



## Writing Through the Memories

### Autoethnography as a Path to Transcendence

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**Abstract** This autoethnography is about writing through the sometimes difficult or traumatic memories that show up in my life from time to time. It is about narrative healing and transformation through the practice of autoethnographic writing.

### Beginnings

This autoethnography is about memory. It is about the process of writing my way through the pain, the exposure, the vulnerability that sometimes accompanies a rush of memory. It is about the process of writing memory, and coming out the other side. It is about narrative healing.

Goaded by emergent memory, I examine the “crashes” in my life, seeking to understand them narratively, as pathways beyond turbulence and into moments of narrative reverie, healing, and transcendence.

### Crashing

Memory is such a curious phenomenon.

It shows up, unbidden, and demands attention.

As I write this, right here and right now, I find myself falling into memory...

You see, there was this hill in my neighborhood. We called it “Heartbreak Hill.” We knew it was dangerous, but it was oh, so irresistible! When it snowed, which was rare, we sledded down it, on any conveyance that could be reasonably expected to slide on snow. There was never any steering on these sheets of plastic or cardboard, or on the saucers or trashcan lids or inner tubes we filched from our garages. But we didn’t care. We figured that snow was relatively soft, though our best path was on the hard street, which meant hard crashes. But the street was clear of obstacles such as trees and bushes and such. We didn’t worry much about cars. This was the Deep

South, and the minute snow was even warned of, people parked their cars and did not return to them until the melt was fully completed.

In summer, on occasion, we would poise our bikes at the top of the hill, looking down, trying to get up the courage to take the plunge. Something should be said about these bikes we rode. They all operated on a single speed—in the case of this hill, that speed was *fast*—and with those old-fashioned pedal kick-brakes as the only stopping mechanism. The thing about these brakes is this: They work very well, if by “working” you mean sending the bike into a fishtail, and laying down a long patch of tire rubber onto the road before coming to a stop. Go fast enough, and you could lay down a stripe 20 feet long. In other words, they felt *cool*, but they didn’t stop the bike all that quickly or efficiently. Or safely.

It probably didn’t help that we favored slick, tread-free tires, because of the way they skidded.

So, one day, I find myself sitting atop Heartbreak Hill on my purple spider bike with its slick tires, sucking in air, wondering if I should dare a downhill run. Next to me are my friends Eddie Hampton and Kevin Quinn. They’re urging me on, in their usual way:

“C’m on, man. Don’t be a chicken.”

But, look—this hill is *really* steep.

“Bwak, bwak, bwak.”

Knowing the taunts will never stop—not, at least, until I take action—I shove off, pedaling furiously. Half way down the hill, I realize I’m going a little *too* fast. So I stop pedaling, let the bike coast. But I’m still gaining speed. As I said, this is a steep hill.

At that moment, a car comes barreling out of a driveway to my right. So fast that he is right in front of me before I know it. And I realize I have only one option to avoid hitting the car full on. I swerve hard to my right to avoid a collision. I barrel into the nearest yard, hit a driveway, and fall sideways. My bike, with me on my side under it, slides across the pavement, and through the hedge that had previously hidden this neighbor and his car from view, across his driveway, and into his front yard. As I said, I was going fast. I had momentum.

Now my bike is tumbling, and I am, alternately, rolling and bouncing. And I land smack in the middle of this inattentive neighbor’s front yard.

And he drives off.

Apparently, he never even saw me.

Meanwhile, I find myself lying in his yard, looking up at the sky. Before I move, I try to assess the damage. I’m afraid to look at my bike. Or my leg, which is shouting for my attention.

Gradually, I start to look around. The first thing I see is blood. So, naturally, being only 10 years old and somewhat queasy at the sight of blood—especially my own—I avert my eyes. The next thing I see is the hedge I ran through.

Ah, pyracantha. My favorite. This shrub is well known to all the kids in the neighborhood. Its name means “fire thorn.” Yep. Fire thorn. My grandpa (a farmer) taught me that:

“Here son. Take a look at this bush. It’s called a pyracantha. Know what that means?”

“No sir.”

“It means ‘fire thorn bush.’ See these red berries? They’re the color of fire. But if you look more closely, you’ll see the thorns.”

I look, and notice the reddish, fiery tint to the thorns. They are sharp, and an inch or so long.

“Watch out for these, son. They can be dangerous.”

“Yes, sir.”

I remember this conversation as I lie in the grass of our neighbor’s yard, staring at the hedge. Wow. I just rode through a pyracantha hedge. Nice.

This realization leads me to consider my arm, which, though it did not hit the driveway as my leg did, is throbbing in pain. That’s because the skin has been torn by the pyracantha thorns, as has my new shirt (*Oh shit! I think. Mom is going to kill me! This is a new shirt!*). Blood trickles off my arm. Shredded. Not looking too good.

But I find myself thinking that my legs currently hurt worse. So I screw up my courage, and look at my legs, which took the brunt of this one. And I discover, as I suspected, that wherever pavement and leg made contact, which is most of the front and side of both legs, there is not so much skin there as a raw patch, previously occupied by a layer of skin that has now been scraped off. In its place is the layer below it, oozing with blood and little chunks of gravel.

As I stare at my blood, which flows freely at first but gradually slows to a trickle, I am mesmerized. I find myself feeling a bit woozy, but for some reason, I can’t stop staring at the blood as it flows in little lines onto the ground.

Scabs are on my horizon.

Big, bloody scabs.

Funny thing, a scab—the body’s way of bandaging itself, starting the healing process.

But before that, there is just blood.

And I find myself wondering: *How much blood can I lose before I lose it all?*

From all this, it is clear that I’m going to have to go home and face the music. I

need Mom's help. So I decide to see if I can stand. No big problem there, though I wobble a bit from the pain. But apparently nothing is broken.

Hmmmm...where is my bike? I scan the area. At first, I see nothing. No sign of my bike.

"Hey, man, are you OK?" I hear from behind me.

There they are, Eddie and Kevin, sitting astride their bikes on the driveway, fingers pointing up and at an angle, to their right, my left.

I turn and follow their hands with my gaze. My bike is hanging from the low limb of a crabapple tree, right by the driveway.

I limp over, take a look. The front wheel is bent. Other than that, it looks OK.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Give me a hand."

"You don't look so good."

"Come on."

Struggling a bit, we eventually retrieve my bike, which is tangled in the branches of the crabapple.

It's going to be a long walk home...

### Crashing into Consciousness

The onset of that memory, of an ordinary childhood event, starts me to thinking about the purposes and the messages of memory. It also gets me to wondering what I might have learned from this particular *memorable* experience, or what I might learn now. Even more interesting is this: Why *this* memory, why *now*?

Sometimes, I seek out memory, hoping to reconstruct parts of my life that have evaded me.

Sometimes, memories just seem to pop up, for no particular—or at least apparent—reason.

Sometimes, memories just rush me, and I fall into them.

Sometimes, these memories appear to be ordinary memories of ordinary days, when something slightly out of the ordinary happens, thus interrupting the flow of the day.

The Greeks called the one in charge of memory Mnemosyne. She was the goddess of memory...alluring, tempting, evasive...and powerful. Mnemosyne holds great powers—powers of light, and powers of darkness (McGlashan, 1986, 1988).

But sometimes, she just flings out any old memory, as though she is tired of carrying it, and thus must pass it on to someone else.

Still, these more mundane memories can sometimes lead to deeper, darker,

more painful memories. Like a chain, many of my memories seem to be linked, with similarities in circumstance, or some sort of small co-occurrence or co-feature appearing to be the connecting point in the chain.

What is Mnemosyne trying to *communicate*?

Why this memory, why now?

What am I supposed to take from this?

Is it just a random memory from a random event in my childhood, a little neuronal slippage, a firing up of some neglected patch of my mind?

Or is there something important here, something I should attend to?

As I reflect upon this question, I realize this memory-turned-story could be read in terms of what it says about me as a child (Bold? Reckless? Both?). Or maybe it's more about my relationships—with my friends, with my grandfather, with our neighbors.

Perhaps it is all of these...

But then it hits me: This memory is about the act of *crashing* and *bleeding*, and how I handled such events as they occurred in my life. At least that's how I make sense of it, right here, right now.

I make this narrative choice regarding the past, partly because of events in my present life that may have urged this memory forward, or upward, into consciousness. Somehow, day-to-day events in my life have a way of triggering memories. Somehow, ordinary daily occurrences are not so ordinary when they become gateways to recovering memories of trauma. Somehow, like the real-life events of the past, these moments today have elements of crashing, and thus serve to draw forth the crashing, bleeding, painful moments of my past.

Thus go the strains of accidental ethnography (Poulos, 2009).

And besides, this memory of a bike crash is linked to all my memories of crashing. I say this because, shortly after this memory surfaced, a flood of these memories was triggered by something that occurred in my present life.

Memory, as I said, is such a curious phenomenon. Sometimes, it delights us. Sometimes, it overwhelms us. Sometimes, it is so achingly painful that we just want to forget what we once knew, or experienced, or felt. Memory is a seductress: tempting and dangerous.

Like the Sirens in *The Odyssey*...the voices of memory beckon, drawing us in, luring us toward knowledge.

Dangerous knowledge.

But gradually, as in all cases of overwhelming memory, Mnemosyne's sister appears. Lesmosyne: the goddess of forgetting. Just as seductive, this one who beckons us toward forgetting.

*Send that memory packing. Come with me on a journey to forgetfulness.*

"Whew," you find yourself sighing.

And then it is gone, receding into shadow.

## Memory Triggers

On a recent Saturday, I am at my parents' house. Our extended family—along with a few of my brother's friends—has gathered to celebrate his 55th birthday. After we eat cake, we are sitting around the living room, chatting. Two of my nieces, ages 6 and 7, come barreling into the room, a bit hyped-up on sugar. They seem to have a plan in mind,<sup>1</sup> which involves some horseplay with their uncle, me. I am fine with this plan; I am happy to hang out with little kids again, since my own sons are nearly grown up now.

They start jumping up and down, showing me their latest acquisitions, one of which is a stuffed animal toy apparently called a "Beanie Boo"—a little giraffe with oversized eyes. My other niece is flashing a lipstick in my face. I wrestle around with them a bit, all in good fun. But then something happens, and they sort of "mob" me, together, pushing their hands up into my face. One of them actually hits me, in the glasses, pushing them up the bridge of my nose into my eye.

Before I can even think, I feel overwhelmed. Quickly, a kind of deep fear rises up in me. I can't breathe.

Trapped. I am trapped.

And fear morphs into anger, in a flash.

"STOP!" I shout, in a loud, commanding voice. And they pull back in horror. Natalia bursts into tears; clearly I scared her. They both run out of the room, seeking comfort from their mothers. I don't care. I am, at this moment, drowning.

Drowning in memory.

Blood. Blood is everywhere. All around me. Blood. Where is it coming from? And why am I choking?

A gurgling noise breaks into my reverie. A gurgling, choking noise. Blood flows down my throat, apparently from my nose. It also flows onto my shirt, onto the floor beside me. My nose. It hurts. Is it broken? Is my nose broken?

What happened?

My glasses sit askew on my face, apparently because they are bent beyond recognition. I realize that something is wrong with my vision. Everything is blurry. I pull my glasses off, gingerly, and take a look. The left lens is shattered. This is before "shatter proof" lenses.

Damn. Dad will be pissed. Another pair of glasses, shot.

All this happens in a few brief seconds. Then, I shake my head, trying to remember. All I remember is a crashing fist, a sneer, a kid walking away.

As I ponder the emergence of memory, and the way it can come over me (overcome me?) so quickly, triggered by an ordinary, if somewhat frenetic, interaction with my nieces, I recall my therapist saying, in a session over two years ago: “You have all the major symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder<sup>2</sup>: hyper-vigilance, hyper-reactivity, uncontrolled outbursts of anger, exaggerated startle reflex, fear of entrapment, repressed memories, general anxiety disorder, and depression. I think it’s time we stepped up your treatment.”

To which I assented immediately. It has been a long journey—a journey into uncovering, and desensitizing, memories I clearly didn’t want to face. In some cases, they are memories I did not know were there.

Lesmosyne is a powerful goddess—at least as powerful as her sister.

But...Mnemosyne is always ready.

One day recently, my son Noah is in the kitchen, checking on the spaghetti sauce simmering in the Crock Pot. He leans the glass lid against the side of the pot, attempting to take a taste. And the lid crashes to the ground, loudly, shattering into a million tiny pieces.

And I instantly fall back into memory.

CRASH!

BOOM!

Shattering glass and twisting metal. Loud. Blood. My blood. This time, it’s pouring off my forehead. What happened?

And then I realize: I am sitting in the middle of an intersection. Cars are swerving around me to avoid me, horns blaring. I gotta get out of here. What happened? I shove the car into drive, shoot across the busy intersection, narrowly missing a car as the driver swerves to avoid me. I pull over, see a phone booth by the gas station on the corner. I don’t know why I notice this. I think maybe I should call someone. I am feeling woozy.

What happened? I turn back toward the intersection for a moment, and see it—garbage truck. A very big garbage truck! I glance at my car. It’s mangled. Badly. What was once a small station wagon is now pretty much a hatchback. Totaled, I think. It’s totaled. Ow! I realize I am in pain, all over my body. Am I totaled, too? Blood trickles into my eye. I reach up with my sleeve, wipe. I am cut. I think my head hit the windshield. I walk to the curb, and sit, resting my head in my hands. Surely, somebody will help me.

And suddenly, the scene changes.

I am horsing around with my friends. Carefree childhood stuff. We are sliding down a wet slide, into the shallow end of the pool. Some genius put the slide over the shallow end. I decide to turn a flip as I launch off the end. But I miscalculate, and my head crashes into the bottom of the pool. Hard. I see stars. For a moment, I am stunned. Then it hits me: I'd better move. I somehow manage to get out of the pool. I am not OK. A concussion?

And the scene shifts, again.

And there I am, years later, standing in our friend's front yard, drinking beer with my brother. We are teenagers now, and reckless. Delinquents, really. He makes some crack at me, and I swipe back. And he jumps on me, fists flying, furious.

I manage to get up, and shove him off me. He comes at me again, so I kick at him hard, landing a blow to his crotch. He goes down in a heap.

Later, we are driving, my brother and me, heading home after a long night of drinking and fighting. I am shouting at him to stop the car, to let me drive.

"You can't drive, man! You're too drunk!"

"Fuck you!"

"Pull over, you asshole."

"Fuck you!"

"Fuck yourself!"

And, without warning, his fist crashes into my face, badly bending, but not breaking, my glasses. I will feel that one tomorrow. But I sit quietly, not retaliating. He's driving, you know? So I sit there, in silence, trying to bend my glasses back into shape.

Somehow we make it home, and tumble out of the car.

I turn my back on him, and walk into the house.

Inside, I turn, and there he is, facing me, fists clenched tightly at his side. He is clearly enraged. I know what's coming. This is a regular feature of our relationship.

Powerlessness and frustration, born of fear and an unmanageable life, erupt into violent rage on a regular basis.

I say, "Wait! Let me take my glasses off before you hit me!"

"Fuck. You!"

And before I can move, his fist crashes straight into my left lens. The lens shatters, and the glasses are driven up my nose, their metal frames gouging my skin. They fall off, and lie mangled on the floor at my feet. I fly into a rage, and grab him, pounding furiously at him. He staggers, and I shove him, hard. His head flies right through the dry wall of our basement room and into the concrete wall behind it. He lies on the floor, dazed. I walk away.



## Crashing into Consciousness

Over the years, my body has taken many blows. *My face* has been punched, jabbed, slammed. I have suffered numerous head injuries. I have experienced far too many crashes in my life, some of them deeply traumatic—traumatic enough, at least, to be stored as enduring bodily memories. That bike wreck long ago is my first memory of this sort of thing. Still, it is clear that my first car crash—the collision in which, as I sat at a red light, tuning my radio, a garbage truck, traveling in the neighborhood of 40 miles an hour, crashed into the back of my car, flinging it, and me, out into the intersection, and my head into the windshield—was a “turning point.” Not a day has gone by since that moment when I didn’t feel tension in my neck, and a little nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Anxiety.

Sometimes even panic.

And when I am sitting in traffic, these responses are heightened.

But what is the *story* buried in all my deeply bruised-scraped-torn-broken-bloody pain? Or to put it another way, how do I make sense of all this bottled-up memory-pain? What should I be *learning* here?

Surely, it’s not simply that, at times in my life, I have been accident-prone.

My face didn’t just collide with fists, randomly.

On the other hand, the “crashes” I’ve experienced often appeared to be just random “accidents,” well beyond my personal sphere of control.

These events don’t seem related. Some are fights; some are accidents; some are just weird happenstance. What’s the link, the connecting narrative thread? How to make sense of all this crashing, all this trauma, all this stored memory, all this enduring pain?

What seems clear to me, at this moment, is that these memories of crashing are surfacing for a *reason*. Now, it is up to me to discover what it is.

## Writing My Way Through: Narrative Voice and the Healing Power of Autoethnography

Battered. Beaten. Bruised. Bloody. As I look back at the now memorable crashes in my life, I begin to wonder what I should make of them. As I begin to pick up the pieces of shattered, splintered, fragmented memories in my life and examine them, I begin to see the possibilities, glinting like light off the edges of a shard of glass. As I attempt to make sense of the crashes, the noise, the shards of glass, the pain, the

violence, the trauma, I find myself drawn to writing. And I find myself writing my way through this problem. It is the only thing I know how to do. When I need expansion, or understanding, or healing, I turn to autoethnography.

To be sure, I know that I must *feel* the emotions associated with these events—anger, fear, sadness. But I also know that I'm not supposed to *stay* engulfed in them.

For me, it may be a matter of resilience.

For me, it may be a matter of standing up, brushing myself off, and going right back at life.

For me, it may be about finding my way through the pain and into an understanding of the power I carry.

And for me, it may be the power of the word.

If autoethnography is, in its essence, a way to *write through*, then I must see these crashes as leading me, inevitably, back to my voice, back to the beginning, back to learning to speak up, back to the opening to who I am that is offered by the moment of putting words out into the world.

For me, my most eloquent, my most thorough, my most passionate, my most meaningful utterances (Bakhtin, 1993) come in and through the written word.

When faced with a problem, or a challenge, or a dilemma, or a sharp, painful, wracking memory...sometimes all I can do is *write my way through it*.

Writing this way has taught me how to call forth the little memories that are nagging at me, tugging at the corners of my consciousness, demanding that I attend to them.

Writing this way has taught me that memory—even the sharp painful memory of trauma—can be my friend. I say this because I think of my friends as those who support me, urge me along, help me to be the best human I can be. And writing through my memories has made me stronger, more open, more compassionate, more supportive.

Writing this way has taught me that narrative has the power to evoke, to invoke, to provoke, and to stoke the fires of my consciousness (and my reader's consciousness) in ways that no other form of discourse can.

Writing this way has taught me that autoethnographic writing is, indeed, a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000).

Writing this way has taught me that I can write my way through even the most traumatic memories.

Writing this way has taught me that I can come out the other side of traumatic memory, and pick up the pieces, and examine them, and, even, eventually put them back together, rebuild, move on.

Writing this way has taught me that the path to healing is a narrative path, that the power of narrative is a power of *transformation*.

I was once told that my writing is “too therapeutic.”

“Ha,” I replied, “That’ll be the day.”

But I did wonder what that could possibly mean.

After all, the Greek word *therapeutikós* means ‘to attend to’ or to ‘pay attention.’

Hard to see how I could do too much of *that*.

Writing this way has taught me that autoethnography is, indeed, therapeutic.

It involves attending to what matters.

Writing this way has taught me that, in and through the act of writing through my pain, my memory, my life story, I find openings to possibility.

Writing this way has taught me that the opening to possibility that inheres in crafting an autoethnography—in writing my way through trauma and pain and danger and even joy—is, in fact, a path that carries me *through memory to transcendence*.

And beyond, to the next story.

And the next.

And the next.

## Notes

1. Kids this age tend to sneak off into other rooms to make “secret plans” to “surprise” adults.
2. For more detailed delineation of the causes, symptoms, and treatments for PTSD, see [www.medicinenet.com/posttraumatic\\_stress\\_disorder/article.htm](http://www.medicinenet.com/posttraumatic_stress_disorder/article.htm)

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