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Introductory Remarks to Lost Voices/Found Words by Erika Duncan

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Before psychoanalysis became an established therapy it was simply a discovery; Freud had observed that as individuals could allow themselves to hear what they were saying, they would know their world and themselves anew. He advised individuals who wanted to verify such a discovery, and who were not able to experience a formal psychoanalytic treatment, to write down their thoughts, their dreams, their memories, and their hopes. Erika Duncan has, for the past ten years, formed groups of women who do just that and who have, in the process, encountered themselves and their histories: what they have hidden from themselves and, in many cases, what they cannot forget. Ms Duncan has creatively crafted a safe and respectful space for groups, where personal support and sympathetic ears function much like an analyst's free hovering attention. She has developed a method of teaching, deceptively simple on first reading, enabling the participants to find words for their memories – good memories as well as painful ones. Sharing personal stories as relative strangers listen is remarkably similar to analytic hearing. And, as the following article makes clear, as the group hears and responds, each writer's trauma can be recalled without being re-experienced. Given a psychoanalytic clinician's training, the article may raise queries about how the group or the leaders address transference, countertransference, defenses, and/or interpretations. Without denying the value of such metaphorical concepts, it is not Ms Duncan's intention to reflect within such a clinical framework. The article provides fertile ground for the reader's own interests and reflections. The creative and insightful guidelines which are presented reaffirm the psychoanalytic premise that when human beings learn how to speak as well as listen to each other, with a modicum of care, the foundations of healing are set.

Lost Voices/Found Words: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on a Writing Workshop

ERIKA DUNCAN

In this article I would like to describe a growing organization that addresses women's needs – women who have not had a voice and who are struggling to find words to express their life stories. I want to speak about parallels to the psychoanalytic process I discovered when I founded Herstory Writers' Workshop, a grassroots memoir writing group for women living on Long Island, in March of 1996. It was a time when the reading public was hungry for stories of trauma and triumph, told by those whose lives often remained anonymous and unsung. I had offered to give a free week of workshops open to any woman who ever dreamed of writing a book, never imagining that 10 years later we would have 14 branches on Long Island, including three weekly workshops in the Suffolk County prisons.

Until that March morning when I opened the doors of the Village of Southampton Cultural Center, where I would be holding my first free workshop, I had felt that especially when stories were intimate or painful it was absolutely necessary to have a consistent audience and a certain amount of privacy which workshop members could count on, as they were opening themselves up on the page. I hadn't realized how my thinking would change in a setting in which there was nothing to prevent a new stranger from walking in just as a participant was in middle of crafting an intimate revelation.

By the time I had second thoughts about whether such a public format would work for material so private, it was too late to turn back. To make the best of what I assumed was a bad situation, I found myself helping each speaker to play-act how she would most want to be heard by the "stranger/reader" walking in on her life on whatever "page one moment" she would choose. What I didn't take into account when I first devised this exercise was the profound effect that asking the stranger to care would have on victims of severe trauma, who had not yet developed much caring for themselves.

Among the first women attracted to our project were victims of incest, family violence and poverty, and children of war. As I began to work with them, I dis-

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covered that the process of play-acting the relationship between each new writer and her readers created a replica of that transitional space – where product can be touched both from within and without – that Winnicott so eloquently describes.

Long before these women were ready to feel much compassion for the wounded selves that they had set out to write about, they were energized by the "task" of inventing forms to evoke the concern of the ever-shifting crowd of strangers who came to listen to what they had written every week.

For the first time in my life I was working with women who for the most part had never written before. Perhaps I would not have been so intrigued if the quality of the writing produced under these circumstances had not been far more vibrant than that which I had seen in my closed workshops.

Each new day I would ask the women who had been there the day before to either read or recapitulate what we all started to call their "imaginary page one" for the newcomers. Their level of concentration was intense, despite the fact that they had to cope with an ever-increasing number of new strangers. Could it be that their sense of their mission to shape their stories was so concentrated *because* there were so many new strangers?

Each night I thought about the private/public nature of this form that I had accidentally happened upon. Why it worked, against all intuition, was something to be pondered and explored. I could see that the women who had started to write their stories were so excited that they rearranged their busy lives so as not to miss a minute of the workshops.

Although I had used the image of "If you were writing a book . . ." as an opener to help them to think about structure, never expecting them to take it seriously, they were speaking already about the books they were writing as if they were *faits accomplis*. Many of them stayed up all night writing, they were so happy to have shapes to return to and an audience ready to hear them the next day.

By the fifth and supposedly last day, I woke up knowing that it was not going to simply be a case of magically inspiring people and then letting them go. Despite the transient nature of the set-up, and the taken-for-granted welcome of newcomers, already, the group was turning into a community. I asked if we might continue to meet on a twice a week basis at the Cultural Center of the Village of Southampton. It was agreed that the Center would contribute the space and I would contribute my time.

As the weeks turned to months, we alternated our meetings between evenings and daytimes, to accommodate working women as well as mothers and grandmothers with young children at home. Although some came only for a few months, to tell a particular story that needed to be told, the majority stayed on for several years, shaping book-length projects which were, in turn, to change the shapes of their lives.

We developed a format in which workshops were two to three hours long and included between four and ten women at each session. No matter how many

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women attended, everyone in the room would have a chance to read or to talk about what she was writing.

Close friendships developed, and a number of community action projects were started by women who would never have encountered one another save for their desire to create "a telling" of what they had lived through and known. We began to give public readings, sometimes to very large audiences. And, after a while, the project, which had begun as a bit of an experiment – why such a public/private thing should work so well – took on a life that began to feel more permanent.

With the help of various foundations, we developed a scholarship program that would enable women of little means to make the writing of their books their central endeavor. To this day our chronically ill and handicapped women, many of whom are primarily homebound, are our most prolific writers.

The more that we worked, the more convinced I became that the task of forming one's life story for the ear of a stranger was a powerful gateway into integration of past and present. We developed our own special vocabulary, through which the study of what creates reader empathy replaced literary theory, as we helped each new member to transform what often started as the "victim's complaint" into a work of art that would become a gift rather than a burden.

All the while I kept returning to the notion of Winnicott's safe play space, where the interface between the self and the other can be touched, in play-acting the relationship between the writer and the stranger/reader. I realized that the "book" in progress (even if it never becomes an actual book) is the place where we can safely meet. It belongs to each person, and yet it is separate from her; so that when we say we cannot yet feel a scene from the inside, we are not attacking the writer's own capacity to feel, nor are we superimposing our own feelings on vulnerable material when we ask for a sort of deliberate development of this sensation or that remembered bit of dialogue that will take us back there.

As interest in our "method" grew, we began to think seriously about replicating our work, looking at venues where the need was greatest. In 2003, the JP Morgan Chase Foundation gave Herstory seed money, enabling me to design a prototype manual detailing our workshop techniques, while launching a small-scale replication project. The following year, we received additional grants towards the expansion of the replication project and completion of our manual, from the Long Island Fund for Women and Girls and from Suffolk County's Office of Cultural Affairs, whose director expressed interest in having the county become a model for developing grassroots memoir writing groups.

At the time of this writing our expanding group of grassroots trainees includes a bilingual facilitator and translator, allowing us to conduct workshops in Spanish, reaching out to Long Island's large immigrant community, and to publish a bilingual magazine. Our prison project is so popular that, even as we add new workshops, we still have a waiting list on the tiers.

As we work across race, class, and culture, the fact that the Herstory approach allows college professors to develop memoir-writing techniques on level ground

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with women whose education had been in the area of lived experience has come to have important implications for those of us concerned with the "urgency of diversity." We now have 16 books in various drafts, waiting to find their way into the world, and in the 10 years of our existence have engaged over 1000 women in the Herstory process.

Although the making of art is our mission, a voyage with many echoes of psychoanalysis is often an important byproduct, as stories relegated to silence begin to be heard. As each woman learns to convey her story so that a "stranger/reader" can be moved by it, she discovers a lost and often more loveable part of a self she had banished or left behind. We hope to have our manual available by the end of 2007.

MOVING FROM DETACHED TELLING INTO "THERE-NESS"

Reading and writing take us through the delicate dance between merging and separation. One moment we become the character we are reading or writing about. The next we are back in ourselves, cheering that character on or yelling at that character to stop a flawed action.

In providing would-be memoirists with the techniques to venture one minute to inhabit a past self (so as to merge with her temporarily on the page) and the next moment to become a present self looking back, not only do we create texts that evoke reader empathy; simultaneously, a powerful potential for integration is unleashed. The ancient Greeks were very much aware of this, in their refusal to separate art and catharsis.

In order to give you a glimpse of our work I will take you into the back room of the Heart and Soul Counseling Center in West Babylon, Long Island. This is my favorite setting for Herstory, a place where poor people can get quality treatment, where children can always be seen in the waiting room or playing in the parking lot. Its director, Tina Calabrese, is a warm-hearted activist who would love to offer her clients far more than the meager treatment packages their Medicaid, SSI, or insurance provide. Not all of the women who come into our writing workshops are Heart and Soul clients, but we have a fair sprinkling of those who have confessed in a therapy session that they always had secretly dreamed of writing books about their lives.

In this particular group there are three or four women who make no secret about their long histories of mental illness and childhood abuse. Attendance in the short-run is often erratic, as members confront real-life obstacles, evictions, illness, childcare emergencies, and family violence. In the long run, however, there is a deep sense of commitment which keeps a sense of group cohesiveness and engagement throughout the many years it takes to write a book.

For today each person has a small (really earth-shakingly large) assignment. Each is working on a scene, much the way one might do in an in-depth psychoanalysis, so that we (the "stranger/reader" and, of course, the writer) will be able

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to retrieve the details that will move it from a detached telling into a tableau that can be entered, smelled, touched, heard, seen, and felt.

But, beyond that, each person is working to develop a larger container for her story, so that moment by moment, scene by scene, she will be able to string together a life.

This group's most long-time member, whose story I will tell with her permission, started with us five years ago, at a point where her abuse memories were still actively coming back. A brilliant student and clinician, she had climbed out of a difficult childhood, hardly looking back, until one day in a therapy session that was part of her training to be a counselor, her past was touched on in a way she couldn't push away.

Her memory scene for today is the re-write of a description of a morning spent with her grandfather, who taught her to play pool and craps and often took her fishing, getting her drunk on apple jack in the process, before he began to misuse her. Initially she had condensed the incidents preceding her first remembered abuse scene into a single line, noting the fact that before she and her grandfather went fishing, they used to listen to music on the radio in the car. She had included nothing about the fishing trip itself.

I had asked if she might allow the reader to hear a bit of the music that they listened to together, as a way for us to get to know her grandfather better. Or, if she didn't want to write about the music, perhaps, I suggested, she could write about the light on the water, or the fish, or anything else that would give her a handle on the physicality of the scene.

(Notice how I started in a safe, neutral place, asking for the sort of free association one might evoke in in-depth analysis.)

In order to help her arrive "there" I reminded her of that word "jaggedy" coined by a student years ago. For when we are truly present, our way of experiencing a scene meanders from sensation to realization to non sequitur in a way that no writer (or analysand) can plan.

When our writer allowed herself to write about the music with free-floating attention that gathered in her sensations and thoughts as she concentrated hard on whatever she could remember, we began to see a different grandfather, with his head bobbing with an involvement in the rhythms he would only show his young grandchild, when he wasn't trying to be tough with his buddies.

When she applied the same concentrating/free-rambling process to the river and the fish, this took her to the apple jack and the joy of having her own paper cup of the spirits, and then week by week into scenes of shooting craps and playing pool, half-forgotten or misplaced in time.

Just when we think we have all of the process words we can use, someone comes up with a new one. Thus the word "de-organize" was invented a few weeks ago, when someone wrote something that was sanitized into smoothness, so that the resolution preceded the process.

That word-invention game, available to all, regardless of literary or educational background, depends on an ever-deepening understanding of the concepts

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behind what creates reader empathy, as well as what it means to consciously agree to lower one's defenses (within the safety of "book-time"), in order to let in the other.

It was through consciously "de-organizing" what had been too smooth into jaggedy free-floating writing that our student was able to allow the words that would be the key to it all to keep bubbling to the surface, as her grandfather's voice crept from one scene to another, rescued from the layers of memory, repeating: "You are my buddy. You are my very special buddy."

Although we had not set out with an analytic purpose, her retrieval of that refrain came with a definite analytic "aha."

"I didn't remember how much I loved him until I wrote those words," she said over and over. "Discovering that love really kicked my ass, but it also became an important part of my healing."

In real life, of course, we seek resolution. However, it is often this very sense of resolution that deadens our stories when we tell them to another. You cannot find yourself with another – which, I suspect, is the reason we wish to write memoirs – unless you dare to take the other into the place where you are still lost. How then do we return to the place before the resolution began, so that reader and writer can go on the journey together?

What psychoanalysis and effective memoir writing have in common is conscious postponement of both resolution and interpretation. They both call for a reliving of "the time before we thought that we knew" in order to take us through events, whether half-forgotten, misplaced, or too rigidly remembered, to a new more fluid level.

If we refuse to go into the regions of our past experiences with our eyes as wide open to the mystery as we expect our readers' to be, we will be unable retell our stories with that tension and sense of discovery both reader and writer will need.

Throughout the process I had been careful to keep to my role as mediator of the "book time" product, In explaining the need for delaying betrayal until our student's love for her grandfather could be properly felt, I had been careful to talk of the readers' or book's need for this delay, never attributing the need to the writer. I had been careful also, when other students identified dead patches, to make sure that we all understood that they existed in the manuscript. Whether the student's heart was alive or dead in those places was not up to us to say, as we helped her bring each moment to life on the page.

Once our student had unearthed the refrain, "You are my special buddy," she was able to weave it into each subsequent scene, repeating the words in ever-changing variations, from his non-verbal "Don't tell anyone we're doing this" to his reminder that "This is our special secret."

Through elaborating this technique, she was able to make the conscious decision to make each repetition more ominous. Thus, what she could not control as a child was now within the power of telling. She was "here" in the

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now while her book, her product, was "there" in a place that was separate from her.

Especially when working with traumatic material, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of helping each writer to slow down into each scene, so that the writer will not get flooded, and so that the reader will not be driven away by the flooding, just when the writer needs most badly to be heard.

This is parallel to what happens in the course of psychoanalysis, where if the patient rushes towards insights or results with her head, before her heart is ready to take them in, the analyst will try to delay the too-rapid layering or peeling away, so that each experience, when it does come, can have the depth it deserves.

ALLOWING FOR CHOICE IN REVELATION AND TECHNIQUE

We do not choose our childhoods, nor should we create divisions between those who have been given more or less in terms of trauma. Within any group, I am ever-conscious of the need to give permission equally to those who want to pour out their guts on page one and those who want to herald a more gentle welcome, to those who cannot write *How Green Was My Valley* because their valleys were never green, and to those who are afraid that they don't have a story to tell because they did not experience the Holocaust or childhood violation.

For, ultimately, integration comes not out of telling or retelling the story of trauma, but out of the wholeness of the person who is recovered in her shy, secret ways of reacting to a flower or the touch of a lover, or the feeling of sunlight on the surface of her upturned cheek, to what is essential, be it loving or enraging, to the need for dignity and power, as it is played out from inside.

There is no room in an article such as this one to capture the multiplicity, not only of the stories, but of the ways of entering the interior realm, how one writer will start with a fantasy of walking into a photograph that moves her players back into a time before she was born, while another will invent letters she wrote to her father who died in a war she was too young to fully believe in, how one will have her child-self looking for heaven on a map and another will fix her camera lens on her adult children as she catches a moment of physicality between them she had never before witnessed, how another will allow a day of following her heart's desire in terms of eating whatever she chooses to last 100 pages, while, during the year of writing it, she loses 100 pounds.

The surprises occur, not only for us as the listener/readers, but for the writers themselves in the shy, secret ways of remembering and piecing together a life, in what Plato referred to as learning to play one's own instrument. The surprises occur in giving up control, in one sense, and seeing that one doesn't fall apart, and in another sense gaining control of the assembly and style.

I am careful to have each writer reiterate her process every time there is a new person, so that a full collage of ways of approaching not only content, but

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also process, will be modeled. For, if you give just one or two examples of ways of going about things, the new writer will become absorbed in trying to replicate them. If you give seven or eight, or even 10 or 11, you can be sure that the writer will come up with a twelfth that will be authentically her own.

Our next reader describes the way she, as a visual artist, writes each scene more or less the way it comes to her and only when she is finished begins to pare it down to its essentials.

She is quick to assure today's newcomer that it is important not to go faster than what will make you feel safe. Note again how thinking about process and structure becomes a safe container, as this writer focuses on a moment that became like a beacon for her, in a life where existence was so charged for her, she says, that even in adulthood she cannot get her chronology straight.

We had helped her to isolate a single scene in which her father is carrying her down a very long hallway. She had fallen and so seriously injured her head that her father had to be called into school. The scene stood out, she explained, because it was the only time in her memory that her father held her tenderly. Although later she became convinced that he was only doing this because he was embarrassed to be seen as the cold and cruel father that he generally was, her writing returned her to what she was able to retain from her first "take" on that moment. Whatever that moment did or did not mean to her father, she realized how she had retained it as the seat of her yearning to someday be converted it into capacity to give to her children the very affection that she had not known.

As we move from one "moment of being" to another, we ask for the same sort of slowing down, into what I have come to call "there-ness" as opposed to "about-ness." These words, taken from my own psychoanalysis, resonate with all of my students. They speak often of how their understanding of the difference between those two states deepens with continued immersion in the writing/empathy exploration process. I am never sure whether my students learn more about "there-ness" or "jaggedy-ness" or "de-organization" from comments made about their own work or from listening to others. The more that they work towards true "there-ness," the more memories return in an ever-increasing fluidity of tone.

PARALLEL PROCESSES, DIFFERENT NEEDS

As I teach, I know that in any given group there will be untold stories finding echoes in what is being developed aloud. Each student is safe in the knowledge that even as she helps others develop techniques to make their memories vivid, she may choose her own canvas, leaving out what another might decide to tell.

While our first writer is working on a moment leading to childhood incest and our second is working on a moment of being carried by her father, a third is working on a follow-up to a scene where she has taken her six children to

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safety in the family station wagon, without a clue as to how to drive it. The first scene came out whole with humor and pathos and power, but now, when the players are on their way to the shelter in which they will spend their first night of "freedom," her children have grown invisible to the reader and the narrator's heart is half-hidden.

Again we are careful to choose a section of the text that is both fluent and resilient enough for us to touch on the "holes." To fill one of those holes, we ask if we might hear her daughter singing (as we asked to hear the grandfather's music before.) To fill another, we ask to see her son walking, knowing that within these safe moments she will be able to paint both the light and the shadows without having to call them by name. (Note how we repeat the assignments of "Let me hear more" or "Let me see more," while allowing "Let me feel more" to fend for itself, as we move from one student to another. This is not at all the same thing as the simplistic command that appears in all too many writing classes. "Show, don't tell." Rather it is a vehicle that allows the showing be integrated with the sort of telling in which the self can come through.)

"I write for revenge," this writer had said a few weeks into the workshops, and as voices had risen, the students vying with one another to tout the healing aspects of compassion, I had taken the subject off trying to second-guess for another what might be needed. Letting the phantom reader serve as my intermediary, I had pointed out that readers intrinsically have trouble with the too-good narrator, helping the others see how this writer's willingness to be led by her anger imbued her prose with a vibrancy that allowed us to enter, unleashing, as anger so often does, those unmediated moments of beauty – be they prayers, songs or simply sensations – that the others all loved in her work. As soon as I turned everyone's attention back to the product, the others calmed down, allowing this student to slowly, carefully image out loud the missing pieces.

It doesn't matter that one writes for revenge while another writes to try to forgive, as we turn over and over again to structure as a guiding force. Much of this sort of work, I have found, consists of teaching the group not to judge or preempt, nor even to offer promises of comfort to come from the writing, as tempting as such offers can be.

When each person finds the strength to pause in a moment, and the words to tell it so that it rings true, the very particularity of that telling cannot help but be powerful. But this result does not happen by magic. The command simply to express oneself, to pick a good memory or a bad one, and write about it, so prevalent in the many memoir-writing workshops springing up in a large variety of settings, is ultimately a betrayal for those who have not been heard.

FOUND WORDS

In between my students' readings I often stop to talk about parallels between the way we experience our memories and our own needs as readers and listeners. This gives each student a quiet space in which to do her own thinking and

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feeling, so that the camera eye can return the person who just revealed herself to privacy. I see those spaces of talking about the writing/remembering process as musical interludes during which each student can find her own way.

I would now like to point you to a piece written by the writer I mentioned who was struggling with creating more three-dimensional portraits of her "perpetrators," as gradually she let in the love that had preceded the betrayals she described. She had come to a bump in the road, in which we found ourselves outside of a scene of terrible abuse, and quickly realized that she was writing about the moment in which she first became aware of hearing voices inside herself. Up until that time, she wasn't at all sure she wanted to include this aspect of her life in her book, even though she had spoken to us about it during our weekly "go-rounds." Knowing how much that material hurt, we had given her permission to find other ways of handling the scene that did not have to "go there", to find more general ways of depicting the kind of disassociation she and many of the others in the group described, making sure that all understood that this process wasn't about "outing" either secrets or pain.

If there were "book-time" spaces that made the text unreal, we helped her and the others see the many ways that a writer could point a reader's eyes away from what was too painful to face directly. However, she decided she was ready to take the plunge. It is a scene she had to rewrite numerous times, over a period of weeks, until all touches of "about-ness" were gone. The very slowness of the process, so that she didn't go there all at once, created its own kind of safety.

As you come to the part where the voices emerge, note the originality of the treatment. Note also how the permission not to include them – not to name them directly – but rather to follow the scene in slow motion was what allowed them to emerge.

The following is an excerpt from the memoir in first draft entitled "Childhood is a Relative Experience," to be published under the pen name of LL Mathis (reproduced here with her permission).

> On the nights when I washed up in the sink instead of taking a bath, I kept my clothes on; at least my slip. I hadn't always done this, but now I did. I had to. No locking the door. I hit all the important spots: my face and hands, under my arms and down below. Even with my slip on I washed really good. Mom always said she hated to smell me. My ears ignored the sounds of running water as they tuned into the sounds of the rest of the house. My panties lay at my feet, just as I had stepped out of them. My breathing was heavy, as I rubbed hard and fast, trying to rush and finish. My towel was soft against my skin. Footsteps in the hallway stopped at the door. No locking the door.
>
> "Keep your clothes on so he doesn't see," came the voice from inside. The towel moved quicker, trying to dry and get clean panties on before the knob turned. My skin turned to ice. It wasn't the breeze of the door opening. It was the look in his eyes: red, bloodshot, bulging, angry, searching. I had seen them like that before, every time he came to watch. The tile floor was icy cold against my back. Screams loud and terror filled, silent screams.
>
> Hot smelly breath in my face. Wet lips against my neck, on my ear. "Shut up!" came the growl. "Don't make a sound!"

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> The base of the toilet was icy cold in my grip as my head banged the back of my hands with each of his thrusts. "I'm dying. Please God, let me die!" My voice came as if inside a hollowed log. And then the darkness surrounded me.
>
> She cried from the inside, "Where's Mom? Where's my Mommy?" I wasn't shocked to hear her. I had heard her voice from inside a lot. But today it was louder. Today I felt her. And I felt myself disappearing.
>
> "Nowhere." My own voice answered inside. Not screaming but distant and fading. Not surprised but strangely, sorrowfully familiar. Beaten. "Mommy is nowhere."
>
> "Shut up!" Did that come from the inside or the outside? My body was ripping in half, right up the middle. "Please, God please . . ." His hand, covered in the stench of cigarettes, squeezed my clenched lips, sealing my mouth shut. Not my mouth. It didn't belong to me anymore. None of this pain-filled body did. It was hers. I could hear her thoughts, knew what she felt, but I was untouched now. The pressure of him on top, the way he moved back and forth inside, the pain, was hers. He pounded his huge body into her tiny being, tearing it in two. She heard voices inside her head, too; tiny voices, one that cried out in agony and one that screamed in silence absorbing the pain that the she who spoke to me couldn't take anymore. I could somehow hear them, feel them. But still it didn't touch me. The pain was theirs.
>
> With his hand over the mouth there was no choice but to breathe through the nose. They tried not to but they thought they would suffocate. With each breath they took, all that he was pounding into her body and then into theirs seeped through the darkness into me, the me that was hiding, the me that was trying to save whatever I could. The me that had prayed to, begged an unheeding God.

I am not the only one who asked for a copy of this piece to share with those in the helping professions. Our student's therapist also asked for a copy, which she now uses in training other therapists, to show them what it feels like, from the inside, for someone who has been forced to split into many selves.

At about this point our student became aware that the real purpose of her book was to show people what abuse felt like through the mind of a child. Once she had made that decision, many other parts of her life fell into place.

Like the immersions of analysis, the inner journeys required in memoir writing make for difficult work. During a particularly hard week, when the lingering ghosts of our student's past came back more persistently than usual with every new word that she wrote, she decided to relax into what she thought of as a minor transition, to get herself grounded inside the bar that was the site of her first remembered incident of abuse.

The week before she had written:

> I felt like such a big girl as Granddad and I approached Jim Gray's that day.

Notice how the girl comes to life when our student slows down to remember and invent.

> Granddad told me that he couldn't kick the men off the table if they already had a game going, not just to teach me. I nodded my head to show that I understood, but somewhere inside of me I knew I wouldn't have to worry. I guessed that not that many other kids' Granddads taught them to shoot grown up pool. I had no doubts about being big enough to learn to play the game. I figured that I would be shooting pool almost as good as the

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> men by the end of the day. My chest swelled with pride as I thought of all the people in the bar crowding around, laying their money on the table, placing bets on whether I would win or not. Excitement bubbled up inside me. I was a kite about to be grabbed up by the wind and set free in the sky. I had to work hard not to run ahead of Granddad and throw the door open to get inside and claim the table, but I held back.

Now she came in with an extra paragraph she had thought of as a mere transition, to get the reader from here to there:

> The place was quiet when we entered, except for a group of men whispering at the bar and the rich purr of the blues flowing from the juke. One of the good things about Jim Grey's was that all the music on the juke was good music, music that I hardly ever heard on the radio. It made me sway when I walked or rock side to side when I was sitting. It sent electricity pulsing through my legs. The words ran together, linking head to tail and tail to head, like elephants in the circus. They tasted delicious on my tongue and I had to close my eyes when I sang along, enjoying the full flavor of words I would otherwise never speak.

Recently I was asked whether the excerpts above were representative of the work of the women of Herstory. Surely, my reader said, all of the women wouldn't be able to write so beautifully. I thought for a moment about his question, and of how often after someone reads, I find myself using the word beautiful, regardless of the awkwardness of the writing.

Of course not all of the women of Herstory write equally well. Yet there is a deep, often "terrible beauty" that cannot help but move the reader. As each writer gathers the capacity (both emotional and technical) to "listen" to the voices (both interior and remembered) that emerge once a room is reconstructed or a scene is lit up, a new authenticity comes – as one writer dares herself to describe her response to her father's phallus, hideous to her at first, as it seems to be beckoning to her asking to be comforted and stroked, as another, writing of trying to understand what people are doing while sitting Shiva, suddenly writes of how "I'll have the most interesting Show and Tell when I go to school tomorrow. 'My Daddy was killed in the war.' I won't say in France, because 'Loose lips sink ships' . . . and even if we're in 4-1, mostly [the kids] don't follow the war like I do."

As each new member masters whatever it takes to make a scene come to life, so that readers will be able to walk "inside" the teller instead of watching her from without, we cannot help but feel she is touching a certain beauty of expression that is unique, her own, even when spelling is faulty and the subjects and verbs do not match.

IS THIS WORK THERAPEUTIC?

I am not a clinician, nor does the work we are doing come under the rubric of analysis or other less intense forms of therapy. And yet, each time that a scene is made to stand still on the page, its bits and pieces no longer float into the writer's present existence in ever-shifting shapes.

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As one student put it:

> Once I wrote it down, I was able to say to myself: "It Happened. It is no longer a Haunt."

Part of what makes the Herstory approach so therapeutic, I think, is the way difference can be developed and celebrated, even within the commonality of experience. To be able to be oneself, fully, and to learn the tools to share the particularity of perception (which, I often say to my students, is our one inalienable right), to become more particular before the eyes of caring others, is empowering and healing.

In order to fully illustrate this point, let us turn to a very different treatment of the internal splitting that occurs in incest, in a case where the student chose to situate her story in the moment of her first freely chosen sexual encounter that took place when she was 22.

Here again, what was important in working with this student was to make sure she dared to personalize the splitting that allowed her to live within the truth of her experience without in any way pathologizing it, nor feeling that it had to be named. It is not denigrated as a "coping" mechanism, but rather it is given full and creative play, as an important part of a self with which everyone can identify and to which everyone can come close.

I reproduce this with the permission of Hazel Sharon Saunders.

> Now it was my turn, and at 22, with everyone else at that age having had the experience, I was ready . . . no one was going to rob me of my body, no one was going to attack me, creep up on me, and leap like a hungry, bloodthirsty savage animal after its prey, devouring it and leaving behind only fragments of what was once whole.
>
> When I opened the bathroom door, which was only slightly ajar, the music burst into my ears, and with passion swollen in my heart, the abrupt sound of the music, which may have been frightening for some, for me, became intoxicating. Wrapped in a towel, I moved arithmetically into my room. With my eyes closed I allowed the sounds of jazz to surround me and I was instantly transported to a stage with full orchestra and with my comb microphone, I began singing the romantic low tones of jazz that pulsated throughout the house. Around I swirled and moved, and grooved, gyrated, and rocked with the horns and sounds of bass. I was Ella and Sarah, Dina and Billy, and I sang until they applauded and stood and kept applauding for me. My audience, they were my listeners and they were expressing delight just for me and I kept going around, bowing and thanking them until I found myself dizzy, and nearly dropped to the floor. I reached for my vanity chair and quickly sat in front of the mirror. Looking up into the mirror expecting to see my hair wrapped in a towel, void of stage listeners and viewers, I was shocked to witness, staring back at me, a very sad and frightened little girl, with reddened eyes and her hands holding her face, she was angry with me.
>
> She spoke, and shame became my patron.
>
> "Look at you, what are you doing?" She cried out. "Please, no, don't do that, you know he's going to hurt us, why, why are you acting like this? How can you be so happy? Don't you know what you're doing? I tell you all the time that we can't ever, never do any thing like that, not ever. Remember every night when you try to go to sleep, and you think about that stuff? I always have to tell you that you can't, that it will hurt us. Can't you remember? How could you forget what happened to us!?"

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My heart sank. I had no immediate feelings, as my body seemed to sink deep, deep into an abyss. A river of water sprang from my eyes and pooled onto my vanity table, as I had dropped my head in terror and shame. Shame, I was so ashamed. I could hear myself crying but the sound was hollow because above it all, the little girl was yet scolding me for my actions.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I pleaded over and over again. I just wanted to feel like everybody else. They all say it's OK if they do it when your ready, and want them to. It's only bad if they make you do it, that's why. That's why I'm doing this. I'm getting ready to let him. That's different from before! Can't you understand that? I won't hurt you anymore, I won't let anybody ever hurt us again, and I want to. I want to do what my friends talk about all the time, and they're alright. They like it, and it makes them feel so special and really nice. No one is hurting them, so this is different than what happened to us. Please understand. I'm older now, and I can protect myself from anyone trying to make us do it."

"Listen to you, you don't even care about me anymore. You just care about yourself. You said we would never do that, and that no one could ever make you do that again, now look at you, you want him to do it, you're even getting ready for him to come. Please Sherry, it's going to hurt please, remember the blood and stuff. Please don't do this to me."

The little girl is on the floor crying so hard, holding herself between her legs. Her cries are so mournful and her moans are so deep. She rolls over and over on the floor moaning and moaning seemingly from her innermost self.

Suddenly, "Stop that awful music." She screams out. "Make it stop, make it stop. Why are you even listening to that stuff? Go blow out those candles and get dressed before he comes in here. If Pauline and Joe was here you wouldn't be doing this would you?"

"But I have to. Walter's coming home and I want to surprise him. There's nothing wrong with that is there?"

Her sobs lightened and she began to reason with me!!!!!

"Why can't you just let him hold you? I like it when he holds us. It feels so warm and nice. I feel safe, and I don't even look over my shoulder for anyone coming behind me to hurt me when he's holding us. And when you tell him to hold us tighter it feels just like dad when he was going to California for the Sunday School Convention and he held everybody so tight that morning before we went to school, remember that? Remember how we were happy all day. Just let him do that Sherry, that's good enough, alright!!! Now let's get up and put all this stuff away before he comes. Hurry and get ready for him to hold us again."

There isn't space here to trace the healing that went on as, week by week, our student developed the voices of her 22-year-old "me" and her 8-year-old "abandoned", nor to tell of the growth that went on for every member in the group as they helped the writer stay on track. The fact that the names were her own, and not taken from anyone else's interpretation was essential to this growth. Once she invented them – for the sake of the writing – she said she often called on them, in real life, for comfort.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND VULNERABILITY

Two issues of concern, confidentiality, and what happens if someone ventures into a dangerous place, immediately come up. Because I see these two issues as linked in their application to our work I would like to treat them together.

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When Herstory first began, I described it as sort of a hybrid in that it was intimate and public all at once. The stories themselves kept that very special sense of intimacy usually associated with closed groups, and yet we never knew when a new stranger would enter. Because the stories were written deliberately to be publicly heard, our workshops had simultaneously the nature of speak-outs.

Each group meeting had that quality of the confessional associated with anonymous self-help groups, except for the fact that the act of naming was so crucial. The majority of the women were proud to have the stories they crafted told and retold by those new friends who bore witness to their first oral readings. They vied with one another to be chosen whenever we had a public reading, leaving the need for anonymity far behind.

Unless a writer specifically requests this, we do not make it a matter of policy to keep what is revealed within closed doors. That said we have found that sharing the act of writing what is sacred and secret helps those who choose to enter into the risks and rewards of our process feel safe. For those who have had little control over their lives, the realization that memoir writing is not a form of true confessions, but rather a canvas in which one can design the telling of one's lived "moments of being" to best reflect the inner journey, is deeply empowering.

SECRET-KEEPING IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF MEMOIR WRITING

When working with a group, it is critical to inhibit both curious questions and too-ready answers in the interchange that is inevitable once stories begin to be told.

Let me give a simple example of what happened when a workshop member started by asking, "But don't you want to know about me?"

"Not necessarily," I found myself saying, "Imagine that you are at a party. A stranger approaches you and begins to tell you her whole life story. After a few minutes, instead of wishing to continue, you move away. I want to know only what you chose to tell me in whatever window on your life you choose to create."

"Well," she said, suddenly slowing herself down. "I don't know how to explain it, but I was a good child, and now at 47, I consider myself a good adult, but there were times in between when I got into things that were very bad."

Left to their own devices the other students would probably have asked: "What things did you get into?" When such questions begin, I often find myself saying, "Curiosity is what keeps listener/readers going," explaining how any good writing has the element of keeping readers waiting for answers.

In this case I immediately jumped in and said, "What a compelling possible opening line. I would certainly read something that began with the image "I

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was a good child and now I am a good adult, but there were times in between."

Others joined in and said that they were also moved by that line. Before anyone could ask any more questions and before our student could give any more facts I gave a little speech about the appeal of the less-than-good narrator, with whom all of us empathize far much more easily than we possibly can with an idealized self voice.

I had no idea of the dimension of the "things in between" but I wanted to give our student permission both to tell them and not to tell them, whatever she wished. In converting the conversation quickly to narrative issues, I wanted to make it clear to the others that our role for the moment was to listen for form, not to probe.

"At 18 I was a ward of the state," our student continued. It was more than most of us expected, but my modeling of how we must continue to look at form and not content kept questions at bay.

"So, if you had to find an opening moment?" I asked, just as I would ask any other.

"I might start it in jail," she said. "In jail I had a lot of time for reading and thinking and growing."

By this time there was no danger that the others would ask what had brought her to jail or what had she done.

"I was in prison for eight and a half years," she continued.

Although we all knew that one did not spend that kind of time in Bedford Hills without having committed a serious crime, this student was treated with the same protection of her "window" into her life as the woman next to her who for another year would be writing warm feeling-filled vignettes about being given her first violin as a four-year-old during the Great Depression.

Because other aspects of her "recovery," such as returning to school and vocational training, took her away from our group for a year, we never found out whether she wanted to write about what brought her into prison, but she did image, with our help, a scene out of the present in which, as a student of animal rescue, she was performing a Caesarean section on a dog, a wonderful metaphor to contain the story she might have told.

As of the moment of this writing, she has just returned with more images for her opening scene, as she fills out the picture of looking into the dog's eyes as she gets ready to perform the operation, musing about how animals are able to trust.

I often think of how, when I entered psychoanalysis, I expected to be instantly asked to tell the story of my life. How surprised and confused I was at first, when my analyst asked me to meet her in a more contained moment, so that we could see, without my trying to control my narrative, what might spontaneously come up. As I lay on the couch in that ever so vulnerable position, I was deeply relieved to realize that I could keep my own secrets, although it took

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months and even years for me to fully fathom that what was inside me was mine.

Similarly I find that students who expect to be "out-ed" are both relieved and intrigued by our teaching techniques for secret-keeping. Given the confessional nature and vulnerability of memoir writing and psychoanalysis alike, it is critical to provide structures that allow for free back and forth movement without the loss of capacity to connect to the other and the task.

GUARDING AGAINST RE-TRAUMATIZATION

A number of years ago, I offered a workshop for social workers who were using writing with their clients. Most reported that they had no trouble eliciting powerful first scenes; indeed, their clients often gravitated right away to the place of the most extreme trauma. Their clients would come to two or three workshops, writing feverishly and openly, and then disappear, never wishing to return to the process.

This led me to work ever more consciously with the notion of creating a safe container in order to make sure that the floodgates aren't opened too fast.

Perhaps the most powerful story about guarding against re-traumatization concerns a woman who came through the counseling center. She was in her seventies and worked as a nurse, which she told us at once, but again I stopped her from telling me more, so that our page one way of knowing would be unpolluted.

As I started with my usual "I am the stranger/reader" and "Where would you like us to meet you?" she said "My daughter died, but I don't know if I could write about that. It might make me too sad."

She did not say "My daughter was murdered." That would only come a few weeks later – precisely because, I will argue, I made sure that we didn't ask questions about a death she said she wasn't ready to explore. Had we led her right into the eyes of the storm, I do think we would have risked re-traumatization of the sort that would have made us helpless voyeurs to a pain we had rekindled and didn't have the tools to assuage.

"You could choose a very different place to begin," I had said, not yet having any idea of the depth of the story.

"I could," she had repeated, "but my therapist really thought it would be good for me to try to write about my daughter."*

"Even if you do," I had said, "it might be better to find a way to get to know you first. That way as the reader I will care more about you when I learn what

* In working with people who are in therapy, I have found it is better to go along with what their therapist seems to want for them, rather than questioning whether the suggestion is right. That way, whatever Herstory is able to give will become supplemental rather than at odds with what is already in place.

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happened to your daughter. You might want to start with a pleasurable or neutral moment, which might be easier for both you and the reader."

"Perhaps one way of approaching it, structurally speaking," I had continued, "is to choose a time around when you lost your daughter, either right before or right afterwards, to create a kind of cocoon for the story."

Here again, I am using the discussion of structure as my safe play space. When I teach my approach to others, I cannot remind them often enough that even if the speaker seems to be asking for direct questions, they must bite their tongues and refuse to ask them. Instead, as they continue to impersonate the reader (an open, caring reader who wants the story, if only the writer will find a way to let her in), they must say (in their own way of course): "Right now I know nothing about either you or your daughter. Even if you tell me your daughter has died, I know nothing about the age she was when she died, whether she was an infant at the time or whether she was already quite a bit older. I know nothing about the circumstances under which she died, and, depending on what you wish to do narratively speaking, you can go on for pages and pages only very slowly giving me those facts."

Deliberately I elongated my list of examples in order to give my student the time and privacy to absorb her own feelings about what she had just revealed, returning every once in a while to my request that she start thinking about another event or still moment that occurred around the same time. (Had I not stressed that this "moment of being" ought to be within the timespan she had spoken about, but that it could be tonally very different, we would have gotten nowhere.)

Finally she smiled shyly and said: "Well my other daughter suddenly called me one day and told me that she had signed me up for college." She paused, watching our faces. "You see," she continued, "I never had a chance to go to college and my other daughter knew that this was something I really wanted. She knew that I envied her for having the opportunity. So one day, when I was so deep in mourning that I didn't want anything to touch me, she just called me up and said that she had signed me up, just like that. The only thing she needed was my social security number and for me to choose my courses."

Here was a classical case of our expecting a sad story and instead getting an entirely uplifting one.

"And we did go to college together." Now her smile was much broader and was even a tiny bit mischievous, although her tears were still wet on her cheeks. "I decided I had to start from the beginning and take grammar and she even signed herself up for the same class."

She stopped for a moment. Now it was her turn to read our faces, to get permission from us, as it were, to go on.

"I guess I could write about that," she said with more laughter than tears. "We had lots of fun even though it was a sad time, and she saved my life, even though later on I wasn't able to save hers. But I'm not sure I want to take the story that far."

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Over the next six months, the subsequent chapters of this story evolved with a very real combination of humor and pathos. Our teller was marvelously funny and "could not help herself" from popping into sudden wry moments, even as the details of what really had happened could no longer stay inside. It was as if a veil of shame lifted when, through the telling, she was able to realize that it was that very humor and spirit, which she had given also to her surviving daughter, which saved her. Once the shape was decided on, our teller no longer got stuck, though there were weeks when she wanted to be elsewhere in "book time" and wrote out of memories of childhood that had shapes of their own.

By the time she told us that her daughter had been brutally murdered, we were ready to embrace her, not as voyeurs to a grisly case history that would make anyone's hair stand on end, but as true friends who had come to know her through her writing far more intimately than we would have, normally speaking, in our relatively brief encounters in real time.

Had I not been able to name it right away as a story of hope that would be a gift rather than a burden to us, and had I not been able to give it a structure, also right away, I suspect that the venture would have felt too dangerous and she would not have pursued it.

Without specifically looking for voice, we were able to help her to give a whole range of variations to what another student described as "laugh-crying," because the range was so implicit in her framing. Finally, we were able to agree with her that a story only treating the murder would have distanced most readers. We were able to help her towards a shape – very real to her life – that would bring others close to her.

Through painting the perceptions of a self, past and vanished, vividly enough for that stranger/reader to be able to feel them and smell them and breathe them, the teller was able to be moved by that self and to forgive her.

MY TRANSFERENCE RESPONSES

We all bring our own backgrounds into our work, whether or not we think formally in terms of our transference responses. I do not want to tell too much of my own story here, but I think it is important to note that as the child of a psychologist with poor boundaries I had absorbed early on both the good and the bad aspects of placing a close camera lens on intimate stories. I had grown up sitting on my mother's lap, listening to stories about her patients' recoveries and woes (in a way that of course was a violation of their privacy), while we talked about feelings. It wasn't until I went into psychoanalysis myself that I fully comprehended that to talk about feelings and to feel are two separate things.

In a home where there was a great deal of unhappiness, the patients' stories became my legends of hope. I was mystified by the fact that my mother, who seemed able to heal other people, was so unhappy herself. As if this might give me a clue, I paid careful attention to the way that she told her own story, as compared to those of the patients. Theirs continued to fascinate me.

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Was it because they were told with a sympathy she could not muster for herself? Whenever she started to talk about herself, something was always just a little bit off, as if I were listening to a wrong note in music. Especially with the stories that should have most made me weep, it was as if a part of her was still struggling to experience them, so that it was the struggle I witnessed, instead of being able to enter the story as myself.

As one by one, my mother's stories "died" on me, I kept in a secret, idealized crevice of my mind my picture of her as the wizard whose compassion could transform even the most boring patient's story into a moving episode. Still, I tried hard to listen with the same compassion I imagined her to have when she entered that mysterious cork-lined office, sound-proofed so I could only know what went on inside of it vicariously.

It is this trying-to-listen feeling that I have learned to tap, whenever it comes upon me unannounced in my teaching. My discomfort when my freely given listening becomes forced remains as acute as it was once, when I was a child. While this discomfort used to distress me, I have learned to allow it to come into play as a positive thing, as I work to help others shape their secrets, so that they will be desired and cherished, rather than ignored or thrown away.

When I teach I must separate my over-reaction to content that might particularly provoke me from my over-reaction to wrong notes in the treatment. This alerts me in distinguishing what is a narrative flaw and what is particular to my experience.

Let me give a specific example.

Since my mother often spoke of suicidal feelings, and since I felt suicidal at times when I was a young mother, I find it particularly challenging to work with suicidal mothers. And yet, I loved working with the women of the Postpartum Resource Center of New York, a group committed to taking the stigma away from women whose depressions were so extreme that their lives and sometimes even the lives of their children were in danger. Invariably, in this work, I found that when there were dead spots in the writing, I was no longer on the page; rather I was back in a moment in my own life and the teller and her story had disappeared.

Acknowledging this transference helped me to work constructively even in instances where the content did not push my particular buttons. If I saw group members either over-identifying with or pushing away the teller, I learned to immediately ask whether something might be missing in this scene or that, which might have allowed a reader to dwell with understanding in an uncomfortable place.

As I trained other workshop facilitators, I grew increasingly able to help each of them separate transference reactions caused by content and the more general numbness or pushing away that occurs when writing isn't yet "there."

Most of the women of Herstory enjoy using their books as safe play spaces, where dangerous, often very frightening portrayals of feelings and events are given a shape. Touching those dangerous places in one another's presence, with

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care for both listener and writer, creates a deep sense of community that spreads to other areas of the women's lives, so that whenever health or legal emergencies come up, the women form a network.

Over the years, we have had among us several women who have been evicted from their homes, who have had to go to shelters, and have seen how the whole group became engaged in helping to find housing, legal help, and other services. We have also had several lawyers and nurses join and offer their resources. A number of foundation heads who came to audit our program were so intrigued with the process that they joined us as members. They were in a position to help our women conceptualize and fund projects that have become important in their communities. Women who start to write in our prison workshops are welcomed in our ongoing groups. This welcome, combined with the task of returning to a piece of writing week after week, becomes a life-line in their adjustment to life on the outside.

WHERE THE PROCESS CANNOT WORK

What happens when we sense that a member is presenting real danger, either to herself or her children, or when her work is so frightening to others in the group that they begin to move away – when the writing takes the form of a present day suicide or death threat that isn't veiled?

I can think of half a dozen instances over a 10-year period when a member came to us, whose need to flood or batter the reader could not be channeled into the creation of exploratory scenes, to the extent that the other group members got scared.* When this happens, I have to remind myself that memoir writing is about giving shape to our memories, and that it is only in this that I am qualified to lead the journey.

If a member is so involved in what is unresolved in the present, so that we feel in each word that she writes a call for help, or when we sense that she might be dangerous to herself or her children, I have to help the person leave our group and to help her move on into a situation where a trained therapist will take over. I am careful, in these instances, to consult with those who help me do this as gently and with as much support as I am able to give.

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*I can think of an equal number of instances when a student suddenly stopped at a happy moment in her life, saying that she did not want to take the risk of unearthing past pains.

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