Writerly writing is personal writing, whether or not it is autobiographical.

Mariaanna Torgovnick

“I learned that what I have to say is valuable in and of itself and does not need to be generalized into obscurity.”

Susan Krieger, quoting a student

One must ask whose privacy we really protect when we deny students the right to address these [personal] topics, and whose interest it serves to maintain the traditional taboo on these topics.

Cinthia Gannett

One appeal of the personal voice in academic writing is its flexibility, its accessibility, and potential literariness—that is, its reliance on rhythms and word music, imagery, specificity, allusions. Another is its capacity for principled disclosure—of research goals and practices, of researcher stakes, of implications for problem, field, and author. That is the aspect I am interested in as a researcher, as a writer, and in my graduate courses in autobiographical scholarship. But the aspect on which I will focus here is the capacity of personal classroom writing—personal responses to course readings and disciplinary issues and the use of personal forms—to negotiate the divide college students often feel between school and work or school and home, their writing and their caring, their knowing and their being. Allowing our students, for a time anyway, to posit connections, can encourage discouraged and dislocated students, give them a way into the disciplinary conversations that might otherwise daunt and distance them.

When I invoke the personal as pedagogy, stance, or style, what I am really endorsing is connection, between student and subject, teacher and student, reader and writer, student and student, coursework and the work of the discipline and the world. I’m not asking for easy writing with pat or unambiguous conclusions about life or intellectual problems. No, the “personal” is a multipurpose route or ruse that invigorates academic learning, academic publishing,
our various disciplines. Many disciplines have been “getting personal” in various ways. Postmodern versions of selfhood posit its constructedness in and through discourse, including the “I” voice of a discourse that, in a more innocent time, seemed private, deep, authentic. Now to speak of the personal “always already” means to ask for a poetics of the personal and to recognize its rhetoricity. We know even our freshmen (emphasis on fresh) come to us socialized and not “pre-sexual” or “pre-economic,” such that even when writing emotionally or narratively about immediate or past personal events and feelings they write out of ideas and with discourses formed or inflected by others. Moreover, to quote Jane Tompkins, “What is personal is completely a function of what is perceived as personal” (36). Tompkins acknowledges that “what we are really talking about [may] not be the personal as such, what we are talking about is what is important, answers one’s needs, strikes one as immediately interesting. For women,” she believes, “the personal is such a category” (36). All of this is to say that so-called personal writing is also inevitably varied, complex, and likely in flux even within one writer’s experience.

In my classes and in this paper, I build on the pedagogical work of David Bleich, Norman Holland, and other early “subjectivist” teachers or reader-response theorists in composition and women’s studies, including Louise Rosenblatt, Charles Moran, Anthony Petrosky, Nancy Hoffman, Jean Kennard, Suzanne Juhasz, Patsy Schweickart, and Jane Tompkins, among others. I also draw on postmodern debates and the educational approaches deemed “applied” or “service-learning.” Personal scholarship teaches that knowledge work involves the whole person. Axel Nissen, in a special PMLA issue on the personal, writes, “The will to know, which is at the base of all scholarship, is located not only between the ears but equally under the sternum and in the crotch. Intellectual curiosity, love, and desire are intimately intermingled in our work as scholar” (1149). And service-learning teaches that education does not come in isolation; it involves the whole community. These theorists seek not just the personal, nor just anything else, but a comprehensive pedagogy that goes beyond a goal of disinterested, hands-off intellectual activity.

Such a pedagogy underscores what many teachers of writing and literature and especially many women teachers know, that students are unavoidably bringing their personal lives into their academic work, the classroom space, and their conversations with teachers and peers. One response is to draw out the personal connections and develop them as scholarship—or as material recognized as interfering with student understanding of a text and its critical reception to date. If the personal is to remain in the final draft of a paper, it must serve to illuminate the text or issue under discussion; if, on the other hand, to quote Douglas Atkins, “the experiencing, responding critic is not
interestingly and effectively represented . . . why [would] anyone else want to read him or her or . . . be expected to do so?” (97). The classroom permitting experimental critical writing and encouraging service-learning projects can help students find academic work more rewarding, bring student work closer to the “masters” and models students usually study, connect home life or past life with school life, and join one person’s “unique” experience with that of a larger community group.

Besides encouraging students to explore personal and associative responses to academic texts and issues, I encourage students to take classroom work into the field (an effort aided by large bulletin-board or career-center lists of organizations seeking volunteers, intern-for-credit programs, and the many new state and university organizations for public and community service). A disclaimer: this work has been done and much more extensively by those more skilled in ethnographic work and who teach more writing courses or service-learning-based courses than literature teachers like myself. While I have a good background in and a degree in teaching writing (and another in creative writing) and all courses in my present department are termed “writing-intensive,” I was hired most recently as an “Americanist” with special expertise in contemporary American literature, especially poetry and autobiography. Students in my classes are invited but not expected to write personal criticism. And although I have been appointed by the Governor to the New Hampshire Commission for National and Community Service, and while I do encourage all of my students to consider undertaking community service related to writing and literature, I do not require that the “project” component of each of my courses consist of service—it may instead involve music and art or independent research.

Nonetheless, I will share some student testimonials regarding reading and writing personally, offering them against a backdrop of important work and debates in autobiographical scholarship—the subject area about which I can claim greatest knowledge. As Joseph Boone has written, “While the proliferation of autobiographical narratives by scholars is a significant development, the role that the personal plays in pedagogy is equally important” (1153). Indeed, self-inclusion has become a valued scholarly genre, one that both authorizes and learns from its use in composition and lit.-comp. classrooms.

Most of us are familiar by now with the genre of autobiographical or interactive scholarship and the experiments in the personal voice and blurred genres it offers and advocates. It is most widely practiced in literary studies. Specialist in African-American literature Claudia Tate sees “no boundary between our scholarship and our political commitments” (1148). Michael Berube, English professor and one of the new “Public Intellectuals” writing and speaking (even on the radio) for a broad audience, answers critics of the
new subjectivity. Berube refuses to see “personal narratives as some kind of
generic violation of scholarship in the human sciences,” adding,

as long as the scholarship in question concerns humans and is written by humans,
readers should at least entertain the possibility that nothing human should be alien
to it. . . . In fields like history, anthropology, sociology, or literary study . . . the inter-
est of the observer are an integral element of research, so much that to ignore those
interests is to run the risk of pretending (or at least assuming) that the human sci-
ences might aspire to the accuracy of the physical sciences if only humanists (and
antihumanists) would conduct human sciences without hermeneutics. (1065)

Some investigating or practicing “personal criticism” set it against postmod-
ernism, feminist theory, or post-structuralism (in the name of the everyday, of
writing pedagogy, of accessibility and anti-elitism), but most recognize that its
current growth is very much a part of or in keeping with feminist critical, theo-
retical, and pedagogical practices not to mention postmodernism. Sociologist
Laurel Richardson aptly assesses the current situation in Fields of Play:
Constructing an Academic Life (1997), announcing, “Today, the dominan-
t intellectual context challenges . . . all claims for a singular, correct style for orga-
nizing and presenting knowledge.” In her book, Richardson offers conversa-
tional writing, an ethnographic drama, and poems, among other experiments.
To Richardson, president of the North Central Sociological Association, a per-
sonal, creative, and non-authoritarian approach is appropriate in academia
today. She confesses heretical leanings and a “penchant for mingling the per-
sonal, the political, and the intellectual” (12). She borrows from anthropolo-
gists, who describe the present as a period in which we have the loss of
authority of a “general paradigmatic style of organizing research” (Marcus and
Fisher 1986, 8; qtd. in Richardson 13), and observe that “ideas and methods are
freely borrowed from one discipline to another, leading to a ‘blurring of gen-
res’” (Geertz 1980, qtd. in Richardson 13).

Indeed composition and literature teachers now also speak of, demonstrate,
and offer courses in the blurring of genres. (Tom Romano offers such a sum-
ner course in the Reading and Writing Program for teachers held at the
University of New Hampshire, where Pat Sullivan and I each offer similar
courses in academic autobiography during the year; at other campuses, Brenda
Daly, Madelon Sprengnether, and Olivia Frey have taught related courses as
well.) Richardson, like others, perceives that

the loss of grand theory has affected all the disciplines, although their responses
have differed. In literary criticism, literature is aesthetically equivalenced [such that
writers on literature, or deconstructors of literature, are on par as writers]. . . . In law,
critical legal studies . . . abrogates the legal reasoning model (Livingston, 1982). In
philosophy, the principles of uncertainty and contextuality undermine the possibility of universal systems of thought (Rorty, 1979). In physics and mathematics, the focus is on the inelegant, the disorderly, indeed, even “chaos” (Gleick, 1984). In sociology and other social sciences, sociological production, like other human productions, is seen as socially produced (cf. Fiske and Shweder, 1986). (13)

Since professionals in these various fields have questioned grand theory and passive-voiced, author-evacuated prose and science envy, it is not misleading to our students to have them write differently and expect that their work can still be taken seriously or lead them to the fields or grad programs of their choice.

Nellie McKay, renowned scholar and editor of African-American literature, concludes, “I am convinced that the personal voice, used seriously and responsibly, has an important role to play in the education of young people” (1155). Of course, personal and experimental essays, the memoir, the confession, and so forth have long writerly histories. “If I tell how I chose this topic, what serendipitous encounter with book or friend put me onto this approach” and so forth, George Wright insists, he is “only following lines laid down by Augustine, Montaigne, Coleridge, Keats, Woolf [and many others]” (1160). In the eighteenth century, George Campbell said of persuasive writing, “passion must also be engaged” and “Nothing . . . keep[s] our attention alive and vigorous [more] than the pathetic, which consists chiefly in exhibitions of personal misery” (113, qtd. in Paley 17). In the nineteenth century, another rhetorician, Alexander Bain, praised Plato for his relief of “the severity of philosophical discussion with touches of general human interest . . . The debate is interrupted by dramatic displays of personal feeling” (202, qtd. in Paley 17). Jules Lemaitre and Anatole France “defended the free play of the appreciative mind,” the basis of the “impressionistic” criticism much maligned by the “New Critics.” In 1910, J.E. Spingarn described such critics as being sensitive to impressions, capable of expressing themselves well, and (thus) producing new works of art in response to the sensations generated (“The New Criticism” 5). If accused of straying from the work of art, these critics reply: “Do not deceive yourself. All criticism tends to shift the interest from the work of art to something else” (Spingarn 7). In the 1960s, Irving Malin and Irwin Stark extolled the work of Jewish-American critics writing against New Critical tenets. In Breakthrough: A Treasury of Contemporary American-Jewish Literature, they explain:

Many of these [anthologized] critical essays emphasize the value of suffering. In this, they are noticeably different in temper from the pure, scientific, rather aloof criticism of the “New Critics” who avoid committing themselves to any real understanding or sympathy. . . . The refreshing quality of American-Jewish criticism lies precisely in this involvement with passionate spiritual questions, which is certainly a more
humanistic involvement than close scientific explication. This is not to say that American-Jewish critics are merely impressionistic—they think as well as feel. (18)

A decade ago, I noted that blurred or mixed-genre texts have been “produced and theorized by feminists, deconstructors, French psychoanalytic critics, reader-response critics, and composition teachers, not to mention past poet-critics from Sir Phillip Sidney and Walt Whitman to W.E.B. Du Bois, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson along with anthropologists Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, Renato Rosaldo, George Marcus” (*An Alchemy of Genres* 83). Today’s alternative forms also have echoes of nineteenth-century women’s work in such “nontraditional genres” as sketch, letter, diary, newspaper column as well as of the testimonial mode of slave narratives.

In terms of the personal as pedagogy, however, let us only go back to the early twentieth century for now. Drawing on James Berlin, Karen Paley reports, “in 1928, Richard Reeve encouraged the use of dreams for invention in writing personal essays. In 1932, J. McBride Dabbs had his students keep journals and made their texts the central reading of the class. In 1938, Edith Christina Johnson saw writing as a way to form identity and gain self-knowledge” (Paley 42). Also in 1938, Louise Rosenblatt brought out *Literature as Exploration*, the text that gained great critical attention when it was reissued in 1976. Rosenblatt had asserted that “the reader counts for at least as much as the book or poem itself . . . through books, the reader may explore his [or her] own nature,” and “just as the author is creative, selective, so the reader also is creative” (Rosenblatt 42).

Back in the 1970s, when I was an undergraduate, Cornell University offered many sections of a freshman writing course entitled “Writing from Experience.” I myself taught “Writing Family Histories” in Cornell’s “Experimental College.” As a graduate teaching assistant at Cornell, however, I assigned my students in “Film and Rhetoric” and “Practical Prose” only academic writing exercises—summaries, analyses, reviews. At the University of Washington, in a writing program under the direction of Charles Schuster, I taught several courses (expository writing, writing about literature, essay writing) in which personal essays served as models for student writing. In the advanced writing courses, in particular, my students modelled essays on those in Robert Lyons’ collection *Autobiography: A Reader for Writers* (Oxford, 1977), Nichols’s *Writing from Experience* (now out of print), or David Cavitch’s *Life Studies: A Thematic Reader* (St. Martin’s, 1986).

Even traditional composition classes, taught in the modes (description, narration, classification, comparison and contrast, process), like those offered (including by me) at the State University of New York in Cortland in 1979,
relied on personal narratives, although students were to “progress” from these chronologically arranged essays to argumentative essays organized by the reasons offered in support of the thesis that appeared in an opening paragraph. But by the time I taught “expository writing” at Washington and at Skidmore College (as an assistant professor) feminist-theory groups discussed essays in feminist theory and pedagogy; friends and colleagues shared their syllabi and writing exercises—the personal was the political, and it was in. Composition and Gender Studies conferences had sessions in which the evocative and nuanced personal narrative ultimately was celebrated as a possible capstone project of a course rather than considered an easy, throwaway, warmup exercise to be used only in the beginning of a course. Paley describes a class she taught at Boston College in which several students wrote moving personal essays and others wrote more conventional academic essays. A student who did the latter “apparently did not find writing narratives to be easy. In fact,” writes Paley, “he found it to be more challenging than writing papers about the thoughts of famous philosophers” (my emphasis; e-mail excerpt, 19 February 1999). Rather than a copout genre, the personal essay or the hybrid personal-scholarly essay requires practice and antecedents. Moreover, it is a real genre called for across the disciplines and in the “outside world” though perhaps rendered predictably and poorly in some places.

Wouldn’t it be a delight if those college and graduate-school admissions essays were truly evocative and interesting? What about cover letters in job-application packets? Grant and TA applications? Letters of welcome to new students, stockholders, or community members? The question is not whether real writing or real scholarship is personal. It is inevitably so, as most of the twenty-six contributors to the *PMLA* Forum on the subject and others attest. Moreover, I accept what Bleich in 1978 found to be a basic principle:

> an adolescent student—ages 12 to 22—is intensely preoccupied with his [or her] own person—physically, psychologically, and socially. He[/she] shares in common with people of all ages a fundamental concern about the relationships and people in his[/her] life. These preoccupations and concerns are the key to bringing out a new, serious awareness and understanding of the role of emotional life in intellectual development. (18-19)

It is inevitable that much if not all scholarship, student work, and real-world writing is personal. I’ve elsewhere asserted that “joining the personal and professional, analysis and emotion, ‘self’ and other,” personal scholarship “powerfully connects readers to texts, to their own writing, to our own (if previously unacknowledged) critical process, and to one another” (“Autobiographical Literary Criticism as the New Belletrism” 12). The questions then become:
when and how the personal should be given expression in a scholarly text (Nissen 1142); are there more or less productive ways of getting personal (Gallop 1150); must an openness to personal writing mean a naive acceptance of the notion of a rational, coherent, and unified “self,” a notion critiqued by postmodernists and thought to inhere in all personal writing; and how can a teacher avoid getting overly involved in or upsetting students’ emotional lives when personal, even passionate, essays are permitted or solicited.

EVERYDAY WRITING AND TEACHING: PERSONAL NARRATIVES

I begin this next section with a braided epigraph, a student taking off, in a personal-scholarly way, from a writing theorist’s ideas:

One idea that Farrell discusses is . . . that the “female” mode is more relaxed for both the writer and reader [because] it comes close to “recreating the process of thinking as it normally occurs in real life” (910). Everyone has a “real life,” and every day of this real life people think (even though we often wish we could avoid it). Since this idea is so universal, I think that writers should use their “every day” mode of thought to structure their writing and thus allow themselves, as well as their readers, to relate to their work. As a writer trained in Farrell’s “male mode” [that is, “logical, controlled, framed, and contained” as opposed to “open-ended, generative, and process-oriented” (910)], I . . . distance myself from my work. This is very unnatural and tedious. However, I think that by using my “I” voice and being able to retrace my thoughts on the page, I can be more free . . . as a writer.

Cory, undergraduate student

An important and inevitable cautionary note is sounded fully by Brenda Daly in the following passage from Authoring a Life. Daly is thinking about fiction and personal narratives detailing childhood sexual abuse, including her own:

The decision to speak or write autobiographically must be made again and again. As each situation arises, we must ask: What is the nature of the constraint? What are the risks of speaking openly? Who benefits from my silence? Who benefits when I speak out?

Now to my own real life, my teaching life.

I had been carrying around a folded departmental envelope daily for nearly a year on which I’d recorded my telephone authorization code—as a faculty member I get a code and department stationary—only to realize suddenly one day that the envelope had first been someone else’s, an unknown, ungendered student whose “to do” list (jotted on this very envelope) had included: Freedman’s office, thank you note to Jill, condoms, and call Mom. What message about my calling was I to read in the envelope then?
Is the year it took me to notice all that a measure of the level of faculty-member-student disconnect even a personally-oriented teacher like me sustains? Am I just one among hundreds of faculty members intent on his or her private code, secure that an envelope with a departmental address is necessarily one of her own? Or does the overwritten envelope signify that students and teachers are in fact on the same page and that it is every day about the body? Teachers in my department (English) have always taken into account student needs overtly and because literature and writing have healing effects. But as student needs grow every day more apparent and psychically acute, must our pedagogies grow ever more personal? What would that mean? And how can we avoid overwhelming students and ourselves by our classroom modes and materials? Dan Morgan, in “Ethical Issues Raised by Students’ Personal Writing,” describes well the situation (which has intensified since Bleich described the preoccupations of adolescent students, just as some think the period of adolescence has lengthened into what was formerly adulthood):

A teacher’s responsibilities always did entail more than content expertise and classroom management, always did include listening, encouraging, mentoring, and even, occasionally, some degree of informal counseling. But we now live in a time when many more college students have “special needs,” when we see a much higher proportion of students who have led nontraditional lives, a larger number of what I call “broken wing” students. And so, our roles have of necessity become even more time-consuming and challenging. (139)

More and more students remain on campus more than four years or begin college after age eighteen. Most at my campus work, often at more than one job, sometimes more than forty hours a week, while taking a four-course academic load. A good proportion are first-generation college students; several have told me their parents cannot read. Many students everywhere today are also victims of some kind of abuse or of “everyday” accidents, errors of judgement, loneliness, or intellectual isolation.

I know this not because my students have appeared in the hallways drunk or stoned or weeping or otherwise marked as troubled. I know it not because of articles like Morgan’s or Bleich’s early book or what I learned in TA-training or in new-faculty orientation, but because of what my students say and what and how they write. Especially, I venture to guess, in the American-literature, writing, and women’s-studies classrooms, perhaps also philosophy, psychology, and sociology courses, student self-disclosures have increased in and through writing. Whatever the complex cultural forces at work, the result is that more of our young people have had difficult, even traumatic, experiences, and those experiences are erupting in college classrooms, whether disclosure of
them is sanctioned or not, overtly related to course materials or not. It is no accident that at the same time, we have a “memoir boom”—the increasing publication not just of tell-all tv-talk-show-like narratives, but literary memoirs and “self-inclusive” or “personal scholarship.” Subject matters previously taboo are no longer so; either we are a culture no longer in denial or more and more of the world’s citizens are traumatized. One of my graduate students, who is also an instructor of first-year composition, deems our entire culture a traumatic one, by which she means nearly all of us are touched by traumas—our own or others. Dan Morgan offers ways of perhaps heading off excursions into the personal in composition class (tightly assigned topics, a greater concern with audience and purpose, announcing a lack of preference for papers dealing with past or present illegal activities, eliminating personal narratives). But they’re not necessarily desirable—even to him—and certainly not fool-proof; Morgan acknowledges students will still find ways to write what they want. Instead, our curricula and methodology in the university classroom can—should—reflect an awareness of the students’ inner and everyday lives without overwhelming ourselves or our students. One’s innermost experiences and values are fair grounds for teaching and research, and classroom learning is enhanced by acknowledging inevitable and necessary connections between life and learning. In fact, the prevalence of new experiences and new genres means we have more pedagogical and socially-grounded writing options to explore with our students.

How can we build bridges between the major (for which we teachers have too often served as Major General) and the student every day—whether traumatic or more happily connected to the figures inscribed on the coveted envelope: “Mom,” “Jill,” and the lover implied in the jotted injunction to [buy] “condoms”?

I certainly do not propose that we should all get re-degreed as counselors or install couches in our offices or even that we should spend more time just chatting with students during our office hours or on e-mail. I argue for the cultural and ethical work of facilitating lifework through coursework, the writing and reading of personal-scholarly narratives. Nearly all disciplines offer narratives. However, many scholars have pointed out that we sanctify the study of narratives as perhaps the chief coursework of the literary studies field, for example, and yet cordon off the narrative mode from further application. Thomas Newkirk comments on the “strange schizophrenia” regarding narrative in English departments: “On the one hand, [English departments] are built upon the narrative—it should come as no news that students become English majors to get academic credit for reading narrative fiction. Yet in writing classes there is a sense that narratives are relatively easy to write
and academically suspect” (20). I consider it no crime to let students respond in kind. Even “in atomic physics,” according to physicist Franz Capra, “we can never speak about nature without, at the same time, speaking about ourselves” (The Tao of Physics). While there is theoretical justification for this reflexivity in the work of so-called “expressivists” such as Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, Lad Tobin, and Newkirk; reader-response “subjectivists” such as Bleich and Michael Steig; feminist critics such as Louise DeSalvo, Adrienne Rich, Michelle Cliff, Jane Tompkins, and Brenda Daly; in the new “ecocriticism” practiced by Scott Slovic and Ian Marshall; and others, a case can also be made on the basis of the experiences and writing of college students. In the end, I do not suggest that everyone should or can regularize the use of personal narratives in the classroom, just that linking course work to life has been of major and increasing importance for students and scholars. It has helped bring students into positive relation with one another as well as all facets of their educations. It has produced “good,” “close,” and “strong” readings and powerful and eloquent writing.

As an example, an undergraduate student, Kelly, discovered writing about and reading literature was not only significant for herself, but, she imagines, for her classmates and other readers, “I hope my sharing . . . can encourage or uplift you or maybe make a difference in your life. If I didn’t speak, that would be a burden. I believe it is wrong to hoard things to yourself that have the potential of encouraging others.” Erica invoked poet Muriel Rukeyser when she opined, “However confused the scene of our life appears, however torn we may be who now do face that scene, it can be faced, and we can go on. . . . Poetry helped me to face the scene when my life was confused.”

Classmate Lolly agreed, “There is a sense of connection that I feel when I read and analyze different literary works because in everything that I read I find a connection within it to my own being.” Literature continues to be what educational theorist Paula Salvio terms a “technology of self.” For most college students the dynamics of any classroom and discipline are a technology of, guide to, and test of selfhood. And the inverse is true: through the self or personal experience students access and create disciplinary knowledge.

Neither the emotional intensity of some student narratives nor the questions, cautionary tales, and postmodern denials of agency have made me abandon the comprehensive curriculum that relates the personal to the academic. Kate Redfield Jamison, a psychologist who writes of her own mania, depression, and psychosis in An Unquiet Mind (1995), announces perhaps an extreme view: “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” (7).
cannot but share her position based on faith, student and professional testimonies, and contemporary literary and pedagogical theory.

At the outset of her book *Vertigo: A Memoir*, published in 1996, literary critic Louise DeSalvo writes:

> Without books, without talking about books, where would I be now? . . . would I have created a life for myself so different from my mother’s, from my sister’s? Filled with pain, yes, but not disabled from pain as they were? I don’t think so.

> Books were, at first, solid objects to hide behind. *Hawaii, The Brothers Karamazov, Exodus* were substantial books I could get lost in, safe screens to prevent me from watching my family. Something to hold in front of my face so I could not see what was happening. . . .

> Events in books became a universe against which to measure what I was living through, a world through which I sought understanding. . . . (6-7)

She concludes, “It is as simple as this. Reading, and writing about what I have read, has saved my life” (7).

Many of us in the profession agree. Sometimes reading or writing narratives whose themes are the very things that cause one’s pain is even more useful. It is worth noting that DeSalvo’s testimonials on the life-saving effects of both pleasure reading and scholarly writing come in the wake of one of DeSalvo’s most poignant undertakings, a book about the relation of Virginia Woolf’s early sexual abuse to her later life and work. DeSalvo further confides:

> When I started my work on Woolf, I did not realize how similar her family was to mine—did not know my sister would kill herself as Woolf had; did not see depression as the core of my mother’s life as it was the core of Woolf’s and her mother’s; did not realize that I, too, would fight depression; did not see that we were both abuse survivors. And that I would learn, through studying her, the redemptive and healing power of writing. (11)

The reciprocal and layered process of discovery depends on such identification, conscious and unconscious.

In anthropology, Ruth Behar calls the making of such connections between one’s life and one’s work, “vulnerable” anthropology, emphasizing, “Vulnerability doesn’t mean that anything personal goes. The exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake” (14). In this era, she argues, “we need other forms of criticism, which are rigorous yet not disinterested; forms of criticism which are not immune to catharsis; forms of criticism which can respond vulnerably, in ways we must begin to try to imagine” (175). Laurie
Stone, author of *Close to the Bone: Memoirs of Hurt, Rage, and Desire*, offers a similar view of what makes memoirs “literary” or successful instances of cultural autobiography:

[Their authors] are vulnerable on the page, digging at their actions and emotions... They are interested in their layers, their ambivalences, their irresolvably mixed feelings.... All the rage, self-pity, and self-importance have been spent.... What’s left is a voice that may once have told its story as a weeper but now knows, ineluctably, it is threaded with comedy. (B9)

Student work increasingly too exhibits this wonderful layering. Moreover, students writing for self-analysis and self-help have usually begun this process and the making of the literary before we meet in the literature classroom. They merely extend it in the presence of contemporary narratives that serve as models of thought and expression. I teach with the expectation, now, that difficult themes will emerge sometime in the semester, in reading, perhaps discussion, often in conferences. *But I’d rather have them emerge in the writing than in conference alone.*

For those students for whom or for those topics for which writing personally is not a welcome possibility, students and syllabi offer other strategies—such as visual narratives—for relating course materials, the class, to life. Projects have included painted and dyed triptychs, a quilt of the bedding that dates back to early scenes of incest, photographs of a consoling and invigorating network of wooded trails. Other students, working in community-based programs, have helped men and women to read or to prevent or deal with sexual harassment or sexual abuse. Still others read to local children in schools and daycare centers, offering children more of the literary solace on which they remember having so depended. These are academically legitimate narrative interventions as well, especially when they are further described in term-end journal entries or classroom presentations consisting of personal stories and visual aids.

Newkirk sensibly insists that:

writing situations can be therapeutic precisely because we [teachers] don’t act as therapists ... In fact, the therapeutic power of such writing may be the experience of having it treated as “normal”—that is, writing that can be responded to, critiqued, even graded. Writing may have healing power because it represents a third part of the relationship; it is an artifact, a construction, a relatively stable representation of experience. (19)10

The text and the writing are stays against confusion. Writing about Ann Petry’s short story “In Darkness and Confusion,” a graduate student in
“Autobiographical Scholarship” addressed her new understanding of the riot at the center of that story, moments of intense rage in her own life, and the central role of literature in life:

I know that rage destroys both its object and its host, and I have used the study of rage in literature to prevent my own hatred from destroying me. It is not a coincidence that I was depressed for months before that night when I attacked my father, nor is it a coincidence that William [from the story] was stifled in his dismal surroundings. . . . After encountering rage within this story I realized that it was possible to discover literature that deals directly with my own problems and concerns. . . . This threefold nature of literature is essential to an understanding that human emotions and the human condition are best comprehended when studied simultaneously through individual, private, public, and artistic means. If I had not discovered that literature can be therapeutic, my own pain and anguish would have remained buried within me and would have boiled to rage again sometime in the future, just as my inability to speak initially brought upon my rage. (my italics)

After teaching the graduate seminar, I developed an undergraduate seminar, “Poems and Essays that Matter.” This course acknowledges student wariness and concern about the use(s) of literature from the beginning. The course description, which begins with an epigraph by contemporary New York poet Sharon Olds, follows:

English Major Seminar: Poems and Essays that Matter

For twenty years I’ve lived in New York City on a block with two “heroin hotels”—a lot of middle-of-the-night screaming, cop cars, loud radios, and over the years occasional singing, laughter, and gunshots. So I’m often hearing sounds of suffering, and seeing its signs. Deep down, I have a fear that poetry is useless, I guess I mean my poetry is useless, a self-indulgent activity—that it’s obvious I should, instead, be holding infants in a hospital orphanage, or working at a good kitchen for the homeless. Other times I feel extremely lucky to be able to spend time on what I adore doing and need to do. But it’s obvious that a worker at a shelter for battered woman, or a tutor in a ghetto, is a more useful member of society.

And yet my wild hope is that poetry somehow, secretly, matters as much as anything.

Sharon Olds

With opportunity for student input, but with an emphasis on recent U.S. women writers, this course will focus on poets and essayists of political, personal, formal (stylistic), or local importance to course participants. Students will work on their own poems and essays that matter as they consider—as subject matter, inspiration, and models of good writing—poems and/or essays by Adrienne Rich, Patricia
Williams, June Jordan, Annie Dillard, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Wendell Berry, Nancy Mairs, Alice Walker, classmates, UNH faculty members, and other suggested activists, feminists, ecocritics, and literary critics and theorists whose writing moves us. There will also be guest visits by UNH faculty members; student-led discussions; outside poetry readings; special projects, field work, or service work.

Directly or indirectly, this course may answer such questions as: Why study literature? How do we define the literary? Why write? What might we do with an English major? (Or a Women's Studies major or minor with an interest in writing?) What will we choose to read and write in years to come? Where might we find what we want and need? What literature have we previously found inspiring, important, irresistible? Why? What might we share with friends, parents, children, and/or the larger community? What else constitutes current issues and debates in literary studies and its value for teachers and students and the country at large?

Three books and a packet of readings were required, though students collectively decided which readings would stay in and which go out for classroom discussion. To these we added other student-recommended contemporary U.S. poems and essays that fell under one or more of the three course rubrics.

Writing on poems or essays of nature and place, Erica described poems in relation to her past depression, illuminating both:

It seems as though that whole time was Frost’s “Desert Places.” I had always loved the soft “s” sounds, thinking of them as replicating fallen snow. But now I understood the last lines, “I have it in me so much nearer home/To scare myself with my own desert places.” I also understood why Frost’s woods are “lovely, dark, and deep.”

Helped by a second look at the literature and by others’ personal-literary essays, Erica identified and communicated to others her situation and that of the poems, understanding them both more than she might have previously.

Lana, who made a quilt of her childhood blankets, was also able to write “Deconstructing the Bed,” emulating and empowered by course reading. She explained:

My bed is a metaphor for my disease. My dis-ease is the covering over of painful memories. Each night, I slide into bed between sheets that are as old as I, and a pile of blankets I’ve been collecting since those sheets were purchased. They are meant to cover something huge, something unbearable, something so ugly it must be concealed. In my bed, I suffocate under my own attempts to heal, which are really only attempts to avoid naming an unutterable thing—the abuse I suffered at the hands of my father from the time I was three to the year of my parents’ divorce, abuse that is best described by the following poem, based on Joy Harjo’s poem “I Give You Back”:

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I BRING YOU FORTH
I deliver you, my lustful and vengeful
child. I deliver you. You will be the symbol
of muted words, brought forth in a scream of
pointed blame.

...I bring you forth to the naked children
who were made ugly and seductive creatures
by ignorant fathers, and voiceless mothers.

[The bed] is on a pedestal, it is a sacred space, and yet it is a detestable thing,
a corner of the room blazing in lust and blood and fire, and all the things
from which we are taught to avert our eyes. . . . I’ve been covering a scar with
gobs of makeup which have made their own mess.

...Somewhere beneath
this expression
I am not afraid.

Lana detailed the influence of Harjo and of autobiographical scholarship
on her work, sharing her foreword and her mixed-genre autobiography in the
seminar as well as at a year-end departmental conference, by which time the
piece had become part of a portfolio, creative and research-based, that consti-
tuted a senior honors thesis.

Like several students in classes taught by Karen Paley, several of my students
turned their private or hybrid discourses into public documents or presenta-
tions. Paley reports that one student wrote an essay regarding campus security
at another university in the form of a written complaint; she mailed the letter
to officials there. Paley herself published an essay about how one student’s
experience of harassment became the subject of a class, and the letters class-
mates wrote became public documents in the struggle against racism on her
campus.12 Some students had essays accepted in the campus publication Fresh
Ink, a juried collection of freshman essays passed on to the next year’s fresh-
man. Some are even reprinted in the college’s alumni magazine, circulation
130,000 (35). Paley notes too that three essays from her advanced writing sem-
inar are being considered for publication in that magazine, and they are all
first-person narratives (whose topics speak to outsiders and well as commu-
nity members: drinking, losing grandparents, a visit to Auschwitz). She con-
cludes, “When such essays emerge from the process writing classroom into
more public domains, the discourse is not as contained as [some detractors]
claim [personal writing] is” (35).
For another of my undergraduates, writing was at times a substitute for complete (which, to her, meant oral) disclosure, and she was not yet ready to have her academic work in classes outside the seminar be joined with this special kind of writing: “Writing is my chance to say what I can never say in real life. I have all these thoughts and ideas in my head that are never expressed verbally, so I have to write them. Otherwise I might go crazy.” But this very private sentiment was one shared during peer-critique sessions in the seminar—as if to disturb again the false or provisional line between inside and outside, private and public.

Other students also might not have made a formal presentation of their personal or hybrid personal work or published their work, but at term end they made their essays available to classmates through the library Reserve Desk. They claimed to find the class assignments good practice for reading and writing sensitively in other contexts, and they linked even their practice work to professional writers and writing. Marianne reported:

This is what I try to accomplish with my personal writing. It is not very productive in the sense that there is no real goal. I don’t know where I am going with it. I have not written a complete, finished poem or a complete work of short fiction since I was a little kid. . . . My writing is what Natalie Goldberg would call practice. I like to think of it as an exploration of myself.

Chris found words to name her writerly version of Du Bois’ double consciousness:

I am a writer with two voices. But I am now more aware and appreciative of both voices. After reading Farrell’s and Frey’s pieces, I now recognize the difference between my “male” and “female” modes, my “direct” and “indirect” voices. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. Both play important roles in my life, professional or personal. Perhaps with my new awareness, I will be able to enjoy both styles more and exploit better the advantages of both.

Chris moves back and forth between modes and genres, a versatility I encourage in even the most autobiographically inclined students, and this dynamic is both socially potent and socially dependent. It is in the company of others’ stories and voices that we acquire the skills we need—creative, stylistic, interpretive, attitudinal—to make writing matter in life and school.

Kelly writes in several places about the pedagogical and healing effects of interanimated, facilitative narratives, taking off, again, from an observation of Farrell’s, when she states:

I suspect that the female mode can be learned but cannot be taught. Is faith something that can be learned but cannot be taught? Is high school writing? Would my
friend’s comment about fellowship in suffering have meant anything to me at all if I was not learning something about pain and suffering for myself? [She was ill while her friend had lost her husband to cancer.] Is that what teaching is—what learning is? Making things be or bringing things to such a personal level that the student feels or begins to feel some connection with what I’m saying? How do I do that? Then I thought about the difference between learning something and being taught.

I’m left-handed and have always wanted to learn to crochet, but I’ve only ever known women for some reason who were right-handed and said they couldn’t teach me. Then, just recently, I had two different right-handed friends attempt to show me the process. With one, I was taught. With the other, I learned. . . . [Patty showed her an old-fashioned handout, while Lynn told her that her left-handed grandmother had taught her to crochet by sitting across from her and providing a mirror-image for her to see.]

So what was the difference? Both friends wanted to teach me, both were sincere, but when I sat next to Patty and watched her show me the stitches, I could think only of my inept hands and her nimble fingers. When I sat across from Lynn, I listened to her story.

What students need to know and how can often be found in everyday, “personal,” language and spaces, classroom or kitchen. Kelly, whose father cannot read, taught the next semester in a local elementary school and compiled a scrapbook of poems about the experience. Then she served as a literacy volunteer, was nominated for a student service award, and is currently completing her education while teaching literacy and literature in a local prison. She argues that being able to write personally and analytically gives her a combined sense of herself as writer, editor, teacher, and scholar.

Models and open-ended assignments, careful editing, and peer review move students toward what Behar and Stone and other academics and general readers prefer. Others might object that the domestic spaces explored are too dangerous—or dull. But these are strong students, supported by strong texts. Four from the undergraduate seminar subsequently completed undergraduate theses and supported one another in a writing group. Two of the graduate students wrote personal M.A. theses. Against the worry that these writings are sub-standard or non-standard, one might counter that “vulnerable” or personally-inflected writings are becomingly increasingly numerous and well respected, and few classroom papers are or ought to be published, even the objective, unemotional ones. Either there will be time, there will be time, for decisions or indecisions, before the taking of a toast and tea, or, once off to graduate school or teaching or business writing, our students will continue to balance anew the personal and professional, private and communal. Two of the undergraduates are already enrolled in
graduate programs welcoming their creative criticism, and several more continue their service work reading to children and helping them improve their reading and writing.

“In telling what feels like one’s own unique story based in childhood trauma, the writer can be propelled into producing a highly political narrative,” Paley asserts. She quotes Bonnie Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater approvingly: “To understand someone’s culture, we often to understand the person’s family, too. Through the individual we come to understand the culture, and through the culture we come to understand the individual” (206; qtd. in Paley 2). The personal is inevitably shot through with the social.

Norman Holland speaks of “another kind of productivity” than the conventionally academic: “the writing of things that are pleasures to read,” adding, “How do you evaluate a personal essay? You evaluate it as you would evaluate any essay” (1147). In answer to the question, “Why now?” He suggests:

Could it be that a growing number of academic critics are realizing that academic writing about literature or “culture” has lost political support by cutting itself loose from the concerns of ordinary people? There in the back of the bus are some nonacademics who might just support the NEH, the NEA, tenure, or better salaries for teachers—if they could figure out how our essays matter. In this harsh time, could we be returning to the battle cry of another harsh time, the sixties? To relevance? (1147)

I shall close by quoting another undergraduate student’s recent testimony. Domenica Gorini writes of the relevance of Alice Walker’s words in “Saving the Life That Is Your Own.” She echoes and enhances our understanding of not only Alice Walker’s words but of “personal” writing:

Walker ends her essay by stating, “It is, in the end, the saving of lives that writers are about” (14). Writing has saved my life, given me a sense of accomplishment—writing has allowed me to sleep at night by giving me a way to deal with the world around me that seems too complex and harsh at times. Reading authors like Walker has also saved my life, by opening the door to worlds I would have never known, feeling and ideas I thought I bore alone, as well as providing hope for a better world, but most of all, a better me. . . . To be a writer is to be an investigator, one who is willing to search for what is being longed for or answers to endless questions. . . .

Writing has permitted me to “inquire further” (as in Anne Sexton’s poem for John Holmes) into what might be viewed as shameful or crazy. Writing has helped me understand my human experience as a white, middle-class American, a young woman facing adulthood, an Italian, a Catholic, a feminist, . . . environmental activist, and seeker of joy.
NOTES

1. I wish to extend my thanks to the many persons whose work and support have helped me in the completion of this essay and motivated my teaching, among them David Bleich, Karen Paley, Rachel Trubowitz, Brenda Daly, Martha Stoddard Holmes, Paula Salvio, Laura Duhan Kaplan, and other writers cited, my students in English 697 and English 935, and Brian and Abraham McWilliams.

2. Here I agree with Karen Paley’s critique of Susan Miller’s claims in *Textual Carnivals* about the classroom community of the beginning student (Paley 34).


8. These are traditional attributes of good, traditional literary criticism. For a fuller discussion, see Frances Murphy Zauhar, “Creative Voices: Women’s Reading and Women’s Writing,” in Freedman et al. 103–116.

9. All students are identified in ways they chose to be were I to quote, with their permission, from their work—by first name, first and last, or by pseudonym.

