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From One Human to the Next: How Stories Might Save Our Lives

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On the morning of October 1, 2015, a young man walked into a college writing classroom with a gun and killed nine people, injured many others, then shot himself.

Perhaps because I am a writing professor, as was one of the victims, this tragedy unsettled me more than any of the terrible school shootings in the last couple of decades. Over my twenty years of teaching, I've stood at the front of many classrooms like the one at Umpqua Community College, the lines of desks and shining whiteboard and fall light slanting through the windows. I know well the mood of the room before the shooter walks in the door. I know the looks on the students' faces, slightly bored and tired, occasionally lighting up with interest or understanding as they listen to the professor. I imagine the professor pacing, questions hanging in the air as feet and paper shuffle.

The news accounts of the survivors' stories also allow me to imagine the gunman entering the room, shattering the drowsy peace. I can picture him killing the professor, ordering the men and women into the center of the room, backpacks and notebooks falling, firing into their frightened huddle, then singling a few students out to ask about their religious beliefs and ending their lives before shooting out the window at police and, soon after, killing himself.

I don't want to have these images in my head. I should not have read the articles, followed the story, absorbed the details.

Just a few hours after the man decided to kill his professor and eight classmates, I returned home from teaching one of my own writing classes at Boise State University. I sat down on a stool at my kitchen counter and checked my email, bright blue autumn sky and copper leaves glowing outside my window, then scrolled through my Facebook feed. Several of my friends had posted links to articles or comments about another campus shooting, this time at a community college in Roseburg, Oregon—a small town where life is billed as simple and safe and steady.

I immediately googled "Umpqua," checking the spelling, along with the word "shooting." The news reports were vague and confused,

a developing story. What was clear: a lot of people had died that morning at the hands of a young man who somehow justified walking into a classroom, a writing classroom, with a gun.

When my girls came in from the garage, my sophomore having just picked up my seventh grader after school, I was reading the reports through tears, my chest tight.

Of course, this was not the first time I watched a story unfold in a fog of grief and dread and disbelief. From Columbine to Virginia Tech to Sandy Hook, we have all witnessed the barrage of news coverage following a school shooting. As it is for many teachers, I cannot help but think of how these tragedies intersect with my life, with my work. After each horrific event, I am torn: Do I ask students to write about what happened, to discuss it? Do we confront the discomfort and fear, or do I ignore the shock, the suffering, and proceed blandly with a lesson on rhetorical analysis?

And as it is for many college writing professors in recent years, I am caught between my belief in the power of story, both in the telling and in the listening, and an English department that has moved steadily away from narrative in first-year writing courses. Any more, as much as I would like to invite students to tell their stories, there is less and less room to do so.

A few years ago as I recrafted my syllabus for a first-year writing class, trying to fit in new curricula and pedagogies with my own theories about teaching writing, I stumbled across Jo Ann Beard's "The Fourth State of Matter" on a list of the ten best essays of the twentieth century. I decided to use it as a course reading (and, connectedly, to keep the narrative assignment on the schedule).

It is a heartbreaking piece, both highly personal, details of her life after separating from her husband and of her dog's declining health, as well as a play-by-play of the shooting at the University of Iowa on November 1, 1991, "the last day of the first part of my life," she wrote. She worked in the physics department there. One of its graduate students shot and killed a fellow graduate student (out of jealousy perhaps), two professors, the department chair, and an administrator (out of resentment or feelings of being wronged, it seemed), and an assistant who happened to have gotten in his way. The essay stuns me every time I read it.

In November of 1991, I was two months into my freshman year at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. I vaguely remember hearing about the murders, at a university half a continent away. Shocking, horrible, but an aberration, a crime of a disturbed mind—not likely to happen again, not something that affected my life.

It took Beard almost five years to write and publish the piece. I imagine this writing was a way to make sense of what happened, an avenue for understanding and healing. Hers was the story of the pain left behind. She recounts the day in exquisite and excruciating detail. "Before I leave the building I pass [him] in the hallway and say hello. He has a letter in his hand and he's wearing his coat. He doesn't answer, and I don't expect him to. At the end of the hallway are the double doors leading to the rest of my life. I push them open and walk through" and later "For a few minutes I can't sit down, I can't stand up. I can only smoke. The phone rings. Another physicist tells me there's some bad news. He mentions Chris and Bob and I tell him I don't want to talk right now. He says O.K. but to be prepared because it's going to be on the news any minute. It's four-forty-five." Nothing would ever be the same for Beard after hearing the news—not work, not her house, not writing, not her life.

Any of us who has lost someone we love recognize the aching vividness with which she remembers the minutes surrounding the arrival of the bad news. I can recall the moments before and after my brother's phone call, telling me that my mother had died of a heart attack, as clearly now as I did just after it happened, over five years ago. Nothing was ever the same for me, either. In this way, the essay strikes a very personal chord with me—an echo of loss and shock. But in Beard's retelling of the shooting, I cannot help but imagine my own classrooms, my colleagues, my students. It is a story of a college campus, a place that is achingly familiar, torn apart by unimaginable horror.

When my students and I look at this essay together, it is both uncomfortable and riveting for us. It is such a powerful example of the personal essay; when we study it, the genre opens up for them in a new way, revealing how a story can operate on multiple levels, intimate and public, emotional and analytical, detailed and universal. I try to focus on the writing, to emphasize how this essay may have been good therapy for her, but it's also superbly crafted. Often, though, we end up talking about shootings on college campuses. Students share the details they remember, the shock of watching the stories unfold; some students sit silent, either unable or unwilling to join the discussion, but still engaged, listening intently. If I persevere with the discussion despite the discomfort, we often find ourselves in one of those magical teaching spaces of attention and insight—led by a story, and one person's courage to share it, to a new understanding of what it means to be human.

Still, until very recently, campus shootings seemed like something that only happen elsewhere. An aberration. Not likely to touch our lives.

I even felt this way in 2007, after Virginia Tech, though the conversation on our campus in Boise, Idaho, did change. The scope of that

massacre brought new security measures, alert systems were put into place. As the years have passed, as the number of school shootings have multiplied, those of us who work or study on campuses, whether professor or administrator or staff or student, have come to accept the possibility of tragedy, that universities are mildly dangerous places—yet we hang onto the hope of *not ours*.

As the Umpqua Community College story developed, as the media dug down into the details, we learned that the shooter was enrolled in the class, on probation at the college for falling below a C average, and a young man with a history of emotional and learning problems. The Douglas County sheriff refused to say his name on camera.

Twelve days after the shooting at UCC, Boise State Communications sent out a mass email to faculty, staff, and students. “In the wake of a significant number of school shootings in the past two weeks,” it began, “Boise State University would like to remind the campus community that university security officials work with the Boise Police Department, the FBI, and other law enforcement agencies to investigate all potential threats to the university campus.”

In the wake of, in the wake. That was exactly how it felt: as if something nearby, a mechanism not in my control, had slammed into me. Into us. Didn’t anyone else feel it? I imagined a straight-faced administrator tapping off a required legal memo, listing suggestions for staying safe in the event of an incident along with a link to the Run-Hide-Fight protocol, a schedule for active shooter training, and reminders about other safety measures, like not walking home alone. There was no mention of the losses suffered, no acknowledgement of the effect these words might have on students as they prepared to leave their dorm rooms—of the anxiety the recent events, “the significant number of school shootings,” might have on a nineteen-year-old college student.

We faculty teach our classes, get to know our students, are tough when needed, grade essays and tests, hold office hours, refuse late work, extend deadlines. Our job requires a constant dance between the roles of parent and evaluator, coach and judge. I want my students, whether eighteen or fifty-eight, to do well—to get over their fears of writing, to embrace how words can lead to new insights about the world and themselves, to not only learn about writing, but to become writers in some way, even if small, even if only for the space of the semester. I try to resist mothering them, reminding about deadlines and offering advice about studying or taking care of themselves, but often cannot help myself.

I care not only about my students' learning, but also about their well-being, especially my freshmen, eighteen or nineteen and away from home for the first time. This has always been the case, even when I was only a handful of years older than them. I started teaching at twenty-four. Now, at forty-four, I am very near their parents' ages, my own daughter only two years younger than my students. My students are adults, but still learning what that means—how to eat well and prioritize sleep and manage their time and not drink too much. For twenty fall semesters, I've watched students fight homesickness and exhaustion and hangovers and depression.

In the last few years, it has gotten worse. Students are more anxious, less able to manage their responsibilities. They are easily overwhelmed. They are often afraid to work in groups, to talk with their classmates. They write about this, they visit during office hours to talk about it, they skip class when it gets to be too much, or they come to class high, on weed or Adderall, or with excuses why they haven't done their work. Maybe it is the technology and social media and texting, many of us say, as our students of the last few years are the first generation to have had smart phones accompany the majority of their adolescence. Maybe it is the consequence of having helicopter parents (us Gen Xers who had so much independence in the 1970s and '80s, who learned the hard way that bad things happen, so want to protect and shield) stunting their emotional maturity and decision-making skills. Sending them to college unable to do their own laundry or pay bills or get through a tough week.

I don't know why my students are more anxious, more stressed. I just know that they are. I'm not a psychologist or a sociologist. However, as a writing teacher who still assigns a personal essay among attempts at rhetorical analysis and argument and academic discourse, I sometimes get the stories—the same kinds of stories, the remembering and reordering and working to make sense of an event—that counselors hear in therapy. I am very careful. I always keep comments in the context of the writing task. This is sometimes very, very hard.

College students have always been a volatile demographic. They are emotional and hormonal and stressed and excited and sad and in love and lonely and worried and sleep-deprived. Huge highs and lows. But I've never felt they were dangerous.

I still don't—or don't want to, that is. I don't even want to admit that I think about it, this correlating upswing in anxiety and social discomfort with college shootings and campus violence. If I am very honest, though, I am aware of that small kernel of fear in the back of my mind when I have to be hard on a student, when I have to say "no"

or “you have to do this yourself” or “this is the grade you earned.” Is that how it starts? Did the professor at Umpqua Community College refuse to take a late essay? How does that change my teaching? My life?

Let me be clear: I’m not afraid of my students. I’m afraid *for* them. What, for these boys and men (the vast majority, at least the ones we hear about, are male), who have opened fire on teachers and classmates or on strangers who happen to be sitting in a classroom, is the final straw? What pushes them over the edge?

I’m clearly not the only one thinking about this; I imagine Boise State wasn’t the only university to send out a campus safety email during the couple of weeks following the UCC shooting. And the same morning as I received the email, just after I hugged my younger daughter goodbye at the curb of her middle school (one of the scariest things I’ve done as a parent is take my kids to school the day after Sandy Hook), Malcolm Gladwell was talking on NPR about the shootings over the last two decades, which he had just written about for *The New Yorker* in the article “Thresholds of Violence: How School Shootings Catch On.” He explained his theory, which he conceded was just one explanation: social media and the Internet are propagating a subculture of disturbed boys who idolize the mastermind of Columbine. Although they are likely not psychotic themselves, as the early shooters in this “epidemic” appeared to be, they fantasize about getting even or maybe just adding their names to the roster of shooters. A few of these boys, those who only needed someone to open the door, decide to follow in the footsteps of the boys before them; it has been done before, Gladwell hypothesizes, so the final decision to open fire is easier for them, just as it is easier to join a riot than to start one (he correlates this with Stanford sociologist Mark Granovetter’s model on riots and threshold levels).

I was driving home, listening to this, my vision blurred, still shivering in the wake of Umpqua. All I could think was, *this is terrifying*. Another strike against a world that has become long on information and fear but short on empathy, on love, on connection. On compassion.

One of the survivors, an eighteen-year-old student named Matthew Downing, wrote down what happened to him and his classmates on the morning of October 1 in Roseburg. The media labeled him the “lucky one” because that was what the shooter called him before giving him a package for the police. Downing told news reporters that he chose to write down what he remembered in order to “get my story out in a way that I feel comfortable” (Almaguer and Hesel).

I wonder if this urge to write, to record the events of that terrible day, was something he learned in class, something his professor taught

him: to use writing to uncover understanding and insight, for himself and for his readers. Maybe they even talked about how writing can heal.

That is how I often use writing—to unravel my own tangled thoughts and feelings, yes, but also to exorcise painful memories. I dissuade students from doing the same in class, saying something like “writing might be good therapy, but therapy isn’t often good writing.” Yet after my mother’s death, despite knowing this, I published a monthly personal essay on a blog for two years, trying to make sense of the difficult relationship I had with my mom, of how her death and my grief had changed me, and on my own struggle to tell the story truthfully and openly.

One of the things I explored in the essays was the anxiety and worry that threatened to drown me in the months after she died. I, too, am more anxious than I once was.

In his essay “*Joyas Voladoras*,” which opens as a reflection on the hummingbird and its extraordinary heart, Brian Doyle writes “that all hearts finally are bruised and scarred, scored and torn, repaired by time and will, patched by force of character, yet fragile and rickety forevermore, no matter how ferocious the defense and how many bricks you bring to the wall.” We can only protect ourselves so much. Death and tragedy and all our accumulated hurts leave scars, leave us wary and cautious. Perhaps we don’t want to feel those cuts so deeply, so we isolate and insulate ourselves.

After my mom died, I nearly lost my ability to manage worry and uncertainty. When my daughter, then eight, slipped while climbing some rocks and split her head open, I sat by her bed in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, my hand on her back tracking her even breathing like I did when she was a baby. I imagined all the horrible possibilities. My wonderful creative affectionate darling girl’s brain bleeding, slowly, taking her from me in cruel silence. As her back rose and fell under my hand, I pictured her beating heart, the steady rhythm, and my own heart thumped erratically, in fear and in the knowledge that nothing lasts. None of us. Death was no longer abstract and unimaginable. The heart, especially, seemed so vulnerable, so impossible to protect.

Aristotle believed the heart was the most important organ of the body, where intelligence and sensation resided, thought and feeling in community. I wonder if it is from this heart that some of us attempt to write—from where Downing fought to tell his story. It is, perhaps, for this heart in our readers that many of us write. Its rhythms, both critical and emotional, lead us to insight, understanding, and connection. This is our prayer even: that the words we send out into the world might reach others, move them, heal them. Maybe, if we tell our stories, if

we know we aren't alone, the scars won't ache quite so much and the world won't break our hearts entirely.

Since that night I sat trembling by my daughter's bed, which happened just three months after the shock of my mother's heart attack, that center of thought and feeling failing her, I have replenished my store of strength somewhat, have repaired the muscles required to keep worry in check. Yet, as Doyle described, I still feel the scars and know my fragility.

The shooting at UCC broke open those scars, unstitched them for a moment, let the pain travel unchecked. What do I do? Do I avoid anything that might stir up the ache of empathy? Isolate myself, not watch the news, stay away from the stories that haunt my imagination and batter my bruised heart? How might this affect my work, my teaching?

I can't help but consider this in conjunction with my English department's movement away from the personal essay, away from narrative, and toward rhetorical analysis and disciplinary discourse. These classrooms are generally more formal, less inviting—or, as proponents of this approach believe, less intrusive, more effective and efficient in moving students toward college-level skills mastery. Of course, these are significant academic lessons. But what happens when we ignore our students' humanity? What is lost when we retreat behind academic forms, and they are no longer encouraged to share stories that matter to them? When other students no longer hear them?

And what happens to me, when I close my heart to my students' histories and hurts, to the power of story, to the way words open us up to each other? Why, then, do I teach?

Like my students, I don't spend enough time seeking peace; in my downtime, I clutter my head and my heart. Too many screens, too much information, not enough being human. While I no longer expect the worst to happen at any time, as I did in the year or so after my mom's heart attack, I am more thin-skinned these days than I was five years ago. Just as the shootings at UCC squeezed my tender heart, the events of the world, both terrible and wonderful, spark tears almost daily.

Oddly, it is the snapshots of human kindness on NPR or my Facebook newsfeed, where so many of us interact with the world these days, that often undo me: NFL football players dancing with a cancer patient, parents embracing their son after he pays off their mortgage, firefighters rescuing a dog from a frozen lake, citizens of Hungary handing food and strollers and water to Syrian refugees on the side of the road. These stories leave me driving through tears or unable to see the screen, breathing through the pressure in my chest.

This trembling empathy, this thin skin, sometimes makes doing everyday things, even teaching, even going out with friends, harder. In this, I understand so many of my students' struggles with anxiety, with feeling uncomfortable in the world.

Perhaps, then, my own thin skin, my worry, is the reason that the murders at Umpqua Community College unsettled me so much. There is that word again: "unsettled." When I use it, I mean I am no longer in that place that once felt safe. This is true for me in many ways, but particularly in my belief that my work happens in a peaceful, meaningful space, both literally and metaphorically. The college professor's work is contemplative and solitary, for the most part. It's a quiet job.

Somehow, though, teaching at a university has become a very small act of courage. We are navigating a minefield. The ordinance might still be relatively rare, but that they exist at all keeps us from walking with a steadfast belief in our safety. Each step has the potential for sudden, explosive disaster and despair.

Perhaps, though, I am unsettled because I refuse to seal up my heart entirely, to become numb to the pain: my own, my students', that of the victims at Umpqua and their families. I want to believe this is true. I want to be *that* person, not someone who thinks too much about a disturbed student with a gun.

In his compelling essay, "Ethics and Narrative: the Human and Other," writer and teacher Chris Abani examines Marguerite Yourcenar's idea that "Compassion emphasizes the experience of suffering with those who suffer and it is far from according a sentimental conception of life. It inflicts its knife-like pain only on those who, strong or not, brave or not, intelligent or not, have been granted the humble gift of looking the world in the face and seeing it as it is." Abani asks "But what if we change the idea of gift to choice? What if compassion, true compassion, requires not the gift to see the world as it is, but the choice to be open to seeing the world as it really is, or as it can be?"

That is a worthy goal: to not look away from the ugliness and brutality of the world, to face it without accepting it, and to take into ourselves the suffering of others, enduring that "knife-like pain" even as we are unsettled or worse. What if we choose to listen to the stories, despite everything, even our own instincts to protect ourselves, our hearts? This, then, is what might keep us human. Perhaps this is what might keep boys from treading the dark road of mass murder and suicide in order to prove a point or join a club.

For college writing professors, it is also what might keep us walking back into our classrooms, into the minefield, again and again, back and forth. I may step more carefully, but maybe I can continue to do so with compassion, with care, and with courage. In the end, maybe all

we can do is share our stories, write with our hearts and for the hearts of our readers, make our voices louder than the riot, and hope that words will lead us and others, even disturbed boys who somehow see no other option, into the light, not the dark.

This might make some shake their heads, muttering that it is pretty to believe so. Really, what difference can we make? That might be true, but it won't stop me, either. Hope is better than fear. It's better than worrying about a gunman entering my classroom and shooting me in the head.

Last fall after the UCC shootings, when I looked out at the faces of twenty-five college students, I wrestled with the competing directives of a department that asks for rhetorical analysis, assignments that introduce students to library databases and voiceless academic articles, and of my own heart, steadfast in its belief of a story's power, of the vital importance of inviting students to tell their own, whether tragic or triumphant or even ordinary.

I also fought my own fear, a need to protect myself, and the very loud voices of a society that tells me that I am in danger—from the six Muslim students in my classroom, from the young man who told me in the second week that he is a manic depressive and a perfectionist, from the eighteen-year-old who sits in the back with a downcast eyes and blue hair, an intelligent, introverted boy who writes about music and religion and books.

What I continually reminded myself is that while we might get our news—and learn about horrid acts of terror and violence in places near and far—from the Internet, it is not where we should live our lives or interact with the world, no matter how uncomfortable that world might be at times. I watched my students get to know each other. They overcame the awkwardness of groups and of sharing anecdotes from their lives, whether to write a personal essay, which I still teach, or to personalize the impact of college debt in a persuasive essay. After several weeks together, phones tucked in their backpacks or pockets, they talked easily about our readings and their writing. They shared stories of growing up in Riyadh or Los Angeles or New Plymouth, Idaho. They read excerpts from passionate essays about pollution and music education and animal abuse. Yes, they learned to use library databases and analyze their rhetorical choices, but they also learned about each other—about the diverse lives of the human beings in the room—and heard tales that moved them, shocked them, and widened their understanding of the world and their place in it.

We were also able to talk, together, even if only for a few moments, about what happened at Umpqua Community College, about the terror-

ist attacks in Paris in November, about the shootings in San Bernardino in December. The fall of 2015 was marked by horror after horror; to ignore this in the classroom, to pretend that we are not all shaken, is not only dishonest, it separates us from our humanity.

Those boys who are tempted by the lure of Columbine's legacy, who might right now sit in classrooms, fantasizing about blowing holes in their teachers, their classmates, need stories that challenge the powerful myth of the school shooter-hero. It looms large in their minds, the image of the trench-coated protagonist ruling the hallways, others cowering in fear, life and death in their hands, their names on the fingertips and lips of a tragedy-hungry audience. They need to see that connection matters, that pain is not forever, that most people, except when in pain themselves, try to do their best in any given moment. But how? How might stories of human kindness compete with the shouting voices of the Internet riot?

Perhaps it simply comes down to this: we need to see and touch other human beings. Share our stories. Listen to each other. Learn together. Seek joy with each other. Rescue each other. Maybe it is not much, maybe even not enough, but choosing kindness and compassion over separation and violence still matters.

For me, that means going back into the classroom, looking my students in the eyes, and refusing to let fear—mine or my students'—silence our humanity. I will continue to ask for their stories, listen to them, and share my own.

This year, my twentieth, might be my last. I'm not sure if my teaching practices fit in the "new curricular framework," as my writing program calls it, that they plan to implement next fall, focused on writing-about-writing approaches. Sure, I see the value in these courses. I also admit my own resistance—how I have dragged my feet through what is openly labeled as "incremental change"—that has likely influenced my ability to see the advantages of these approaches. I do believe that there is a time, maybe upper-division courses or graduate school, for an emphasis on rhetorical analysis, meta-cognition, and discourse fluency.

But when students first get to college, connection matters. They need to find a foothold on who they are, who they want to become, and how to relate to and empathize with the pains and joys of others. I believe that as a writer, as a teacher, and as a human being who meets young people at a crucial cognitive, emotional, and spiritual place in their lives. Yes, they need the tools to become stronger students, more critical thinkers, and the first-year writing classroom is a good place to gain those skills; but it is also a liberal arts college's responsibility to encourage students in the growth of their humanity, love and kindness

and justice and even courage, especially in a world that is increasingly connected, complex, and often frightening. There is no better teacher for this than story: the sharing of our lives with each other.

Until the time comes for me to leave the college writing classroom, I will refuse to hide behind technology or academic formality or impersonal, soulless writing assignments. I will keep my scarred, trembling heart open. This is what saves my life, every day.



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