

1998

When a Student Ends a Wounded Silence

Dave Waddell

California State University, Chico

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Instructional Media Design Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Waddell, Dave (1998) "When a Student Ends a Wounded Silence," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 4 , Article 8.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl42uy3>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol4/iss1/8>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

When a Student Ends a Wounded Silence

Cover Page Footnote

Dave Waddell, a longtime journalist and college English teacher, is the Professional-in-Residence in the Journalism Department at California State University, Chico.

When a Student Ends a Wounded Silence

Dave Waddell

"I guess I'll read mine."

The words came reluctantly from the back of my college night class, spoken by a middle-aged firefighter. "Mike" had taken my developmental writing course for no other reason than its completion would put a little more money in his paycheck. His collar was decidedly blue, and, on the few occasions he spoke, his neck seemed a definite shade of red. He came to my class to do the bare minimum, but something happened on his way to the end of the term: He recounted a decades-old war story—one that for him was traumatic—and in the process largely healed his wound.

I believe Mike's experience—how he came to be moved to tell a painful story, what occurred during his exchange with audiences, and the therapeutic benefits derived—is typical of students who write about their own trauma. Over the course of several weeks, Mike went through what Judith Herman (1992) described as the three "fundamental stages of recovery" (p. 1): He felt safe, he told his terrible story, and he restored connections between himself and his community. Mike revealed his haunting memory to readers who were caring and supportive, and the transaction eased his burden.

For teachers, the handling of such emotion-laden text creates special challenges. Even teachers who view such writing as invasive of student privacy—teachers who deliberately attempt to frame assignments to avoid what Robert Connors (1987) called the "emotional 'knockout punch'" (p. 180)—may find themselves receiving trauma-inspired papers. Students will disclose painful episodes in their lives in classes taught by teachers they trust—regardless of the teacher's theoretical or pedagogical paradigm. Sooner or later most teachers will encounter the phenomenon of writing as healing, and they should carefully consider how to respond.

As for Mike, it was certainly out of the ordinary for him to volunteer to read anything he wrote. On this November night, he had just completed a pre-writing exercise designed to help students generate ideas in advance of writing an "Important Memory" paper. Students wrote five sentences, each beginning with the words "I remember" They then selected one of their topics and wrote quickly for about 10 minutes. The remembrance Mike chose to elaborate on had to do with Vietnam, and he produced a barely legible half-page beginning. He told of a certain day—the last day of 1971—when the helicopter he was piloting was shot down and an American soldier lost his life.

Dave Waddell, a longtime journalist and college English teacher, is the Professional-in-Residence in the Journalism Department at California State University, Chico.

On this night, Mike's desire to share his experience won out—barely—over his hesitancy and uncertainty, as he spoke up just as I was about to end the exercise. He revealed little beyond the fact that a comrade had been killed, but it was quite evident the memory pained Mike, bringing, he later would tell me, “a clamp on my throat.”

When he finished reading, Mike expressed doubt about whether he could write at length about his Vietnam memory. For my part, seeing a disinterested student suddenly interested in the possibilities of writing, I encouraged him to proceed. I saw value in the class being exposed to a first-hand tale of Vietnam—so much a part of the lives of Mike's generation, a mere historical reference to so many of his younger classmates. On another level, I sensed that such a paper could be therapeutic for Mike.

While I think today that my instincts were right, it occurs to me that they came with too little introspection on my part. After all, here was I, a teacher of approximately Mike's age who had managed with something less than Clintonesque slickness to avoid the Vietnam quagmire, encouraging my student who hadn't to write it up. Further, the war in Southeast Asia left many who fought there deeply traumatized for years and decades to come, haunted by an inner pain that never seemed to go away. Not only were the young soldiers psychologically scarred by the atrocities of war, their homecoming was a “notorious example of community rejection” (Herman, 1992, p. 71). They became disconnected from their fellow American citizens.

I didn't realize it at the time Mike was in my class, but one of the most successful treatments to cure the flashbacks of the Vietnam war was to induce veterans to discuss and relive their battlefield experiences (Pennebaker, 1990, p. 79). At the time, my teacherly instincts told me that Mike wanted very much to write this war story about an excruciating day in his early manhood. So I persisted in my strategy of heading him in that direction by reading at the next class an excerpt from Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, a correspondent's wrenching account of the constant horror of Vietnam. Mike was deeply engaged in the class discussion of Herr's reporting—to which he brought an expertise no one else present possessed—and, as I'd hoped, set out to write his own history.

Mike sought out my thoughts on his first draft—something he hadn't done with any other paper. As I read his story, entitled “Not a Good Day to Die,” it became clear why this was such an important—and distressful—memory: Mike blamed himself for the death of his crewchief, a man he remembers only as “Jones.” What made matters worse was that Jones had learned, on the same day he was to die, that his wife had given birth.

A Viet Cong ambush left their helicopter riddled with holes. Mike wrote that there was “No thinking, no talking it over, my decision, my reaction, my crew chief dead.” In the paper's most poignant passage, he describes his feelings shortly after the enemy assault:

I now had time to feel, to think, to pray. I felt many vibrations, I could feel the impending death of a machine that had given her all when I asked for it, I looked up to find red frothy fluid flowing down the inside of the bubble. Blood of a machine. The transmis-

sion fluid was leaking all over the green house blocking the sun and dripping on my hands as I thought of a new born baby that will never know her father.

In the midst of producing his memoir, Mike remarked about how beneficial the paper had been for him, and I asked him to reflect in writing on the experience. To the next class this suddenly engaged student brought a lengthy response, an excerpt from which follows:

... I worked on this paper in handwritten form for approximately 8 hours, writing thoughts and descriptions in a factual manner, thinking back and remembering what really happened. This was extremely hard, it dredged up memories I had buried but they were never very deep but I wouldn't admit that to anyone. I went back over this paper and rewrote, rearranged paragraphs and looked up words, trying to make sense out of a bunch of words....

After the second handwritten paper that turned out 13 pages long, I started typing. It took six hours to type nine pages and I was pretty happy with the outcome until I started proof reading. I let several people read it to get their input and reactions. The reactions were all positive, I like the silence most people showed after reading it, but I really wanted their thoughts. My 18 year old son read my rough draft and spent an hour understanding the slang and pointing out where the writing wasn't proper and I explained why I had written it that way, because that was like it really happened.

I was happy enough that I wanted it perfect so I retyped it again, that took another three hours. I read this second typed paper about three times and finally realized I am really tired of this story, this is old and it really wasn't my fault, it is getting boring and I know I have several hours more work to do before the final draft can be handed in.

... I really believe the reading and writing and changing and re-writing finally made the story so boring I just want to put it down, I am totally tired of even thinking about it. I know I will keep a copy of my final draft as something to look back on some day. But now the story is on paper, I don't have to keep remembering it

For twenty years, Mike tried unsuccessfully to put his battlefield trauma behind him, but it wouldn't go away. Daniel Wegner (1989) found that efforts to inhibit psychologically threatening thoughts actually exacerbate them, especially when a person is feeling depressed (p. 130). Herman (1992) asserted that atrocities "refuse to be buried Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work . . ." (p. 1). Perhaps Mike came to feel prisoner to his own thoughts, to sense that Vietnam was an ordeal he needed to confront, explore, and record for his own mental well-being. Yet if he first had had to speak what for him—for decades—was unspeakable, the words might never have come. The written word was the means that Mike chose to at last disclose

his pain and guilt. After two decades of wounded silence, Mike became ready to reveal, ready to write.

In my mind, writing made all the difference for Mike. Writing is dissimilar from talking in that it slows down the thinking process, forcing writers to organize their thoughts and follow them through to a logical conclusion (Pennebaker, 1990, p. 106). In painstakingly revising his paper, Mike came to the realization that “it really wasn’t my fault.” James Pennebaker (1990) reported that “repeatedly confronting an upsetting experience allows for a less emotionally laden assessment of its meaning and impact” (p. 106). Mike’s comments suggest that part of the reason his hurting went away was because he actively and repeatedly faced the trauma while drafting, reworking, and receiving feedback about the writing. He was absorbed in the paper for weeks. Gradually, his perspective changed. He became more detached and objective and eventually grew weary of thinking about the tragedy any longer.

While Mike’s original audience was me and the class, it quickly expanded to what for him was a much more important, much more valued set of readers—his family and friends. Indeed, it got to the point where he seemingly wanted everyone he came into contact with to read a story that, weeks before, he barely could talk about. With Mike’s paper, as with most other trauma-based student writing I have encountered, the most caring and useful responders were actually situated outside the classroom. There may occur empathetic and change-inducing interactions between writers and readers that are never known to the teacher whose assignment prompted the writing.

Across the classroom from Mike that fall sat a very quiet student I’ll call “Melanie.” Years before, she had endured severe physical and mental trauma while she and her two very young sons lived with an abusive man. The shame and emotional toll of those years still lingered, and she had never discussed her victimization with anyone. At long last, however, she chose to write about it. While I was the only one in our class with whom she wished to share her paper, I was not her most important reader. The audience she really sought to reach was the people she loved: her two boys, who had shared her hell, and her mother and husband, who hadn’t. As with Mike, I asked Melanie to reflect in writing on her production of the paper, and this is what she gave me:

While I was writing my story “Scared to be Happy” I had to stop a couple of times, to get myself together again. Some of the things I wrote I had blocked from my mind. The fear had never gone away though. After I typed my story, my oldest son, now eleven years old, read it. After reading it he began asking questions about different things that happened while we lived with that man. He never talked to me about these things until he read my story and found out how I felt about the whole mess. I have a hard time dealing with that part of my life. I never realized that my boys were afraid to talk to me about those awful years. This story helped me explain to my family how my life used to be, since I could never tell them....

In a later conversation, Melanie related that for years her sons wouldn’t talk

to her. The sharing of her paper, however, had made them more communicative. It was Melanie's analysis that her boys, by reading and discussing the writing, "... were able to see that, 'Hey, Mom's human. She feels these things, too.'"

Though post-traumatic dysfunctions of the sort that haunted Mike are often associated with men at war, these disorders are more common to "women in civilian life" (Herman, 1992, p. 28) such as Melanie—the victims of verbal, physical or sexual assault. As a graduate student conducting my master's thesis research, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to interview several articulate and courageous California State University, Chico students who had written in a junior-level writing class about such abuse.

A commonality these students shared with Mike and Melanie is that they had struggled with their haunting memories for long periods—years and even decades. As a teen-ager, "Brenda" had been the victim of incest—an especially heinous traumatization that can leave the survivor with disturbing and unresolved thoughts that last a lifetime (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983, pp. 96–97). Brenda had shouldered her burden for 25 years before writing "The Rape of ME"—a paper whose production she equated to "the cauterizing of a bleeding wound" (Waddell, 1994, p. 55).

Another Chico student, "Karen," who wrote of her physical abuse at the hands of a boyfriend in high school, recalled in an interview the feelings that had continued to hound her into her early 20s:

... These experiences kind of have been nagging at me, 'cause I felt like there's still an awfully lot of hatred in there for something that had happened ... what was it, seven years ago? And I felt like I couldn't get past it, and it really bothered me because ... I'm normally really a happy person ... But there was always this kind of nagging there; it was driving me crazy. And I felt like there were a lot of things that I never said to people that I wish I would have been able to ... things that just went unsaid ... because I was so beaten down ... by people's attitudes. Eventually, I stopped saying anything. There's an awful lot that I just never said. I felt like I had to get it out....(Waddell, 1994, pp. 55-56)

The verbal disclosure of traumatic events, the "getting it out" that Karen seemed compelled to accomplish, is a commonality of psychotherapeutic approaches. Pennebaker has shown that when people write about their own trauma, they are likely to improve not only their psychological health but their physical health as well. The act of putting pain on paper is difficult and affective—for some, such as Karen, a literal weeping before the word processor. Once past the initial wave of sadness, though, "talking or even writing about emotions or personal upheavals can boost autonomic nervous system activity, immune function, and physical health" (Pennebaker, 1995, p. xiii). Karen, in an interview with me on Feb. 16, 1993, recalled the emotion that accompanied her writing:

I was on my computer and my roommate came into the room and I was just bawling. I mean, I was just in tears. She just kind of looked

at me and she said, 'Are you OK?' And I said, 'Yeah, I think I'm going to be OK.'... I really wanted people to be able to feel what I was feeling and so in order to do that I had to go back, and I think that was really hard.... Because when you hide something for so long, you know, and you don't deal with it and you just try to cover it up and when you go back to actually dig through it again, it's really hard.

Writing teachers should have an understanding of what students are going through when they disclose their own pain. I suspect that teachers who students find trustworthy eventually will receive emotion-laden writing—whether they want to or not. Marilyn Valentino (1996) deliberately attempted to avoid assigning personal writing of any sort and was “shocked” (p. 277) by the deep pain her students revealed in responding to Langston Hughes’ “Harlem” and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Wendy Bishop (1993) pointed out that both expressivist pedagogies, which are associated with autobiographical writing, and social constructivist classrooms, which may ask students to consider such political issues as date rape, can elicit disturbing personal narratives (p. 508).

Tom Fox, a professor of English at California State University, Chico who advocates a politically active pedagogy (1990), was both surprised and concerned one semester when numerous students, including Brenda and Karen, wrote about their histories of sexual and physical abuse in his upper-division writing course (Waddell, 1994). These students had been assigned to write not a personal narrative per se but rather an essay on a meaningful topic they cared passionately about after reading and discussing the Michelle Cliff piece, “If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This is Fire.” Fox could not explain why that specific assignment, that particular semester, generated such personally powerful papers (Waddell, 1994, p. 43).

Sexual assault, by its very nature, is a horrifying violation, an intentional infliction of psychological trauma. In the case of rape, the attacker’s purpose is to “terrorize, dominate and humiliate his victim, to render her utterly helpless” (Herman, 1992, p. 57). Sexual abuse is a personal defilement that, for the victim, has unfairly carried with it societal shame and stigma. Pennebaker (1990) has found sexual abuse to be among the most difficult types of trauma to confide to others (p. 30) and one whose victims has a high incidence of long-term health problems (p. 26). Understandably, Fox saw his handling of student papers about such subject matter as one of the greatest challenges of his teaching career (Waddell, 1994, p. 42).

Even though, as a writing instructor, Fox professes a strong aversion to therapeutic intentions, his “fire writers” agreed that his teacherly persona of gentleness created a nonthreatening environment in which they could safely open up (Waddell, 1994, pp. 28, 44–45).

“Tracy,” who wrote of a sexual assault that changed her life, vividly recalled many months later how Fox cradled her paper:

When I walked into his office he had gotten up and grabbed the paper and he held it with both his hands and he handed it over to me

and he said, "I wanted you to know that I cried when I read this." And I was like ... Because first of all, it's jumbled. I was not expecting that at all. And second of all, I made a male professor cry! That just doesn't happen. I was really set back by that, and he continued and he said, "I really feel like you have given me a gift by letting me read this and I just wanted to take care of it and hand it over to you." And I think that was definitely the biggest encouragement because not only was I affecting myself and women by exploring this experience, but I was also affecting a man and somebody whose opinion I very much value. Those two sentences he said to me ... I think that's why I had the several revisions was because when he said it was a gift, I wanted it to be a gift, so I wanted to make it the best I could. (Waddell, 1994, pp. 44-45).

Regardless of the composition theory a teacher may favor, no assignment—ever—should require (even subtly) students to write about the hurt in their lives. Personal-writing assignments should be open-ended enough to allow students to write about traumatic events—or to avoid them. Stories selected from anthologies or examples shared of previous student papers should not be strictly personal tragedies, lest students get the impression that self-disclosure of the same sort is the unspoken expectation.

An approach such as that advocated by Leslie Rex-Kerish (1985), urging students to pick painful topics they "definitely do not want to write about" (p. 3), is clearly wrong. Rex-Kerish even went so far as to select a "student guinea pig" to subject to some especially insensitive classroom interrogation that she hoped would yield "public soul-baring" (p. 2). And while I agree with Carole Deletiner (1992) that highly personal writing is appropriate for the college classroom—if handled with care—Deletiner's practice of aggressively prying into her students' lives crosses where I would draw the ethical line.

Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler (1993) contend that writing assignments requiring "inappropriate self-revelation" (p. B1) are common in colleges and that instructors' highest grades often go to papers with the most emotionally charged topics. Basing grades on degree of disclosure rather than writing ability weakens academic rigor. Students should not receive "above average grades for writing 'tearjerkers' with poor form and careless errors" (Alton, 1993, p. 667). Where confession is pushed and prized, untraumatized students may feel forced to embellish or to outright fabricate stories to satisfy a teacher's craving for the dramatic.

Further, personally revealing writing could be used by predatory male faculty to identify the vulnerabilities of female students (Swartzlander et al., 1993). A sociologist at one university was denied tenure after female students claimed he "acted more like a psychotherapist than a professor, by inappropriately mining their written assignments for details about their private lives" (Wilson, 1997, p. A12). Clearly, teachers act unethically when they coercively or voyeuristically prey on their students' secrets.

While producing very personal writing may create more risks for students from predatory or insensitive faculty, the students I have taught and interviewed

universally reported positive experiences. Personal writing assignments have been a large part of the teaching of composition in America since the 1890s (Connors, 1987, p. 177). In developmental writing classes especially, telling personal stories allows students to "write what they know." Critics of a personal writing emphasis argue that having students write research papers is better preparation for succeeding in and making a contribution to society. Connors (1987), who advocates a middle ground, contends that personal writing is an "essential step" in discovering "that one has a right to speak, that one's voice and personality have validity" (p. 181).

Students, like other writers, are drawn to relating the salient events of their lives. Sometimes those events were traumatic, and the writer, after a long personal struggle, feels compelled to testify to the trauma, despite the pain and risk that accompany the production and sharing of such writing. Arthur Frank (1995) has discussed the story-telling compulsion in people who have endured bouts with life-threatening illness:

Becoming a witness assumes a responsibility for telling what happened. The witness offers testimony to a truth that is generally unrecognized or suppressed. People who tell stories of illness are witnesses, turning illness into moral responsibility. (p. 137)

In a nonthreatening environment, in a classroom that engenders a sense of safety, students likewise may choose to bear witness to the wounding, the hurting. While the primary purpose of a teacher of writing is not to engage in therapy, "student-teacher relationships have long been recognized as extending beyond a purely instructional to a psychological dimension" (Brand, 1980, p. 29). Alice G. Brand argues that teachers are uniquely situated to "engage in practices of a therapeutic nature" to the betterment of community mental health (1980, p. 43). Bishop (1993), noting the therapeutic impulse of writing, found composition students "savoring their texts and sharing them with friends and lovers" (p. 504). Silver et al. (1983) notes that "the absence of anyone in whom to confide seems to hamper the ability to find meaning" from some victimizing experiences (p. 97). The interpersonal relationship that best fosters recovery may not involve a therapist (Herman, 1992, p. 134); it could include a teacher and/or her writing assignment:

The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. ... [The survivor] must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery. (Herman, 1992, p. 133)

I submit that therapeutic outcomes are inevitable in any student-centered classroom in which important personal writing is promoted and valued. I am honored when students use any of my assignments to write about painful episodes in their lives. I try to treat such papers with the respect and sensitivity they deserve,

though never losing sight of the objective of wanting the writing to be the very best it can be.

While a teacher's empathetic response may be sought and esteemed by students who produce emotion-laden texts, a therapeutic outcome is not dependent upon the teacher. I certainly don't try to solve personal problems, wouldn't know where to begin. Rather, I attempt to create a nonthreatening environment where students write personally meaningful papers. Sometimes the memories they produce are of traumatic events. When this occurs, I strive to be supportive and understanding, and to make careful judgments in consultation with the writer about how public the paper should become. Any healing that takes place occurs in the writing itself and in the path the writer chooses for her paper—in the therapeutic transactions involving certain chosen readers more valued to the student than any teacher could (or should) possibly be, i.e. family, friends, or acquaintances who have been similarly traumatized.

The last time I saw Mike, the Vietnam veteran, he told me that long ago there had been some mention of him receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross for his valor during the fatal mission. The whole notion of receiving a decoration while his comrade Jones had gone home in a body bag had repulsed Mike. But after writing his story, he decided to find out whether he actually earned the medal. It at last held some meaning for him.

What was most meaningful, though, was how the people he cared most about responded to his memory writing. Having his paper about extraordinary trauma received with understanding and empathy by a highly valued audience had moved Mike closer to his friends and family. The power of the written word—and how others responded to it—had helped a man scarred by war to shed his haunting memory. ☹

References

- Alton, C. (1993). Comment on "Crossing Lines." *College English*, 55, 666–669.
- Bishop, W. (1993). Writing is/and therapy?: Raising questions about writing classrooms and writing program administration. *Journal of Advanced Composition*, 13, 503–516.
- Brand, A. G. (1980). *Therapy in writing: A psycho-educational enterprise*. Lexington, KY: Heath.
- Connors, R. J. (1987). Personal writing assignments. *College Composition and Communication*, 38, 166–183.
- Deletiner, C. (1992). Crossing lines. *College English*, 54, 809–817.
- Fox, T. (1990). *The social uses of writing: Politics and pedagogy*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Frank, A. W. (1995). *The wounded storyteller: Body, illness, and ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Herman, J. L. (1992) *Trauma and recovery*. New York: BasicBooks.
- Herr, M. (1977) *Dispatches*. New York: Knopf.
- Pennebaker, J. W. (1990). *Opening up: The healing powers of confiding in others*. New York: William Morrow.
- Pennebaker, J. W. (1995). *Emotion, disclosure, & health*. Washington: American Psychological Association.

- Rex-Kerish, L. (1985). Focusing twice removed. *Freshman English News*, 14, 2–8.
- Silver, R. L., Boon, C., & Stones, M. H. (1983). Searching for meaning in misfortune: Making sense of incest. *Journal of Social Issues*, 39, 81–102.
- Swartzlander, S., Pace, D., & Stamler, V. L. (1993, February 17). The ethics of requiring students to write about their personal lives. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. B1–B2.
- Valentino, M. (1996). Responding when a life depends on it: What to write in the margins when students self-disclose. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 23, 274–283.
- Waddell, D. L. (1994). The role of teachers and other audiences in making writing therapeutic. Unpublished master's thesis. California State University, Chico.
- Wegner, D. M. (1989). *White bears and other unwanted thoughts*. New York: Viking.
- Wilson, R. (1997, November 14). A professor's personal teaching style wins him praise and costs him his job. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. A12–A13.