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## Feeling Human Again: Toward a Pedagogy of Radical Empathy

*“You can’t really change the heart without telling a story.”*

– Martha Nussbaum

*I happen to believe that America is dying of loneliness, that we, as a people, have bought into the false dream of convenience, and turned away from a deep engagement with our internal lives — those fountains of inconvenient feeling — and toward the frantic enticements of what our friends in the Greed Business call the Free Market. We’re hurtling through time and space and information faster and faster, seeking that network connection. But at the same time we’re falling away from our families and our neighbors and ourselves. We ego-surf and update our status and brush up on which celebrities are ruining themselves, and how. But the cure won’t stick. And this, I think, is why Sugar has become so important to so many people. Because she’s offering something almost unheard of in our culture: radical empathy. People come to her in real pain and she ministers to them, by telling stories about her own life, the particular ways in which she’s felt thwarted and lost, and how she got found again.*

Steve Almond

In the introduction to Cheryl Strayed’s *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Life and Love from Dear Sugar*, Steve Almond, the writer who originated the Dear Sugar advice column published on Rumpus.net, describes Strayed’s writing as practicing “radical empathy.” To a world in desperate need of connection, Almond suggests that what Sugar offers her readers is a rare gift indeed—a gift that is exchanged along with stories about real lives, “real pain,” both Strayed’s and the readers who ask for her advice. Strayed’s answers, woven in brief and poignant personal essays, are an attempt to reconnect us to a “deep engagement with our internal lives” and with each other, to offer one, small “cure,” or at the very least an antidote, to the pervasive loneliness that Almond describes.

This is what Sugar’s stories offer me, as a teacher, student, and person who lives, teaches, writes, and loves within that same frantic, frenetic, and disconnected “America.” They—like most personal stories—offer the possibility of perspective, of seeing the world through the eyes of another, of experiencing narrative through another point of view, of the opportunity to connect or to reconnect with people I’ve

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known and those I will never meet, of experiencing an empathy that for both its presence and potential can only be described as *radical*.

A quick look at the definition of the word “radical” will uncover the common usage, and the one that I think Irish novelist Colum McCann means when he calls for a certain kind of empathy, one that is “very different from the usual or traditional” or an empathy that is “advocating extreme measures for a change.” Perhaps, even, the concept of radical empathy might be related to the informal or slang use of the word that means “excellent or cool.” But the primary definition of *radical* that is lesser known, that might give us another way of thinking about what happened in the life writing courses I’ve taken and taught, is a kind of radical that is “of, relating to, or proceeding from a root.” This definition of *radical* refers to something that is of or growing from the root of a plant (like a radical tuber) or “growing from the base of a stem, from a rootlike stem, or from a stem that does not rise above the ground.” In this usage, radical means “basic” or relating to or affecting the basic nature or most important features of something. An empathy that is radical, then, is something from which things grow—it is *essential*, the most important feature. This is the “feature” that creates the kind of educational experiences that changes things. This is the kind of experience I want to give my own students, an experience that was radical *because* of its roots in the practice and pedagogy of empathy.

The concept of “radical empathy” is catchy and has real-world implications. For example, the nonprofit organization N4 (Narrative 4), started by award-winning and literary activists Colum McCann and Luis Alberto Urrea, organizes “story exchanges” as an attempt to foster “radical empathy” in an “increasingly troubled world.” Story exchanges, according to McCann, “where you tell my story and I tell yours—are a form of narrative medicine. Stories enter the bloodstream. Stories can wound us, yes, but they are more likely to heal. We *re-story* ourselves in the hope that we might be able to *restore* ourselves.” Stories are intended to cross all kind of boundaries: socioeconomic, age, gender, and geographic with the hopes of, according to their mission statement, “breaking down barriers and shatter(ing) stereotypes.” N4

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—like Sugar’s advice columns—encourages *“people to walk in each other’s shoes and prove that not only does every story matter, every life matters.”* This is where the power of life narrative—*real* stories told by *real* people to *real* audiences—can be transformative, where it could lead to the kind of empathetic experience that frees us from the “jail of the self” and that can lead to the “ultimate adventure.” Tobias Wolff calls this “seeing life through the eyes of the other.”

In one of the most powerful N4 exchanges, students from violence-torn communities in Chicago were paired with Newtown High schoolers who were still deeply traumatized from the shootings that occurred at the grade school just down the street at Sandy Hook Elementary School. According to the N4 website, the exchange helped the young adults gain a deeper appreciation for one another’s struggles, establish relationships based on mutual respect, and begin to heal the scars that each of their communities bears. Some of the participants wrote, “When you tell someone else’s story...it’s like someone handing over their most prized possession, maybe something made out of glass;” “The story exchange touched me deeply. I came out learning so much about life and people;” and one Newtown student: “Why do we share our stories? We want to feel human again.” Feeling “human” again. This seems to be a tall order, maybe especially for students, in a world where violence continues to invade not only countries, cities, and neighborhoods, but the very schools in which they spend the majority of their days.

In order to truly understand the potential of the emotion of empathy in the classroom, an exploration of the etymology of the word “empathy,” including a discussion of its controversial and frequent misuse, is necessary. In our contemporary use of empathy, we are usually expressing a commonality of social feeling or the ability to share the emotional experiences of others, to feel “at one” with their affective responses (Swanson 127). For some, the concept of empathy extends from an individual relationship between humans and is extended to a compassionate relationship to the larger global community—to an “animate world”—and is based on the continuity between human existence and

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the fate of the biosphere. This kind of empathy is a driving force behind a number of ethical and political causes including animal rights and environmental activism (127).

Whether we are conceptualizing empathy as an individual or global affective response, we are generally reflecting on the ability to not only imagine and reconsider, but to *feel for* what exists beyond the personal and the known. It is beyond the known that the realm of the “trans-individual” exists, where we experience the feeling of being in touch with *something* beyond ourselves. According to Gillian Swanson, empathy is a concept traditionally conceived as “a passage between minds, the mental processes that allow us to imagine the states of others as the basis of a feeling which is neither properly ours, nor empirically theirs, but borne from that connectivity” (128). However, empathy, closely bound to the concept of sympathy, is one that is often misused and misunderstood.

The word “empathy” has a recent origin, appearing for the first time in English in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, translated from the German word *Einfühlung*. When philosopher and psychologist Theodor Lipps introduced *Einfühlung* into the field of psychology, he suggested that it constituted an instinct and argued that aesthetic pleasure was derived from the drives directed toward imitation and expression. By adopting the term and reappropriating it as a projection of feelings into objects of contemplation in the natural world—everyday situations or the “arts”—Lipps reinforced a separation between self and object prior to the contemplative experience. Thus, Lipps helped define empathy in terms of an understanding of an “expressive other”—a definition that preserved the distinction between *Einfühlung* (“feeling into”) and the psychological concept of sympathy or *Mitfühlen* (“feeling with”) (Swanson 129). It was Lipps’ work in the field of psychology that brought the concept into the language of social feeling as it became associated with responses to the expressions of others through a process of “inner imitation: an expressive act by which the other invokes a feeling in the self, which is then projected ‘into’ the other by being attached to the perceived gesture: we are bound to project our own feelings into the process of perception as these are the only mental states to which we have experiential access” (130). Thus, the conflation of *Einfühlung* and

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*Mitfühlen*—or the extent to which feelings are projected or introjected—is transferred into our contemporary use of empathy to signify social understanding, creating an ongoing tension that followed the adoption of the word into Anglophone culture. It was experimental psychologist E.B. Titchener who proposed the word “empathy” as a way to highlight the difference between empathy as a “feeling into” objects through the imaginative projections of mind and its visualizations, from the historical interest in “sympathy” as “feeling with,” a shared or “fellow” feeling (Swanson 131).

When we confuse or misuse the concept of “empathy” as simply another or more intense version of “sympathy,” we are overlooking an essential difference and potentially cheating our students (and ourselves) out of the kind of powerful work that narrative can do in their personal and academic lives. Sympathizing for a character, a writer, or a colleague—*feeling for* or *with* them—is not the same emotional experience as empathizing, or *feeling into* them. Sympathy essentially implies a feeling of recognition of another's suffering while empathy is actually sharing another's suffering, if only briefly. Sometimes, we're left with little choice but to feel sympathetic because we really can't understand the plight or predicament of someone else. It takes imagination, work, or maybe even a similar experience to get to empathy. The idea of empathy suggests a more active process. It is also less common especially in an academic setting.

### **Empathy in Theory**

Because the concept has a historically ambiguous past, the term is frequently used to mean different phenomena. Diverse and competing interpretations have brought to our attention the varied roles of affect, imagery, and embodiment on the emotion. Thus, the word has been used to define multiple concepts reflecting psychological, ethical, aesthetic, and epistemological interests (Rosan 117). For the purposes of this study and for exploration in the life writing classroom, the concept, emotion, or phenomenon of empathy presupposes an intersubjective experience that forms the subject's connection to the other and the co-presence of worlds of meaning between self and other. The “intersubjective

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experience” examined in this study is the practice of reading and writing life narratives in the classroom setting, an experience, I argue, that can potentially lead students to a more empathetic “way of being” as readers and writers. Perhaps even as *people*.

Almost immediately after the concept of “empathy” had been defined and centrally situated within Western aesthetic theory, it met high modernist theory, particularly New Criticism, which taught students to avoid the “affective fallacy” of empathetic experience when reading literature. This approach had a devastating impact on not only the interest but also the ability of students to engage in the kinds of literary interpretation that considers the relationship, mediated by the text, between readers and writers. The movement, although never completely formalized as such, was a reaction against the idea of “literary appreciation” as being too subjective and emotional. Instead, New Critics considered the text as a self-contained, self-referential, and aesthetic object, separate from—and unaffected by—the interpretation of the reader or intention of the author. New Criticism dominated the literary landscape in our educational system until challenged by theories such as feminism and structuralism in the 1970s. While the formal practice of New Criticism has been formally absent from the curriculum for decades, its influences linger, unintentional and possibly even unrecognizable, in the pedagogies of the teachers that have trained us, the teachers of the teachers of the future. It is in this “forgotten,” formalistic theory, with its prioritization of more “objective” texts in contemporary reading and writing classrooms—that the Common Core standards seem to be finding inspiration and importance. As students are taught not to *value* the “affective” in their approach to reading and writing texts, they are consequently taught not to *practice* it. As teachers of life writing interested in cultivating a pedagogy of empathy, this historical baggage—ours and the students—is worth consideration.

According to psychologist Peter Rosan, people come to understand one another “through their use of a common language and on the basis of their engagements in particular situation and shared traditions” (117). But, sometimes, these daily interactions are interrupted by an experience that engages us in a deeper,

more intimate way of knowing, and we find our own “reveries and sensibilities” to seemingly mirror or resound with the other’s expression, including, and maybe, *especially* to disclosures. These “interruptions” are the daily work of a life writing class. I like the verb *interrupt* here, to essentially cause something to stop, to break the flow of something, because it accurately captures the experience students feel when they encounter the study of personal story in the midst of their academic curriculum. The *surprise* of interruption opens up a space of possibility for attention and reflection.

In order for us to cultivate an empathetic way of being, according to Rosan, we must have an “exquisitely unique interpersonal context” that invites the subject’s participation and the conditions of possibility for this participation in the subject’s approach to or regard for the other. The occasion for an empathetic presence occurs when the “poignancy or pathos” of the other’s expressions or discourse, “typically vivid in character and unexpected by the subject,” signifies a life-drama unfolding in the other’s world (118). When this gradual awareness occurs, the subject becomes implicated as a witness, and then later as a participant, in the other’s exploration of self. Life writing classes, indeed any writing class that celebrates the exchange of personal stories, creates the kind of interpersonal context that could lead to the kind of empathetic presence that Rosan describes.

Both language and story are essential in this empathetic awareness. The other’s expressive life begins to resonate with the subject and causes a “turning-toward” where the subject joins with the other’s expressions toward the discovery of the other’s world (121). According to Rosan, turning-towards may be accomplished perceptually, imaginatively, and/or *narratologically*. For example, if the situation that is causing the other’s suffering is in the subject’s potential field of perception, he/she can turn directly with the other to the particular experience. Or, if the subject is unable to directly relate to or perceive the experience, she may imagine how the world appears to the other. Rosan argues that an understanding of the other is bound to, or has its origins in, a communicative experience and is dialogic in nature, arising from an interplay of multiple worlds of meaning:

The subject's private reveries are intertwined with the spectacle of the other's changing expressions and/or disclosures. In turn, these reveries reciprocally illuminate...the meaning of the other's expressions, albeit from the subject's own unique perspective... In this sense, empathy as a form of being with the other leads to an illumination of the other. (131)

To conceptualize empathy in the context of the life writing classroom requires us to think about how discourse—language, words, *stories*—works to facilitate the experience. Therefore, it is useful to acknowledge its roots in aesthetics as well as psychology.

When Titchener elaborated on the concept in 1915, he did so through a description of the aesthetic experience of reading: “We have a natural tendency to feel ourselves into what we perceive or imagine. As we read about the forest, we may, as it were, become the explorer; we feel for ourselves the gloom, the silence, the humidity, the oppression, the sense of lurking danger; everything is strange, but it is to us that strange experience has come” (Keen 209). In aesthetic terms, empathy was a concept that involved a kinesthetic and emotional response of work by a viewer, to form as much as content, and then to the projection of that experience into the work in a way that enabled a merging of self and the object in a contemplative act. English novelist Vernon Lee brought *Einfühlung* and empathy to a broader literary audience when she advanced a theory of embodied aesthetic perception focused on the bodily sensations and muscular adjustments made by viewers of works of art and architecture. It wasn't until after Lee adapted Lipps' understanding of empathy (*Einfühlung*) that she began to incorporate emotional responsiveness into her conceptualization. Lee defines the purpose of art—literature in this case—as “the awakening, intensifying, or maintaining of definite emotional states” making empathy a central feature of collaborative responsiveness (210). She argued that empathy enters into “imagination, sympathy, and also into the inference from our own inner experience which has shaped all our conceptions of an outer world, and given to the intermittent and heterogeneous sensations received from without the framework of our



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constant and highly unified inner experience, that is to say, of our own activities and aims” (qtd. in Keen 210).

Keen’s work seems to suggest that the recent interest in the cognitive study of empathy—including the redefinition of the emotion as one that clearly involves both thinking and feeling—might be at least partially responsible for a reimagining of how empathy works in the study of narrative. In the relatively new field known as Cognitive Approaches to Literary Studies, based heavily on the work of LeDoux and Damasio, matters of affect are generally considered to “fall under the umbrella” of the term “cognitive” (213). Keen argues that empathy, as a process, involves both cognition and affect; when texts invite readers to feel, they also stimulate readers’ thinking” (213). However, these responses—both affective and cognitive—do not inevitably lead to empathizing, but “fiction does disarm readers of some of the protective layers of cautious reasoning that may inhibit empathy in the real world” (213). Of course this quote would suggest that a clear distinction exists between a textual world and the “real world” where, as readers and writers, our ideas and experiences can be isolated between the real and the imagined. Rather than relegating experience into the distinct realms of “fiction” or “reality,” Keen might be suggesting that fiction could provide a bridge between the two.

Although Keen’s work on narrative empathy is focused on the study of fiction, it can be productively applied to the reading of nonfiction, particularly life writing. For instance, narrative theorists have identified a number of techniques that perpetuate empathetic experiences, such as the use of first-person narration and the interior representation of characters’ consciousness and emotional states that life writing shares with fiction. Life narratives are personal reflections but also aesthetic *constructions*. In other words, life stories are ultimately *stories*—not the people they represent. This belief, central to life writing studies, separates lives from texts in a way that makes empathy not only a psychological experience (between subject and other) but also an aesthetic one (between subject and object). If we believe that the

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constructed text is merely one reflection of a *represented* self and not a representation of an *actual* self, then an empathetic experience becomes much more complex.

### **Empathy in Praxis**

During the spring 2014 semester, I taught a creative nonfiction class at the Midwestern community college where I teach centered on the reading and writing of life narratives (including personal essays, memoirs, blogs, and documentary films), a curriculum that consciously deviated from the original course goals that included, “To study the techniques of submitting freelance writing and to encourage the submission of that work to possible markets,” and “to enhance students’ awareness, appreciation, and understanding of non-fiction prose as a literary art form.” These goals seemed preoccupied with the *product* of writing rather than the person writing it. Based on my own highly intersubjective experience in a life writing classroom, I wanted a classroom that was focused on the craft of autobiography, but equally concerned with the kinds of issues that make life writing studies so rich—questions about identity, authorship, memory, and truth. According to Rosan, an empathetic way of being or experience must have four different referent points, including:

- (a) a situation occasioning the subject’s participation; (b) the communicative event as it unfolded over time; (c) a poetics or bringing form of multiple worlds of meaning and the different ways of knowing accompanying the relational patterns between subject and other invoked by new worlds; and, finally, (d) the resolution of an empathetic participation in the subject’s awareness of the limits to knowing the other and a discovery of the possible for himself/herself. (118)

The thirteen studies who comprised my Life Writing class were aspiring filmmakers, journalists, comedians, and graphic artists—most of them English majors and all of them prolific writers and voracious readers. The youngest was 17 and the oldest 71. The students were diverse in their ethnic,

gender, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds. I worried that this diversity could complicate the reading and writing of life stories, a worry that was echoed in separate conversations with both the 17 and 71 year-old students who privately expressed concerns on the first day that they didn't think they belonged in the class because their stories wouldn't be interesting, or even recognizable, to their peers.

The course readings included essays, memoirs, a few theoretical articles as an introduction into the field, and each other's work. Students were expected to write a weekly response to the assigned texts on the online discussion board. Additionally, they were responsible for maintaining a weekly blog focused on life writing and developing their own semester project. The majority of class time during the first half of the semester involved student-led discussions on the readings, short writing activities, and brief "lectures" on various issues related to the field of life writing studies. The majority of their work—their reading responses and their blogs—were public, so that they would become immediately aware of the presence of the "other" in the classroom. Because of all of these factors, the students recognized that something different from a typical academic experience was going to happen in this class. This was the interruption that Rosan writes about—this "stop" in the flow of their daily lives signaled by a number of atypical course requirements and classroom procedures, even for a writing class. This awareness, along with the course's focus on their own lives, gave the students agency in the class and a personal stake in their work.

In "Entitlement and Empathy in Personal Narrative," Amy Shuman problematizes the relationship between empathy and narrative with her argument that "empathy appropriates the personal with the goal of greater understanding across experiential differences" (149). Her work focuses on the limits of storytelling, particularly when a particular story is used beyond the context of the experience it represents and when personal stories are used to represent collective experience. She argues that making meaning out of other people's stories can produce sentimentality rather than empathy, in which an emotional response becomes a substitute for understanding others. Shuman warns us:

[...] claiming a narrative as a way of understanding events is a political choice that enjoins particular obligations upon tellers and listeners. Empathy is one kind of obligation, sometimes creating a possibility for understanding across differences... sometimes romanticizing tragedy as inspiration, but in any case deeply compromising the relationship between tellers and listeners. (152)

Shuman, then, draws on the work of Newton who understands empathy as a part of a continuum mediating between “identification or empathy on the one hand, and objective respect at a distance on the other” (152). Finally, she leaves us with the sobering thought that although storytelling offers us the possibility of empathy, and empathy offers the possibility of understanding across space and time, it rarely changes the circumstances of those who suffer (152). Shuman suggests that the biggest challenge to the study of personal experience narrative continues to be to “avoid the conflation of experience and the personal with the authentic and the real and at the same time to understand why this conflation is so compelling” (153).

As the semester progressed, the students grew closer as a community as stories were read, discussed, and exchanged. Unrequired replies to reading responses appeared on the discussion board and students exchanged emails and projects voluntarily. Our reading discussions were rich and intimate, as students made connections between the texts, their lives, and the experiences of their colleagues. In the second half of the semester, the students elected to participate in reading workshops focused on their course projects. During this transition from a concentration on the course texts to their own, I began to see the students working together in radically empathetic ways, motivated by the sincere desire to read, understand, and engage each other’s life stories in the best traditions of *Dear Sugar* and *N4*.

The occasion of the life writing class provided an interpersonal context that fostered and celebrated storytelling, a practice that has typically been discouraged in the academic classroom.

Throughout the semester, students read stories by writers such as Cheryl Strayed, JoAnn Beard, Dave

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Eggers, Nick Flynn, and Mary Karr. We talked about their stories. And students wrote their own stories, each week in their blogs, through their reading responses, and for their final memoir project. But they also told stories—stories about their lives that had meaningful connections to the stories from the authors we studied and from each other. Unlike in other discussion-based classrooms where students' personal anecdotes are met with barely disguised eye-rolls, our class was a space where stories were not only encouraged but *honored*. The stories of Natalie's relationship with her father, of Courtney's troubled in-law relationship, of Helen's estranged sister, of Dave's visit to witch-camp were interwoven into a very different kind of course text—a text that would have been impossible without the community that worked together to write it. As the semester progressed, the students were implicated as witnesses, and even sometimes participants, in the others' "showing and telling of themselves" (118). The introduction of the other's expressive lives invited and sustained attention to and regard for each other. These expressions, however, could only *signify* meaning at this point as the students only possessed general knowledge about each other. According to Rosan, the subject's initial access to the other is resolved in his/her *perception* of the other's expressive life. So, when Helen wrote of her father's abuse of her mother, "Mother had dark auburn hair and soft brown eyes. Sweet natured like her mother, small of build, she was no match for my tall, muscular, cold eyed, sadistic father," we *recognized* the suffering, but that recognition was still a perception. We were still removed and separate from. This emotion resembled what we traditionally consider sympathy—we *felt for* each other. In our experience, sympathy seemed to operate in some ways as a precursor to empathy, as just one step in a larger emotional process that Rosan is describing.

When stories are shared to listeners who become witnesses, an *other-directed* presence is formed. The "other" is a suffering being and this matters to the subject. Simultaneously, a reflexive revelation of the subject and the other is "awakened." The other personally affects the subject, and this awareness creates the realization that the subject and other are essentially alike and fundamentally different (Rosan 119). Helen, a 71-year old returning student, local poet, and divorcee initially expressed her fear that she

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would have nothing in common with her classmates, nothing of value to share. Initially, her classmates might have been skeptical of what kinds of interesting or relevant stories Helen could tell. And yet, Helen's final project, the first chapter of a memoir titled "Four Years with Father" was a story that cut through generational boundaries, as the characters of her mother, siblings, and her elementary school self demanded our attention. Through Helen's story, we were able to travel to 1937, "an era where women were considered as chattel, personal property, and men held the legal right to do with them as they pleased" (Burgess 2). Rosan explains, "The other's suffering is taken up by the subject as a variation of the tragedy he/she had once lived through, the other is similar to himself/herself, or the other's suffering exhibits aspects of the human condition such that the subject cannot but grasp this suffering as illuminating their shared humanity" (119). Students began to live inside of Helen's story and make connections between their own experiences, reminding us all of the common human experiences we shared as daughters or sons, sisters or brothers.

And yet, of course there are limits to knowing another person; there are boundaries that define the "other." Empathy without this acknowledgment is impossible. Rosan describes this as "the tentativeness of knowing another person" while being empathetic. In other words, the subject is well aware that any realizations or comprehension of the "other" will never exhaust the full meaning of the other's experience or selfhood. He calls this a "knowing naiveté," or an awareness of limits that can potentially lead to a discovery of possibilities for the subject (127). Here, I am reminded of the story Ryan tells in "Weights and Measures," a detailed account of his brief foray into the world of drug-selling. In his powerful closing scene, Ryan describes an interaction with his dealer, almost ending in horrific violence:

In the quickest singular motion in which I have ever seen him engage, he reached under the blanket to his right, for just the very last inch of a barrel stuck out. Barely visible, but definitely the rounded square of a nozzle of a pistol, black, poking its deadly head from under the quilts. The cat had practically been sleeping on top, the feline very easily

could have stretched just so, and sprayed my brains all over the front bay window curtains. (Elward 11)

While his class members clearly understood that they could never fully comprehend the meaning of Ryan's experience—that Ryan's story was part of what made him the "other"—through his narrative they were able to dwell in the possibilities. When a subject is deeply moved by and for the other, when she reflexively returns to self, she discovers that she has become *other* through the other, that she has been changed by the other's differences (127). At first glance, it would be difficult to find commonalities between Helen and Ryan, a 20-something year old, artisan-coffee-making hipster, beyond their participation in the life writing class. And yet, through their story exchanges over the course of a semester, they were able to enter each other's lives in meaningful and lasting ways, each person slightly changed because of the experience.

### Concerns

Anyone who spends any time with college students would probably not be surprised to learn that according to a recent student in *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, empathy is on the decline (Stratman 25). While our students continue to isolate themselves with technology—distancing themselves from others through social networking and violent video gaming—their desire and even ability to connect with others continues to decrease. A 2011 meta-analysis of 72 studies conducted on college-age students from 1972 – 2009 indicates a decline in empathy of 40 percent during that time period (Dolby 62). In her winning entry for the *New York Times Magazine* college essay contest, Amy Baugher highlights the decline of social action among her generational peers by suggesting that the students' fear of deviating from a lockstep path that will (perhaps) lead to a financially secure future, keeps students from engaging in activities that foster empathy (62). Her reflections suggest that the declining economic security of the middle class has created a generation that is focused inward on self, rather than outward, toward connections with others.

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The researchers of the 2011 study were most concerned not in the general decline of empathy, a phenomenon they contend doesn't necessarily suggest that we have lost the "golden age" of empathy as American college students have always struggled to see life from other perspectives, but with the link between empathy and social skills. Critics of this generation of college students argue that our students "compose one of the most self-concerned, competitive, confident and individualistic cohorts in recent history" (Stratman 26). In the profiles for her 2011 book, *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle discovered that students want to put distance between themselves and others; they prefer texting to talking on the phone. They crave the sterility and disconnection of the screen compared to the "messiness" that comes from interacting with another human being. These are the students, Turkle argues, that are sitting in our classrooms, obsessing over their Facebook profiles and "friends" "while slipping ever further into a solipsistic and hermetically sealed world" (Dolby 64).

Yet I am reminded, particularly, to avoid conflating experience and the personal with the authentic and the real. As a student of rhetoric, I understand that life writing is identity *construction*. The Helen that is sitting in the front row of my classroom everyday is not the Helen that is on the page, that the "autobiographical I" is a complicated concept, an intricate combination of a multitude of individual and cultural voices. Conveying that concept to my students merited mixed results. When we read in Helen's story of the final time her father violently attacked her mother, "grabbed her, throwing her down on the ground, almost twisting her arm off as he held onto her wrist, and began stomping, and stomping, and stomping on her" (Burgess 18), the students were *angry*. They believed, like Lejeune's autobiographical pact suggests, that the person who claimed authorship of the narrative and the protagonist of the story were indeed the same person (Smith and Watson 11). In this way, the students were unable to distance themselves from each other (who existed in the class, in the flesh) in order to effectively theorize their work as they had with the authors we studied (who represented little more than an abstract name on a book cover).



And I forgot it, too—all the wildly interesting theory on identity, subjectivity, and autobiography. When I read Caitlin’s account describing the first time that she cut herself, I couldn’t isolate the Caitlin-on-the-page.

I look at the stray safety pins in her now-mangled drawer for a few quick seconds. What am I looking at? I start to prick the tip of my finger with one of them. Start to test myself.

*How much can I take?* Finally, a drop of rich, red blood comes out. I like this and want more.

I lightly start scraping my left forearm up and down with the safety pin. Seconds, then minutes go by. *Up and down. Up and down. Up and down.* Straight and parallel lines. Dozens of pink, overlapping scars are left over. And I like the look of my disfigured arm. It hurts, but I feel better. (Krofchik 10)

The Caitlin-on-the-page and the Caitlin-in-my-class became the same person—a shy, sweet, smart, and perhaps neglected young woman that desperately needed to be recognized, to have her story validated.

As a reader and teacher of life writing, I find it extremely difficult not to conflate the personal with the real. As a scholar of life writing, I find this complication infinitely compelling and worthy of further study. Research on the biology of empathy is thriving. Research from such various fields as neuroscience, primatology, social psychology, and cognitive ethology (the study of animals under natural conditions) is demonstrating that while competition is innate to animals, so is cooperation and empathy. What seems to matter to humans is the culture that surrounds them; if that culture promotes competition, then our brains become wired to anticipate and privilege competition. The same goes with cooperation and empathy. According to this theory, humans are capable of creating a more humane, more empathetic world than the one we currently have (Dolby 62).

## Opportunities

According to Jake Stratman in his article “Toward a Pedagogy of Hospitality,” educators today need to imagine classroom spaces that not only argue for abstract ideas, or that perpetuate the notion that learning is solely an individualistic (and economic) enterprise, but that create opportunities to engage in ideas with real people, and that invite students to explore empathetic concern and perspective taking (26). The kinds of classrooms Stratman is describing are not limited to writing courses. The reading and writing of personal stories as a method of educational inquiry, as a process of creating counter-narratives to the grand narratives at play in our culture, are practices that travel across disciplinary boundaries, across differences, across space and time.

The students who signed up for ENGL 117 were for the most part self-identified writers; most were English majors enrolling in the course to fulfill their degree requirements, others were simply drawn in by the posters I placed around campus advertising the class. On these posters, I asked students, “What’s your story?” and promised the opportunity to tell it in the class. The other poster featured a chubby baby, his wrinkled nose and raised eyebrows signaling confusion. “Who am I?” the poster asks. Again, the student is promised the possibility of exploring such essential questions in ENGL 117. I thought these colorful and eye-catching posters would interest the “Generation Y” or “Generation Me” students who populate the hallways who have come of age in a Facebook culture that thrives on personal revelation. Unintentionally, I was capitalizing on a particular cultural moment in the United States, where students, as Megan Brown describes, “operate alongside corporations and commercials that praise and reward consumers for their ‘unique’ tastes, reality television programs that parade contestants’ personal confessions before viewers’ voyeuristic eyes, and workplaces that hire employees for personality types rather than specific skills” (122). These are the students who media, markets, and job recruiters are continually convincing are *special*, that their individuality matters—“that each person is a unique, authentic, rebellious, sexy, interesting, entertaining self with a lot to say and share” (122). Thus, it might seem that a

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pedagogy concerned with fostering empathy would have little place in a classroom full of such students. And, yet, my experiences suggest otherwise. While Victor Villanueva imagines the autobiographic as critique, “not as confession and errant self-indulgence...but as a way of knowing our predispositions to see things certain ways, of understanding what it is that guides our intuitions in certain ways” (Symposium Collection 51), I think we can do more with it in our classrooms. I think we can move the study of autobiography beyond *critiquing* “the problem of selfhood in a ‘self-centric’ society;” move our students beyond the role of critic.

If, as the research suggests, this emotion can be nurtured in a culture, then one very obvious place to start that process is school where students are first learning how to successfully participate in a community of others. In many countries, such as the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Britain, students are taught empathy as part of emotional literacy in schools. In 2013, the Roots of Empathy program, established in Canada in 1996, was introduced in England and Wales. Empathy training is also embedded in the common curriculum as part of a form of relationship education and it at the center of nationwide anti-bullying campaigns. These educational initiatives ask students not just to imagine and consider the other, but to *feel* for them. Empathy is being offered as a cure—or maybe an antidote—for violence. These initiatives seem to be working, or at least to be offering a glimmer of hope to an educational system that is struggling to understand how to meet the needs of the contemporary student. However, I would suggest, using the work of Lynn Worsham, that in order to understand the relationship between pedagogy and emotion, as educators—as *people*—we have to look much more broadly at how our society, not just our children, have been “schooled” to feel in certain ways. Before we presume that empathy can be neatly packaged into a curriculum or fostered in a classroom practice of story exchanges, Worsham’s work would suggest that we first look at how pedagogy and *violence* have worked together to shape the cultural narrative that we are attempting to disrupt.

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Worsham, in “Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion” describes a rhetoric of “pedagogic violence,” a study that “would seek to describe both the forms and effects through which violence is lived and experienced” (215). In her ambitious, and, I would argue, hopeful piece, Worsham argues that “our most urgent political and pedagogical task remains the fundamental reeducation of emotion” (216); this education is at level of affect and is larger than the individual. In her exploration of a “radical pedagogy,” an intersubjective pedagogy based on recognition and mutuality, Worsham suggests the possibility of change, but only with a revision of “our conception of subjectivity and of our affective relationship to the world” (240). This is the work of empathy. A pedagogy of empathy—firmly rooted in the cognitive process of emotion, both the *thinking* and the *feeling*—is one way to begin to reimagine and redefine the dominant ways we have been schooled to feel.

*Radical* empathy. *Radical* pedagogy. Radical, from late Latin *radicalis* “of or having roots,” and Latin *radix* or “root.” For anything, like an idea or emotion, to be radical, it seems that it has to return to its fundamental nature, to dig down, to dwell at the root-level, at the origin. The very beginning. An empathy that is radical and at the center of a pedagogical practice that is, too, is an emotion that has the potential to work at the deepest possible level, before and beneath the current, economic, and *individual* interests and priorities celebrated in the dominant culture. Like the 1920’s version of the word “radical,” it is “unconventional.” It is also, like the surfers of the 1970’s noticed, “at the limits of control.” As teachers of life writing, as purveyors of stories, we are in an extraordinary position to interrupt—even for a just a semester, even for just a day—the larger narratives that threaten to isolate our students, to keep them from the often messy and self-implicating practice of learning to listen to each other. And of learning how to *feel* as well as how to know. Worsham reminds us that as teachers, as people, this reeducation of ourselves and of our students is our *most urgent* political and pedagogical task (216). The reading and writing of personal stories as a method of educational inquiry, as a process of creating counter-narratives to the

grand narratives at play in our culture, are practices that travel across disciplinary boundaries, across differences, across space and time.

A pedagogy of radical empathy can be a method of not only negotiating our world, but also of reimagining it. It is selfish and unapologetic in its assumptions of the importance of life writing—of the writing and telling of personal stories—to our lives as students, teachers, scholars, but most importantly *people*. And yet, it is, finally, this pedagogy is acknowledgement of how empathy enriches, but also infinitely complicates life writing pedagogy in ways that teachers may or may not be prepared for as educators, scholars, as *people*. I know I wasn't. None of us, products of an educational system that traditionally does very little to develop students' emotional intelligence, that continues to value objective knowledge over subjective experience, were prepared for the transformative results of a curriculum that not only allowed but in some ways demanded us to practice an empathetic way of being. While this essay attempts to understand how a classroom that allows for or even encourages its members to be readers, writers, and practitioners of radical empathy, it also falls short as a pedagogical resource in its recognition that empathy like any emotion, and *especially* of the radical variety, is organic, authentic, and in many ways, utterly out of the control of even the most experienced or well-meaning practitioner. Reading and writing personal narrative reminds us what it means to be a person, right now, in this cultural moment. Exchanging stories, dwelling in the experiences of the other, reminds us that "feeling human" isn't only an individual pursuit; it is what binds us to each other, to something larger than ourselves. It moves us outside of the individual experience of "reader," "writer," or "teacher" to a collective, and arguably messier, experience of "people." It is a pursuit that can lead to what memoirist Tobias Wolff describes as the ultimate adventure—seeing life through the eyes of another.

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