husband read my reactions and communicated my needs. He read my cries, as Flaherty suggests, and translated these into language. He approximated my physical pain into a communicable experience. Our use of language requires stepping outside of the experience enough to construct meaning, to pair the internal feeling with external language. In such a way, memoir is a metaphor for the body as the physical experience is symbolized in the words one chooses. The actual experience is incommunicable. Saying “I gave birth and it was traumatic” doesn’t re-create the experience, but it does help me start re-constructing the emotional meaning of the experience.

Indeed, Scarry perceives a distinction between neurological pain and bodily pain arguing that while bodily pain escapes language, emotional and psychological pain can
be communicated. Bodily pain is fleeting; psychological pain is lasting and needs language to rend the experience meaningful. Language re-constructs meaning by sorting through residual emotions, thoughts, and evaluations of the pain. Scarry writes,

"Psychological suffering, though often difficult for any one person to express, does have referential context, is susceptible to verbal objectification, and is so habitually depicted in art that, as Thomas Mann’s Se Hembrini reminds us, there is virtually no piece of literature that is not about suffering. (11)

Our age of memoir reiterates this. Even for jubilant experiences to evoke ethos in today’s reader, memoirs often allude to psychological pain. Complicated emotions help an experience become real. Flaherty’s studies show that complicated emotional states drive creative production as a means to make meaning from our experiences. Below is a segment from my memoir on my son that illustrates how I use language to communicate my mixed emotions:

Just when I think that I will have to succumb to a cesarean delivery, Dima’s voice seeps through my black world. My eyes are squeezed shut, as they’ve been throughout the hour and a half of pushing. It’s been two days of labor, with an overnight hospital stay doped on the glorious drugs Nubain and Morphine.

"Lea, come on, come on, push hard! He’s right there. I can see the top of his head. Come on, come on, come on!” Dima rallies.

“I can’t! I can’t do this anymore—” My body trembles and I feel extremely nauseous. A nurse puts an oxygen mask to my face that reeks
of syrup, which really agitates me. I hear the resident doctor say something about assistance, and I immediately recall the forceps and the vacuum I saw in the Lamaze class. At the time, these utensils seemed barbaric, an absolute no-way. Now, anything will do. The thing is, I’ve lost myself. Somewhere in these past hours I’ve grown numb. My emotions betray me; they don’t work right. The pain and surreal drama of it all takes me into another person whose heart is steely, whose mind is slow and heavy. I’d like to believe it’s the drugs, but I think it’s more true to admit that the physical pain and crazy surge of hormones metamorphoses me. I don’t recognize the blandness of my emotions, especially in respect to this enormous thing—our Viktor.

Finally at noon on Wednesday, our seven pound four ounce Viktor arrives.

After delivery, I hold Viktor’s bundled flesh and cry, but it isn’t from joy, or pain, or motherliness. It is from confusion. I look at his tiny feet smeared in black ink for the identifying hospital footprint, awed that this thing was inside of me. His body looks purple, which they say is normal. His hands look massive, which everyone but my mom says is normal. His breathing seems erratic, his eyes awfully puffy. It is all just too weird.

And then his little hand wraps around my finger. It is tight and strong. I fall in love. I immediately forget the black tar that stuck to his
bust moments earlier, the blood-curdling screams, his alien appearance. In an instant, his hand moves me to love.

The physical experience of labor is barely discussed—and where it is it is replaced by words ("nausea" and "trembling"); nonetheless, it is there—it is the touchstone of the entire experience. Much more time is spent discussing my conflicting emotions. The physical experience can’t be put into words that will evoke the pain, but I hoped to persuade the reader to emotionally identify with me in my description of my conflicting mental states. In addition, I constructed meaning in writing through the experience. I stepped away from it and processed reasons for what occurred.

Scarry argues that when we communicate our pain, it’s easy for the writer to re-experience the story; however, the reader is skeptical of the author’s pain. She argues the writer confirms her pain through the writing, and the reader instead confirms his doubts (4). Perhaps reading about another’s pain empowers the reader as he critiques it in a way he is unable to his own pain, even enough to discredit it. Writing through the experience as well as reading about it affords the opportunity to step outside of the situation and construct meaning. Goldberg believes that writing about painful personal experiences is a chance for the writer to move beyond the experience, the pain, and “take the emotions we have felt many times and give them light, color, and a story. We can transform anger into steaming red tulips and sorrow into an old alley full of squirrels in the half light of November” (191). Jane Piirto makes a similar point when she writes, “In creative writing, the philosophical concern with the meaning of life is melded with the psychological concern of what makes human beings tick and the two are explicated
through dramatis personae in story” (66). In such a way, writing transforms emotion into meaningful art.

Perhaps it is an age of memoir because writers and readers want to explore themselves openly, humbly, intimately. And what is more intimate, more one’s self than the body? Vulnerability is the cost for honesty, but this is a desperate, urgent time (as countless memoirs suggest through stories of intense emotional and psychological pain). Maybe the sense of isolation so prevalent today is responsible for the surging interest in memoir as an avenue into a real-life other, not one’s self but, yet, strangely similar. The emotional, psychological core of each individual is like most of humanity’s. For example, the emotional core—love, despair, insecurity, confusion, aloneness, joy, contentment—is understandable, relatable. We’ve all got it. We also share characteristics of the physical body: hunger, pain, exhaustion, pleasure. Writing may connect the physical and the emotional. While there are variables in what makes each individual “tick,” we are willing to sift through differences to achieve a sense of sameness with the rest of humanity. Ironically, in this age of individuality it seems we also need to feel alike—to be connected. Natalie Goldberg says a friend told her Writing Down the Bones would be popular because after reading the book one knew her better, and that’s all readers want, even in a novel, just to know the author better. Goldberg continues, “Human isolation is terrible. We want to connect and figure out what it means to write. ‘How do you live? What do you think?’ We ask the author. We all look for hints, stories, examples” (xvi). Memoirs share one’s life, which may help the reader feel connected. But, their growing popularity is fuelled by writers’ own desires to write through experiences because there is healing in the writing.
Thus, writing helps us trust ourselves in a world that continually deconstructs the self. As Goldberg writes: “we write out of memory, imagination, thought, words. This is why it is good to know and study the mind, so we may become confident in its use and come to trust ourselves” (34). She suggests memoirs offer us a study of the mind through the metaphors we put to paper. In other words, we cannot re-create the experience for ourselves or others (and it doesn’t really matter whether they are true—only that they are useful), but our stories explore the lasting impressions of our experiences and encourage self-assurance.

In the following section, I share what neurologist Alice Flaherty, poet Robert Lowell, and writer Julia Cameron say about writing through pain. Many memoirists share painful past experiences, and many times the psychological and emotional pain is discussed at great length. They write to know who they were and to trust the person they’ve become. They write to let go of past pain and replace negative, debilitating energy with constructive narratives that piece together an emotionally, psychologically healing person. Often times, the autobiographical tone is honest and vulnerable enough as to allow for a realistic account of residual distress that can never be completely healed or totally resolved. But it is in the partial control they regain in the re-telling of the pain, in the meaning-making of it, that the writer achieves a more satisfying sense of self.

Specifically, I discuss the emotional, psychological, and physical pain shared in memoirs by Frank McCourt, Kay Jamison, Augusten Burroughs, and Anne Lamott. Each memoir illustrates emotional and psychological pain, supporting Flaherty’s physi-neurological stance that there is correlation between emotion—meaning—creative production because it appears the emotional distress serves as the heart of the material,
the motivational source. Perhaps, stories on bodily pain are also stories of emotional, psychological distress because, as Scarry suggests, physical pain cannot be re-created but it is the emotional pain that relates us to another’s experience. Thus, the writer works through the residual mind-pain because: 1) This is the form in which physical pain scars. 2) The reader can experience emotional, psychological pain but cannot feel another’s bodily pain. And, perhaps, 3) bodily pain is fleeting, while psychological pain endures and needs reconciled. Memoirs offer an opportunity for the writer and reader to use language to approximate experience, creating meaning and a more sound sense of self.

Stepping Inside Pain: Memoirs, Meaning, and Making Me

Flaherty believes writing or talking distracts one from pain, which is why so much literature is about painful experiences in life. For example, she was hit by a truck while riding her bike to her twin girls’ daycare. While she was talking to her husband or chairman, someone emotionally important to her, she was distracted from the pain. She said after surgery, at two in the morning, there was no one to talk with. She wrote for three days straight, but when she stopped her pain intensified again (209). Her writing mitigated her bodily pain, perhaps in taking her mind away from her physical condition. The creative activity channeled her energy, energy that would otherwise be spent in worry and fear as debilitating agents, into constructive, meaningful activity.

Other memoirs are written to work through existential neurosis. Robert Lowell writes as psychological therapy: “I am writing my autobiography literally to ‘pass the time.’ I almost doubt if the time would pass at all otherwise. However, I also hope the result will supply me with swaddling clothes with a sort of immense bandage of grace and ambergris for my hurt nerves” (qtd. in Jamison 123). Lowell’s narrative is more than
a concerted act: he equates it with the passing of time; it is as essential as living to him. He doesn’t write to deliberately mend his mind, but he hopes that his writing will, indeed, accomplish this. In addition to psychological restoration, he hopes his writing will supply him with a sense of physical security and peace, i.e. “swaddling clothes.” In a poem he writes, “Is getting well ever an art, / or art a way to get well?” (124) insinuating the obvious, creation has healing power for the mind and body. The question he poses illustrates creation as a quest, an on-going activity that requires one to be engaged in the process of meaning-making.

Writer Julia Cameron suffered with feelings of self-consciousness that extended into her writing, and she developed a dependency on alcohol to inspire her creativity. Later, she learned to trust herself, to use art as a healing mechanism to overcome her dependency on alcohol. Instead of forcing writing, Cameron learned to use her creative mind to serve her:

[w]riting became more like eavesdropping and less like inventing a nuclear bomb. It wasn’t so tricky, and it didn’t blow up on me anymore. I didn’t have to be in the mood. […] I simply wrote. […] By resigning as the self-conscious author, I wrote freely. (xxv)

She removed her expectations, recovering from her painful insecurity by writing through her fear, pausing the anxiety long enough to get busy in the making. Writing about writing became her cathartic narrative.

Judith Herman says the process of recovery is to weave “raw fragments of the traumatic memory into a narrative that can then find a place in the lore—that is, in the larger fabric of narratives—that constitutes a persons’ life experience and sense of
identity” (34). Writing our stories makes clearer who we are and helps us share our constructed selves with others, which may help the reader to piece together a sense of self. In *The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, Cameron does this by sharing how to discover and recover one’s creative self based on her personal experience.

Writing for me is also a way to deal with pain and fragmentation. Growing up is painful. Pain—not in the acute, dramatic sense of the word, but a more subtle discomfort—pushes me to work through my life situations and gather meaning as I go. For example, studying abroad in Russia as a sophomore in college, I met my boyfriend’s (now husband’s) family and culture. Even now (six years later) I think back to the experiences I had and wonder what it all means. Writing about the experience helped me put into perspective what I saw, felt, and thought, and now I see how these impressions have since changed. Writing and re-reading my personal narrative enables me time for reflection on my life. Below is a segment from my memoir that shares some of what happened at the end of my trip—leaving my boyfriend, Dima’s, home and family.

*Pocket Promises*

There are more days spent with the family throughout the week spent in St. Petersburg. On April 20th, four days left in Russia, I am with Grandma on the metro. She came to the hotel to get me after work. The family won’t let me come to Kolpino alone; they insist on picking me up. The family is mildly bossy: they tell me to wear my coat, close or open the window, take a picture, what I am allowed and not allowed to do, but they love me. It’s done in love, all of it. Grandma and I arrive at Tatyana’s apartment.
We watch a video of Dima playing hockey in the States that John brought when he visited. I imagine they show this video to everyone and often. We laugh and say a few words here and there. We communicate through gestures and food, mainly. We sit at the table for dinner together. We eat the freshest black bread, cold Borscht soup, chicken and noodles and butter. (Russians treat butter like a food group in itself.) Tatyana has cucumbers and tomatoes mixed with dill and sour cream, tea and cookies and jam for dessert. The food is scrumptious, but I feel sad.

I want to say so many things, and the silence permeates like a loud vacuum sucking all the energy from my thoughts and spitting them back at me with a malfunction. I want to say *I love your home*. *I appreciate what you did for Dima; how did you let him go? Did you know it would be so many years before you’d see him again? When will you see him again? Do you want to live in the States? Would you like Dima to move back here?*

Instead, silence.

Victor comes home from work in the evening, as Tatyana gets ready to go to her factory job. He brings Mom and me bubble-gum. I truly feel like a kid. He throws us each a piece, slips off his jacket, and hugs me. Then, he walks over to Tatyana and moves his full face closer and closer to hers, laughing and mumbling a joking expression in Russian. They share a youthful loving-kindness with each other.
Tatyana leaves and Victor and I sit at the kitchen table. He eats his
dinner, bliney and jam and sour cream, as we listen to The Beatles and
Grateful Dead, Dima’s music. Ring. . . ring. . .

“Ellow, ah Dimka!” Victor’s happiness spreads to his son over the
13,000 miles through the yellow plastic receiver. Victor motions for me to
pick up the phone.

“Dima,” I say curled up in Tatyana’s white flowered robe sitting in
his living room by the Persian rug hanging warmly on the wall.

“Lea, how are you, baby?”

“Great. I miss you so much.” We continue talking in sappy,
young lover ways, when Dima says that we may get married “earlier than I
think.” What does this mean?

Victor calls me his “daughter” on April 21 and tells me he wants
five boys, who all play hockey. There is a translator at dinner, and some
serious issues are cracked open. The petite female translator asks me what
my parents think of my dating a Russian.

“They love Dima! They encourage our relationship. They were a
little bit scared about me traveling to Russia, but they think that the
experiences I have here will outweigh the risks, I think.” The woman
translates. Victor is very serious tonight. There is no laughter around his
eyes; his face looks drawn. Victor speaks and the lady responds:

“What are my plans with Dima? How do I feel about them living
in the United States?” These words pummel me. It is difficult to move
from limited means of communication to full out, sobering questions like these.

"I love Dima. My plans are to marry him. I..." — the tears are inevitable — "I will do all I can for you, you have done so much for me! You gave me Dima. I am a Christian..." I’m not sure how to translate my faith.

"I will love you as I love Dima."

Though St. Petersburg is said to have only thirty days of sunshine a year, this week spent with the family there are four, three in a row. Victor and Tatyana give me their best: towels, food, Dima, and they only make $100.00 a week, if the checks come in.

Tatyana comes into my bedroom before the week is over. She has a small box in her palm. She opens it. Inside is a thick gold wedding band. It is a blur, but somehow we understand each other. The ring was Victor’s. When Dima and I marry, Victor wants to start a tradition of passing down his ring. I am the start; I am the bridge between Russia and America, between past and future, between love and family.

The day I leave Russia I take the family’s fill-in child. I take the beloved child who messes up the bed she sleeps in all night, who eats the tasty food prepared special for her, the warm young body to whom hopes and love are pinned. Leaving, Victor gives me a beautiful amber broach. The pin looks like a leaf dipped in honey.
They meet me at the airport at 5:00 a.m. “Leka,” he says, “we love you. We miss you.” In parting, I take their hugs and kisses and Victor’s own wedding band, secure in my pocket to give to Dima.

Dressed in my wedding gown on July 1, 2000, I do.

Writing about my experiences abroad captivated me in a way that other writing never had. I couldn’t stop. I wrote my memoir in Autobiographical Writing, a course I took my second semester in graduate school. The assignment for the course was to write fifty pages for the entire semester. I turned in a portfolio of eighty pages with much more I felt I had waiting to be said, to be shared—created, made meaningful. I was on fire as I wrote, nothing else mattered as I sat on my black swivel office chair and pounded on the keyboard, husband Dima downstairs watching *The Simpsons* without me. I realized then that personal narratives have a strange, dizzying energy.

Memoirs satisfy my urge to vent, regain control, and create. Flaherty writes that venting “is probably more ancient than language itself, as old as nonverbal behaviors such as weeping and screaming.” We complain and weep to summon aid from others (201). Charles Anderson and Marian McCurdy suggest that “[t]hrough the dual possibilities of permanence and revision, the chief healing effect of writing is thus to recover and to exert a measure of control over that which we can never control—the past.” Healing is a change from a singular self to a more “fluid, more narratively able, more socially integrated self” (7).

This leads me to consider what I propose in asking my students’ to write personal narratives. I am asking them to re-create a significant incident from their lives and to realign their position within it. I am asking them to consider their bodies, how they feel
and how they felt, as they work to uncover why they respond these ways. Is it useful to write personal narratives in a freshman composition class, and, if so, in what ways? Do such essays illicit critical analysis and further students writing and thinking skills? What ethical considerations complicate a writing instructor’s job when reading personal narratives? Teaching writing as a valuable life-benefiting activity is a complicated task indeed.

Memoirs: Picking up the Shards of Bodily Brokenness and Crafting Them into Meaning

Criticisms on personal narratives range from the suggestion that they are weepy, dangerous, destructive of agency. Some have said they lead the writer into a solipsistic navel gazing, thoughtless meandering around one’s feelings—less thoughtful, critical and academic than other types of writing. Kathleen Pfeiffer argues that emotional writing threatens the purpose of the university, in the way it deconstructs community and communication (671). Lester Faigley argues that because students become vulnerable when they share personal stories, that the teacher, as the one possessing power, can break apart the student’s sense of agency. Writing about the self “might be viewed as part of a much larger technology of confession for the production of truth in Western societies” (23). In addition, students are skeptical of who their “selves” are, insecure about writing personal stories that demonstrate a sense of their “true” self. James Berlin argue that proponents of personal writing hold a foundational view of self:

The existent is located within the individual subject. While the reality of the material, the social, and the linguistic are never denied, they are considered significant only in so far as they serve the needs of the individual. All fulfill their true function only when being exploited in the
interests of locating the individual’s authentic nature. Writing can be seen as a paradigmatic instance of this activity. It is an art, a creative act in which the process—the discovery of the true self—is as important as the product—the self discovered expressed. (484)

This suggests teaching personal narrative requires one take a foundational view, to believe there is a True self that can be discovered, made known. However, whether or not one abides by this philosophy, I have experienced personal narratives as effective means to critical thinking and more concrete, more persuasive writing (both for myself and my students as I will demonstrate further on). On these pragmatic grounds, I advocate using them in the classroom.

Michelle Payne suggests that many teachers believe they “are obligated to keep threatening emotions at bay, to reinforce cultural dictates about how emotion can be expressed and understood. If they don’t, the very foundation of university education will come undone” (3). She goes on to argue that critics of personal narratives see the genre as “reinforcing a liberal humanist ideal of the self, which has been the source of oppression for many marginalized groups [. . . ] disrupting oppression and the power relationships that create it begins with disrupting students’ beliefs in a unitary self” (9). The criticism suggests that emotions replace critical thought, the very basis of the academy; however, as Payne argues, emotions may actually motivate one to think more critically, to engage in the quest for meaning and understanding.

In contrast to Flaherty’s argument that emotive writing drives one into a creative construction of a sense of self, criticisms of emotional writing suggest that such writing deconstructs the self, that the vulnerability inherent in personal writing is dangerous.
Another (usually the teacher) has the power and position to change the writer, to disrupt his or her beliefs, thoughts, ideas, agency. Yet, how accurate is this argument? Does writing our stories really involve giving them away so another can manipulate our meanings and re-construct our selves? Writing through personal experiences is a way to critically perceive our lives and grow understandings. Perceptions can be challenged, writing can be critiqued, but personal experiences and the individual meaning we carve within them cannot be wrenched from us. Most importantly, sharing intimate, emotional realities connects us to one another, and helps us to accept the vulnerability of our minds and bodies.

So, how is emotion used in popular memoirs? How does the memoirist’s vulnerability serve as connecting force among a broken humanity? How are personal stories crafted to convey real life in a relatable, thoughtful, and emotionally persuasive manner? What does the tremendous popularity of memoir illustrate about the constructive power in writing about our pain? I believe that memoirs share individual life experiences (somehow unique, yet somehow the same) as they slip into master narratives, demonstrating that the personal is a small component of the social gestalt—very often we are pieces of one broken humanity.

Frank McCourt’s Pulitzer Prize winning, New York Times Bestseller, Angela’s Ashes, shares McCourt’s experiences growing up in Limerick among poverty, illness, and depression. He vividly recalls such bodily pain as hunger, cold and wet conditions, and typhoid fever. The tortures of fear, depression, longing, regret, and anger are communicated in stepping back into the scenes of McCourt’s life.
McCourt subtly writes through his pain, much of the time re-creating a scene to show the pain instead of telling the reader directly. This enables the reader to experience the situation, to engage in McCourt’s re-created life. In doing so, his childhood unfolds as an obvious cry that draws the reader, and perhaps McCourt himself, into a state of awe that anyone could survive such conditions and become a prosperous human being. For example, after coming home from nearly a year in the hospital, he shares his remorse that he’s returned home:

I lie in bed and think of the hospital where the white sheets were changed every day and there wasn’t a sign of a flea. There was a lavatory where you could sit and read your book till someone asked if you were dead. There was a bath where you could sit in hot water as long as you liked [. . .]. (253)

In the story, he looks forward to coming home to his family but not to the poverty in which they lived. His child narratorial self thinks about concrete, tangible problems: physical discomfort at home, physical comfort at the hospital. The memoir credits him with strength of character as he discusses basic bodily functions (sleeping, bathing, using the john) that open his experience to the rest of humanity, as we all do these things.

McCourt taps into a master narrative of woeful childhoods, but he also marks his individuality; his “miserable Irish childhood” becomes meaningful for him as well as others:

People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the
fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years. Above all—we were wet. (9)

The above quote shares his reflection on the people in his life: sad mother, wasted father, “pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters,” he even refers to the historical abuse of the Irish. All of the people he addresses suffer pain, most of which is emotional. He relates to “people everywhere” but then specifically moves into his experience and the emotional and psychological pain he, his family, and fellow Irish endure.

His feelings, reflections, and knowledge are valid for others as well as him because of his vulnerable honesty as well as his appeal to the physical body. Notice how the main thing he emphasizes (“we were wet”) is a physical state—the misery of which we can relate to; we’ve all been wet. He persuades the reader to feel his past pain and, possibly, to remember his or her own (or marvel in a childhood that was not as riddled with suffering).

McCourt crafts the account of his suffering so that the physical pain of hunger and emotional pain of longing reverberate, collaboratively, throughout the text. These needs, one physical the other psychological, are very similar in nature. Both address the need for fulfillment and escape from pain:

I wish I could swing up into the sky, up into the clouds. I might be able to fly around the whole world and not hear my brothers, Oliver and Eugene, cry in the middle of the night anymore. My mother says they’re always hungry. She cries in the middle of the night, too. She says she’s worn out nursing and feeding and changing and four boys is too much for her. (23)
McCourt wants to escape the acute awareness he has of his brother’s hunger pain, his mother’s guilt and exhaustion, sadness and feelings of helplessness.

In another example, McCourt shares the excitement and disappointment of when his father gets a job at a cement factory:

Malachy says he’s hungry and she gives him a piece of bread and cheese to keep him going. She says, This job could be the saving of us. ‘Tis hard enough for him to get a job with his northern accent and if he loses this one I don’t know what we’re going to do. The darkness is in the lane and we have to light a candle. She has to give us our tea and bread and cheese because we’re so hungry we can’t wait another minute. (135)

Again, the need for food and the need for security work together to create a picture of physical and emotional dissatisfaction. In the beginning of the scene, Angela tries to keep the boys from eating their meager dinners of cheese and bread as she hopes Malachy (dad) will be home soon. As her hope gives way, the boys eat. A number of times in his memoir, McCourt refers to the reward of food. When Frank is in school a teacher named Mr. O’Neill gives the students his apple peel if they answer a question correctly: “He pauses in his peeling to ask us questions about everything in the world and the boy with the best answers wins” (191). The desire is so great for the apple peel that the students are willing to accept verbal abuse from a sneering, arrogant teacher in hopes for it. Sometimes, the promised reward of some morsel of food is cruelly denied. Frank and a friend are denied a sandwich that a boy at school promises if they come over to eat lunch at his house, so Frank and his friend skip school and go to an orchard in Ballinacurra. They stuff themselves on apples and milk from cows in the field. They
become happy and full: “we laugh because we’re out of harms way and I’m wondering why anyone should be hungry in a world full of milk and apples” (199). Just as hunger and despair correlate, physical and emotional satisfaction work together in this scene. The boy wonders why there should even be suffering in a world where satisfaction is available for the taking. This scene satisfies the reader by offering a glimpse of hope.

The central discussion in McCourt’s memoir is growing up poor in Ireland—and all of the yearning that accompanies such a childhood. He constructs verbal images in the ways he crafts his personal experiences, so the reader experiences his story through his scenes. His writing is not “weepy” but illustrates the critical thought and careful crafting McCourt employed in order to create a piece of writing that meaningfully communicates his experience. His story isn’t self-indulgent; it doesn’t subject McCourt to our gaze. It uses the commonalities of experience—physical and emotional suffering—to create community and connection.

In a different vein, Kay Redfield Jamison’s memoir on bipolar disease, An Unquiet Mind, tells the story of bipolar illness. Her story reflects of the disease and how it affected her life experiences. Jamison, too, enters a master narrative (mental illness) and instead of feeling alone, feeling crazy, she makes sense of her life and the lives of others who suffer with mental illness. She writes:

For as long as I can remember I was frighteningly, although often wonderfully, beholden to moods. Intensely emotional as a child, mercurial as a young girl, first severely depressed as an adolescent, and then unrelentingly caught up in the cycles of manic-depressive illness by the time I began my professional life, I became, both by necessity and
intellectual inclination, a student of moods. It has been the only way I know to understand, indeed to accept, the illness I have; it also has been the only way I know to try and make a difference in the lives of others who also suffer from mood disorders. (5)

Just as becoming a professor of psychiatry was directed by her illness and need to work through it by working in it, writing her memoir satisfies the same urge. She addresses her fear in making herself vulnerable, exposed through memoir:

I have had many concerns about writing a book that so explicitly describes my own attacks of mania, depression, and psychosis, as well as my problems acknowledging the need of ongoing medication. Clinicians have been, for obvious reasons of licensing and hospital privileges, reluctant to make their psychiatric problems known to others. These concerns are often well warranted. I have no idea what the long-term effects of discussing such issues so openly will be on my personal and professional life, but whatever the consequences, they are bound to be better than continuing to be silent. I am tired of hiding, tired of misspent and knotted energies, tired of the hypocrisy, and tired of acting as though I have something to hide. (7)

She needs to communicate who she is, to make sense of her experiences in light of her disorder and to strengthen her character as a result. Though she is made vulnerable in admitting the impact her disease has on her life, she embraces this reality and finds solace in her perseverance. And, perhaps in and through her strength and honesty, her shame and denial, her pride and acceptance, she can help others who suffer.
Obviously, Jamison explores emotional and psychological pain in writing her memoir, but her bodily reactions to her mental states point to the relationship between the mind and body: "I was on the run. Not just on the run but fast and furious on the run, darting back and forth across the hospital parking lot trying to use up a boundless, restless, manic energy. I was running fast, but slowly going mad" (3). She continues throughout her memoir to share what her body does with the dips and peaks of her moods. In times of depression, her mind feels dead and she describes her body as "chill skinned, bloodless, and sparrow drab" (110). She addresses the ultimate bodily responses, life and death, throughout the memoir. When she was a child, she worked as a candy striper. The doctors encouraged her dream to become a doctor and allowed her to watch an autopsy. As she watched a small child autopsied, she "reverted back to a more cerebral, curious self, asking question after question, following each answer with yet another question" (21). As long as her mind ran forward, she was able to deal with bodily deconstruction—even as a child. However, when her own mind, stuck in depression, refused to move on, she attempted suicide by overdosing on lithium. Her mind's illness nearly destroyed her body. She was saved and later says that "the road to suicide to life is cold and colder and colder still, but—with steely effort, the grace of God, and an inevitable break in the weather—[...] I could make it" (118). Her personal narrative gives her agency—she takes control of the illness that controlled her in writing through its affects on her life. Her psychological pain deconstructed her confidence, confused her notion of self; her writing, however, reconstructed a powerful and productive self. Writing about her mental illness is not dangerous; in fact, she admits that not writing her narrative would have been risky because she would feel in hiding. She
freed her sense of self in writing her story. She celebrates her making it through and demonstrates the meaning she constructs from her pain.

A memoirist re-creates scenes from life, coloring them according to his emotions, and the picture helps the reader see beyond the physical, bodily reality and into the memoirist’s psychological pain. Augusten Burroughs works through emotional pain caused by bodily addictions in his memoir, *Dry*. His writing is light, funny but addresses dark, serious issues as well. He shares his life as a gay man recovering from alcohol and drug addictions. His story speaks of his desire for love and health in the midst of his bodily addictions while faced with the impending death of his best friend, Piglet, from AIDS. The introduction refers to his ordinarness:

You may not know it, but you’ve met Augusten Burroughs. You’ve seen him on the street, in bars, on the subway, at restaurants: a twenty-something guy, nice suit, works in advertising. Regular. Ordinary. But when the ordinary person had two drinks, Augusten was circling the drain by having twelve; when the ordinary person went home at midnight, Augusten never went home at all. (preface)

In his memoir, he too enters a master narrative: a young gay man in the twenty-first century. His unique pain, the point of departure from existential neurosis, is his addictions. Many today can relate.

In writing his life, Burroughs is able to reflect and make some sense of his losses. He re-enters his earlier life, when breaking away from addiction pushed him further into the loneliness that he used to avoid:
I come home and find myself feeling less than positive. Feeling that I just want to disappear. I feel disconnected, or like I am on PAUSE. I’m restless, but not energetic. Depressed? I think back to the feeling chart. I decide I am borderline panicked, but also I feel homesick or something else; lonely. Then I get it. I miss alcohol. Like it’s a person. I feel abandoned. Or rather like I’ve walked out of a violent, abusive relationship and want to go back because in retrospect, it wasn’t really that violent or abusive. (117)

Through his memoir, he works through the many emotions that alcohol and drugs replaced. Then he gets it, he figures out what his addiction meant to him: intimate friendship. His story is the medium to tap into the physicality that connects us all.

Though not every reader will have an addiction, everyone has experienced loneliness, longing. Though not every reader is gay, we all experience sadness, loss, and love.

Burrough’s works through his feelings from his best friend’s death, reflecting as he recreates the scene of very frail Piglet in the hospital right before he dies:

It dawns on me that the two people I most obsess over are seriously involved with narcotics [Piglet and his boyfriend from rehab.]. I put my head on his chest, listen to his heart. It’s beating so fast that I’m afraid just listening to it will make mine beat along with it and I’ll have a heart attack. His heart sounds like a bird’s, not a man’s. He falls asleep instantly and for some reason, this makes me profoundly sad. (239)

The image of Piglet’s frail body, heart beating like a bird’s, mimics Augusten’s sadness, his own weakness. Physical frailty evokes compassion.
Crafting memoirs requires critical thought, as the above examples illustrate through their fine crafting of personal experiences. Language becomes the tool to convey a segment of life—it takes skill in order to wield the power of language effectively. It takes no less critical thought to re-create an experience, to persuade another to feel one’s pain, than to report or prove something. Personal narrative is academic writing in its most aesthetic form. In a sense, the personal narrative is reporting and proving something (what happened and the implications upon one’s life), yet it has the additional task of showing the reader an experience. The “argument” must be logical to be effective, and it must be honest, open, and vulnerably frank to be emotionally persuasive. Writing personal narratives may be the most difficult form of writing when one considers all that it aims to do; however, the lure in such writing is in the deep-seeded satisfaction derived from meanings planted in the narratives and communicated to others.

So, how does one craft a personal experience—as opposed to scribbling a raving account of an emotionally intense situation? Many memoirs are crafted after the experience. In fact, a common philosophy is to distance one’s self before writing creative non-fiction to allow time to develop reflection. At least I received this advice this semester while in a fiction writing workshop, and something inside of me strongly disagreed with such advice. I wrote a creative non-fiction story about my five week-old son falling from my husband’s arms as he descended our steep slope of steps. I re-create the scene after the fall, and my emotions—even now—quickly return to a surreal state:

“How did it happen?” the E.M.S. guy asks. Three men unfold equipment, check Viktor’s vitals, and ask us questions. The tall blond holds a black box of supplies behind the bushy mustached guy who
buckles Viktor into his car seat, telling me his vitals look good. The short, dark, beer-gut guy stands to the side with a clipboard taking notes. Sloppy wet shoes parade through the living room, adding mud to our muddied lives. I stand frozen beside the couch where my baby is bundled in his car seat, quiet and alert.

“D’you have a normal pregnancy, no c-section or nothin’?”

Whatever, whatever—help my son!

“No. It was normal.”

The clipboard writer continues: what happened (again); did he cry right away; is everything off in the house; do you need to grab anything. . . His words fall like chunks of hail on a dying rose. As I circle the living room looking for my purse, my feet are numb, head floating outside my body. In the ambulance I hold oxygen beside my son’s tiny puckered, five week-old mouth.

The giraffe border in the exam room at Akron General Children’s Hospital gallops around the room, sporting soft pastel animals. My eyes burn. This is the first time, since I was a child, I have been in a children’s exam room. A little dark-haired, bow-legged nurse enters and tells me to undress him.

“I’m Kathy. I’ll be your nurse for the next ten hours.”

She washes her hands and dances around the room, her energy adding importance to her tasks. It’s 10:15 p.m. How long are we staying? She takes Viktor out of the room to weigh him. I wait for a few minutes,
then venture into the busy night hall, desperate to find my son—to take
care of him through this. I hear babies crying. The sound of panic: beeps,
wheelchairs, a doctor paged. Nurses with clipboards, the information desk
with faceless nurses on phones talking to panicked faceless mothers and
fathers. *Where is he?* I walk back to the exam room without my baby.
Waiting without him, I am overcome with need to blend my body and his
together again—to never let him go—to press his sweet face to my cheek
and feel the wet of his tears, the quiver of his lip.

The nurse enters after ten minutes of muted impatience. “He’s
10lbs. 4oz.” She hands him to me. “When the doctor checks him he’ll
determine if they should do a CAT scan. He’ll check him out and
probably admit you for the night.” *Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh! Lord, Lord,
Lord.* Things are coming at me so fast that I don’t know what to think. It
is like we are nothing more than puzzle pieces and Someone is trying to
squeeze us into the place we’ll fit, bending us, toying around with our
cardboard emotions, our flimsy insignificant designs.

A critic commented that my piece is raw, jangling, unfinished. While at first I was
understandably angry, hurt, even shamed because my personal experience and the
meaning I made of it seemed rejected, deemed somehow inadequate, some partial
understanding unfolds in my mind. Other forms of writing are resolved, avoid the
emotional “jangle,” and often conclude recapping what one proved through the writing.
A question is replaced by a statement, an uncertain tone run over by a feigned-
confidence. Don’t misunderstand, I am not suggesting the five-paragraph essay, and its
related styles, are less important or less effective as tools to teach writing and thinking. Such a form is often a pragmatic means to communicate one’s ideas. (Interestingly, I have a combination of the five-paragraph-theme essay form as well as personal narratives throughout my thesis.) I am suggesting, however, that emotional, personal narratives are also effective, specifically through their differences in style, tone, and rhetorical purpose. The essence of memoir is a willingness to explore life, in all its vulnerability, to admit the emotional pain, to create meaning, *no matter how incomplete*. This is what makes the genre so effective today. It’s impulsive. Energized. Urgent. It is the echo of today’s Western culture, a way of life that is fast paced, emotionally broken, and frankly uncertain. The resolutions of fiction, the logical conclusions expected in thesis writing, are altered in crafting personal experience. While there is still logic, conclusion, critical analysis, there is also the realness of unresolved meaning—and not just intellectual meaning, but incomplete sense that stems from the reservoir of the heart and spirit. Often, memoir is a piece of the film of life that is still rolling, and the reader appreciates the authenticity.

Why *must* one wait to do this? Why should emotions be cooled, reflection more molded? I say invite the emotional frenzy that evolves from writing from the heart, use its driving force, its fresh and vigorous perspectives. The emotional energy leads me into a very productive writing state immediately, even though I continue writing, thinking, and developing meaning with greater distance from the event. In fact, I was writing my memoir in the hospital as my son, husband, and I stayed overnight and throughout the following day. It was my cathartic narrative; it gave me some semblance of order—even though I knew nothing about what would be, or what I would later think it all meant.
In a similarly raw, in-the-moment fashion, Anne Lamott’s *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son’s First Year* is a diaristic account, a day-to-day unfolding of her experience becoming a mom. It became a national bestseller; people want real. It is a frank tale of her loneliness, low self-esteem, and anxieties as a single mom. She shares daily passing emotions with humor and boldness. Her stories help her approximate her experience. As I laugh in my bathrobe at one in the afternoon, burping my babe, bottle in one hand, book under my thigh, she helps me too.

Lamott discusses bodily pain but always her focus quickly turns over to her psychological pain. For example, she shares how she was having contractions for a couple days and thought she was going to deliver “but the male doctor who examined me at Kaiser said I was only dilated two centimeters and couldn’t be admitted, although I was in real pain by then. I went into a terrible, fearful depression” (17). When she is admitted to the hospital and delivers she describes the birth:

I was shivering like a wet dog and felt like I was freezing to death even though I had a big fever by then. [...] I felt like my heart was going to break from all the mixed-up feelings and because I couldn’t even really take care of my baby. Finally the fever went away, just as the doctor finished stitching me up, and hope came back into me, hope and tremendous feelings of buoyancy and joy. (19)

She illumines the emotional pain and jubilation of birth that I, too, experienced. Her memoir slips into the master narrative of motherhood, but the unique situation she is in (not having a partner or husband, not having steady income, having a tumultuous past with drug and alcohol addiction) makes her memoir individual, distinct, fascinating for
other mothers who also have imperfect variables contributing to their narratives of motherhood.

Her son Sam takes her out of her mind, makes her cognizant of his physical reality and less obsessed with her inadequacies. She writes:

As I was writing this, Sam, who is lying beside me on the futon in the living room, suddenly did this fantastic and joyful scream, exactly like James Brown. I don’t have any idea what I will tell Sam when he is old enough to ask about his father. I’ll say that everybody doesn’t have something and that he doesn’t have this one thing, but that we have each other and that is a lot. (111)

She talks about Sam’s bodily functions throughout the memoir (as one can imagine), but always as a catalyst for her emotional reactions. She evaluates herself as a mother based on how she deals with his physical pain: colic, teething, falling. She shares her exhaustion and how her mind is affected. After dealing with a fussing baby all day, she confesses: “It has been a terrible day. I’m afraid I’m going to have to let him go. He’s an awful baby. I hate him. He’s scum. I’m not even remotely well enough to be a mother. That’s what the problem is. Also, I don’t think I like babies” (114). Lamott’s honesty goes full circle; she shares, openly and completely, when she is high and low. Such frankness helps her approximate the entire experience of her son’s first year as well as granting the reader the opportunity to more meaningfully conceive of the seemingly endless days and nights of becoming a mom.
Importantly, Lamott doesn’t attempt to resolve the psychological distress of becoming a mother; rather, she writes through the challenges and the highlights of dealing with her metamorphosing baby-toddler-boy:

I don’t know what to make of it all. But, as I was writing this just now, Sam went into the living room closet, played a little song on the guitar, and then, just this second, peered around from behind the closet door, babbling absolutely incoherently, grinning at me like some like crazy old Indian holy man. (251)

Admitting to not having all of the answers draws the reader further into her story because constructing meaning is a life-long endeavor that cannot be concluded at the end of her memoir.

Actor Gene Wilder shares his motivations for writing his memoir, *Kiss Me Like a Stranger*, with Katie Couric Tuesday morning, March 15, 2005:

“Let’s face it, you’re very exposed.”

“Yeah, yeah I am.” Wilder continues, saying he didn’t want to write the typical Hollywood memoir. He wanted to explore his life-quest for love. I looked up at my T.V., pausing from my morning push-ups. As they concluded their interview, Gene Wilder said, “and I am in love.” Katie did not respond right away. As the commercial-time music began, she half smiled and told him that’s good. He looked old, like he may have been wearing mascara and blush to hide this fact, and his last line dampened my interest in his memoir. His comment on his memoir being a quest for love and his resolution (he’s found love) felt too planted, too quick and easy. Life is more complicated. Memoirs are true to this. Memoirs are so popular today because of their
real-to-life problems and pain. Memoirs are without make-up; they open, expose real life, and the best of these move us to engage in each other’s lives as well as our own in the reading experience.

Indeed, memoir often has an open ended, unfinished quality because the life is not finished. Perhaps this characteristic is what bothers the academic discourse lovers. They want writing that provides closure. The memoirist wants authentic life-implicating wonder. She wants her pain channeled outside of her mind, her body, and into the open. The memoirist believes in herself enough to put her answers on hold, to shatter the moral of the story and examine the reflections that shimmer in the sharp pieces. She isn’t looking to have others’ gaze upon her life and marvel at her experience as something cut off from theirs; rather, she hopes they see their own life in hers. She connects to her self and, in doing so, slides into the notion that she’s a viable component of the human race—different but the same. Her reader applauds her for this, turning the pages of his own life and re-constructing a consciousness that admits his pain is okay, a shard of the gestalt.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: BOUND BY BROKENNESS, STUDENTS’ WRITING IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

In my thesis, I discuss the dominance of social theory in the field of composition. Working off Alice Flaherty’s studies on the brain and the relationship she argues exists between emotion—meaning-making—and creative production, I discuss a physio-neurological terministic screen as an additional way in which to consider writing. I demonstrate how published memoirists write about bodily and psychological pain as a way to achieve agency and connectedness in a fragmented postmodern world. Oftentimes, personal narratives are brutally frank and share disturbing physical realities. Some argue against eighteen year-olds writing in such a way. Yet, I believe it is because of the intensity of the issues—the raw, unresolved emotions—that the writing works as a revolutionary force to reconstruct students’ lives.

I now conclude with a look at a few freshman composition students’ personal narratives. Even a cursory look at students’ personal narratives shows that writing about the body evokes critical analysis, constructs agency, and works the students’ personal experiences into a more socially integrated perspective. What do students do with emotion, with physical realities, with their pain? How can writing about the body bridge the gap between students’ lives and academic expectations?

The following personal narrative shares a young woman’s reflection on her father molesting her sister:
The next morning, my mother kissed my sister, my brother, and I good-bye and sent us off to elementary school like any other normal day. Monica was in high school so she had already left. When we got home from school that day, we expected to see both Mom and Dad greeting us for the afternoon. But tonight, there was only Mom. I thought maybe Dad was working late. At about seven o’clock, my bedtime, I questioned my mother about his absence.

“He’s not going to be coming home anymore sweetie. Daddy is very sick. He tried to touch Monica. We’re getting a divorce.”

She was silent after this. My mother’s deep chocolate-brown eyes filled with tears of great sorrow. I never saw my mom cry before that night. I sat there in my creaky old bed with a puzzled look on my face.

It was there that I realized this subject was too much for my mom to talk about. It was in that bed that I realized everything wasn’t always about me. For once, or maybe even for the first time, I tried to think of how my mom was feeling. I could tell divorce meant “to break-up” but I still didn’t know why they were getting one; I didn’t ask her. I figured that in five minutes, after my mom left, my four year old sister would have the scoop on everything that happened, and everything I missed.

I couldn’t understand why mom was so upset about him touching Monica. Daddy touched everyone. He always gave us hugs and kisses and picked me up in church so I could see over everyone. […] I always
wonder what I could have noticed, what I could have heard that would stop my Dad from hurting her.

Becky’s essay uses physical touch as the touchstone throughout. In the beginning, her mother kisses and sends her children to school. Next, when she addresses the abuse, she uses the word “touch”—she doesn’t say molest, or violate, or any other more specific word. Using the word touch makes the experience sound a bit normalized, especially as she continues to share how her father “touches everyone,” he lifted her up in church, gave hugs and kisses to all of the family. The discussion of bodily touch is the spine of the essay, but the emotional response she has to it, then and now, is what drives her essay beyond “weepy,” solipsistic gazing and into a critically analyzed, thought provoking account of her personal experience.

In addition, her experience is relatable. Statistics reveal the climb in divorce and broken families. Many have experienced a form of abuse, and the consequences from such dysfunction permeate within a family. Even though it was her sister who experienced the abuse, Becky, too, felt abused. In writing about this, she re-aligns who she is in the narrative: a child who deeply cared but couldn’t do anything. Now, as a young adult, she cannot change what happened but can accept and move on—her narrative gives her agency.

In another childhood memory, my student, Tricia, leads her readers into her painful narrative:

I remember when I was little, nothing much mattered to me but how long we could stay out in the neighbor’s yards playing hide-and-go-seek, or how much trouble we got into for playing water Olympics on a
friend’s back porch. All I cared about as a kid was having fun; there were no worries or cares. I can remember staying out late catching lightning bugs with my best friend who only lived one house behind me. Our days were spent together and our nights were spent playing games until we were so tired we could barely make it into our houses. Those days were the best, then I found out what cancer was.

Tricia begins with the emotional consequence and moves into the physical experience with each component of her introduction: nothing matters but playing, getting in trouble for playing, having fun—no worries, no cares, just doing fun things with a friend to the point of exhaustion. She ends with her over-all evaluation that “those days were the best” until her mother’s cancer ruins her life. It is significant that she focuses on emotions. This demonstrates that she is analyzing the experience—what it means to her in the context of what her body did before. This is the best portion of her essay because she moves beyond just telling what happened in an emotionally persuasive manner as she shows what she did before and how cancer intruded upon this.

In another section she directly discusses her mother:

She was tough. Dealing with three kids, a husband, and a deadly disease is taking on a lot. But she did it wit no thoughts of doing it any other way. When she was home, all she focused on was teaching me to read and to learn my ABC’s. She would sing songs with me, and work with me on learning the basics that I needed for kindergarten. She always cared about us first, when she was strong enough to. Even when she wasn’t strong enough, she still tried. She wanted us to have the best and
be the best. She always told my dad that she hated us seeing her like that. It was kind of like she knew she would go soon, but she wanted to give us all of her that she could while she was here. I look up to her in so many ways, and I know I always will. She struggled through all of the pain and suffering, and still had a joy and peace about everything that was going on.

Tricia tells but doesn’t show the reader her mother and her interacting. She still analyzes the experience of her mother raising her and being there for the family, but she closes the reader out because the experience isn’t re-created—its significance is just told. Yet, the evaluations she makes proves that she has indeed constructed meaning from the incidents. Tricia goes on to explain how, despite losing her mother, she has developed other relationships (like a closeness with her church and father) and this social connectedness helps her pain dissipate. Perhaps, writing about the experience helps her accept that this is an incident in her past and it is okay, healthy even, that she has moved on. Her story is a part of who she is; it has made her the strong, mature, faithful young woman she sees herself as today.

Alex writes in a much different tone. His voice is light and humorous, but discusses a sobering issue: who he is versus the image his friends have of him. He writes about a bike race:

“You are a clown,” said K.O. I thought about it for a few seconds. Yeah, I might have broken every bone in my body and yeah my bike look like a Lego set. But, hey I risked my whole life to prove to them that I’m not a clown. This win should prove to them that I’m not a clown I think!
I finally beat my little brother. I even beat some people my own age. But, I still have the label the clown. I risk my own little life to their respect and finally gain a win. But, they still label me a clown. *Though a clown is someone who does really dumb things to make people laugh.*

Maybe, a label that someone gives you can never be cast away? The harder you try to shake it, the more they will call you that. There are labels that people might give you that you start actually believing as true. I mean that label that you have is the label that sticks, no matter what you may do. Right?

In the beginning of this excerpt, Alex addresses the physical price he was prepared to take in order to re-align others’ perceptions of him—he’d break all his bones, if need be. And then he finds that none of his bodily sacrifice makes a difference because he’s stuck with a reputation. His essay is about re-writing his image and the impossibility of others reading his new self—but his own sense of self is communicated and satisfies him. His essay is introspective and requires him to look long and hard at himself; however, it is not simply navel gazing because he looks at who he is compared to who others perceive he is.

Alex also relates to the reader as he shares his story by vividly conveying his body:

“Crash, Bang, Snap, Snap, Snap, Snap,” As my bike is destroyed by the impact of the white Oldsmobile, I make a not to friendly crash landing into the top of a tree at the park and broke every branch. As I lay at the bottom of that tree with every branch laying on me and my face
bleeding like my heart was leaking out of my face a very familiar face is looking over me it looked like my brother but every thing was kind of fussy. He is saying something to me but with all the beating, I can’t really make it out. I feel like a Mr. Potato Head put together completely wrong. After about two hours, I regain complete conscious and began speaking clear and coherent English.

The reader experiences Alex’s accident through the flesh and blood of his words. Writing about the body, the emotions and the guts, merges the existence of students’ (writers’) lives and academic expectations. Analysis, personal and social meaning and implications, happens naturally when one writes with openness to the life he’s lived and the residual effects it had, that it still has. Writing about personal experiences encourages thinking and re-thinking perceptions, biases, beliefs, and meaning. Thoughtfulness and communication happens, unequivocally, when we accept the mind as a part of the body—a wormy maze of flesh and blood.

**Ending with a Beginning: Creatively Writing “Real” Life**

My research leads me further into a passionate pursuit of writing personal experiences and encouraging others to do so. Neurological realities affect my ambition to write and instruct creative writing in drawing upon the physical necessity I and others have to share what I feel, emotionally and bodily, and to explicate the significances of these experiences. Writing becomes a validation of my life, and my life becomes a well spring of writing material. This promises me a rejuvenating source of material through which I can intimately deal with life, and relating my stories with society may encourage others to deal with their own lives.
In the course of composing my thesis, I have completed my Masters Degree and begun my Masters of Fine Arts Degree. My studies have transitioned from classes on theory and pedagogy to coursework focused on creative writing. I am currently enrolled in a Fiction Writing Workshop and have faced a poignant dilemma: What is my story? This sounds absurd, but the more I engage myself in the act of writing fiction, the more I desire to write nonfiction because in doing so I sense an authenticity to my writing that I do not often achieve when writing fiction. Such realness motivates me, inspires me to write.

Lately I have questioned the differences between fiction and non-fiction stories. Both genres share all of the components necessary for the creation of an effective story: developed characters; profluence, or moving the incidents along to significantly engage the reader; a message that is subtle enough to avoid a preachy tone but integral enough to maintain a focus throughout the story, etc. My grappling with the distinction between fiction and non-fiction reached its peak the other day in class. In my Fiction Writing Workshop, my professor encouraged a girl to write an everyday scene into her fictional story that made the piece feel more natural. He suggested something along the lines of going to the grocery store. The girl didn’t understand how adding something unrelated to her short story would make it better. She questioned our professor, arguing the scene would distract from her focus. The instructor insisted she needed to allow the story to breathe, to try not to keep it so focused on what she imagined it should be. He also said he thought the story was based on a true incident (the girl’s grandmother dying) and that because it was based on truth it wasn’t working as a fictional piece. I became confused at this point because if fiction is crafted to feel real in order to be “natural” why would real
experiences become a distraction from fiction? It seems to me that writing is always a
balancing act between crafting real and fictional incidents into scenes and ultimately
stories that are persuasively real-to-life (whether true or otherwise). Because I write from
my life, from my experiences, it seems clear to me that personal narratives are at the heart
of fiction and non-fiction.

My future studies of creative writing will center on non-fiction. An important
question arises in my mind: What is the difference between creative nonfiction and essay
writing? Is there a difference? And even more simply, what is an essay? Adam
Hochschild reviewed Philip Lopate’s *The Art of the Essay: The Best of 1999* in a section
of the *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle* titled *Explorations of the Senses:
Collection Rediscover Sight and Sexual Attraction, among other Topics*:

The term “essay” these days, then, covers everything from the meditative
to the confessional, and much in between. Perhaps it’s a good use of the
word, though, otherwise we’d be stuck with the dreadful ‘nonfiction,’
which defines writing by what it is not. (Would the early novelists have
gotten anywhere had they called themselves “nonpoets” or
“nondramatists”?) (6)

I believe “essay” is a term which loosely wraps around writing that is true. Essay writing
feels real-to-life because it is written from the vantage point of experience. It is crafted
through an emotional voice that vulnerably re-creates scenes from life. The essay posits
real-to-life experience. Whether wholly true or partially true it feels real. Perhaps
creative non-fiction slides under the umbrella of essayistic writing, but creative non-
fiction is crafted as a story no different from fiction (aside from its overt trueness), and it

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differs from an essay, which can be many other things. In his review, Hochschild writes
of the persuasive power of a true story:

I enjoyed myself best when someone took me into a world distinctly
different from my own. The most memorable piece is by the novelist and
nature writer Edward Hoagland about the experience of going almost
blind, and then, amazingly, of finding a doctor who restored his sight with
an operation other physicians said would not work. It’s an extraordinary
voyage [...]. [The essay] has an echo to it, an implicit question: Which of
my senses, right now, is a miraculous gift I’m insufficiently grateful for?
(6)

What I am most interested in doing is recreating real-life incidents and crafting
these into stories. Writing my body—my joy, anger, insecurity, excitement, sweating
palms, racing heart, stuffy head, heavy legs, swollen eyelids, every bodily experience
becomes the reader’s own through my *Flesh, Blood, and Words: Creativity and Writing
as Physiological Phenomena* unveils the processing of my present and future scholarship.
REFERENCES


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