

A Memoir Is Not a Status Update

By Dani Shapiro

August 18, 2014

In the middle of my writing day, I sometimes take a Facebook break. I know I shouldn't do this. I counsel my writing students not to do this. But writing is a solitary business, and—well, let's face it, Facebook is tempting. It's right there. A lonely writer can be connected with a whole range of humanity without ever leaving her desk chair. A Russian novel's worth of tragedy and comedy is on display. A friend posts, "As I write this, my mother's light is going out." Another friend announces his divorce simply by switching his status from married to single. Still another friend anxiously awaits biopsy results. There are engagements, marriages, anniversaries, illnesses, college graduations, retirements, vacations, and endless photographs of cute dogs. All of these accompanied by responses, some numbering in the hundreds. Condolences and congratulations. Prayers and emoticons of hearts and hands pressed together in namaste. There's something beautiful and absolutely genuine about it—Facebook is, after all, a way of staying connected in an increasingly busy and disconnected world—but it can also feel thin and undigested, a skimming over of data rather than a deep sink into the specificity and emotional reality of human experience. Death? Check. Divorce? Check. A namaste sign instead of a condolence note. A heart rather than a phone call.

I wonder what would have become of me if I had come of age as a writer during these years of living out loud. My parents were in a car crash in 1986 that killed my father and badly injured my mother. If social media had been available to me at the time, would I have posted the news on Facebook? Tweeted it to my followers as I stood on line to board the flight home? Instead of sitting numbly on the plane, with the help of several little bottles of vodka, would I have purchased a few hours of air time with Boingo Wi-Fi and monitored the response—the outpouring of kindness, a deluge of "likes," mostly from strangers? And ten years later, would I have been compelled to write a memoir about that time in my life? Or would I have felt that I'd already told the story by posting it as my status update?

In an essay on Emily Dickinson, the poet Adrienne Rich once wrote, "It is always what is under pressure in us, especially under pressure of concealment—that explodes in poetry." We live in a time in which little is concealed, and that pressure valve—the one that every writer is intimate with—rarely has a chance to fill and fill to the point of explosion. Literary memoir is born of this explosion. It is born of the powerful need to craft a story out of the chaos of one's own history. One of literary memoir's greatest satisfactions—both for writer and reader—is the slow, deliberate

making of a story, of making *sense*, out of randomness and pain. In the inimitable words of Annie Dillard, “You may not let it rip.”

I’m a bit of an accidental memoirist. I’ve written five novels and three memoirs. I never planned to write memoir at all, and if you had told me, at the beginning of my writing life, that I would write three, I would have laughed. But we don’t choose the forms our work takes. We feel the pressure, wait for the explosion, then stand back, stunned and speechless at the shape that emerges. My first memoir centered on my parents’ accident and its aftermath. The accident itself wasn’t the story. As I often tell my writing students, just because it happened doesn’t make it interesting. In the years that I wrote that memoir, “Slow Motion,” I dove deep into my Orthodox Jewish upbringing, my parents’ contentious marriage, my own powerful rebellion, my lack of any sense of identity or self-worth, and the way that my family’s tragedy turned out to be my unlikely salvation. I’m grateful that I wasn’t a young writer with a blog or a massive following on social media. The years of silence were deepening ones. My story burrowed its way deeper and deeper into my being until it became a story I could turn inside out, hold to the light like a prism, craft into a story that was bigger than its small, sorry details.

I worry that we’re confusing the small, sorry details—the ones that we post and read every day—for the work of memoir itself. I can’t tell you how many times people have thanked me for “sharing my story,” as if the books I’ve written are not chiseled and honed out of the hard and unforgiving material of a life but, rather, have been dashed off, as if a status update, a response to the question at the top of every Facebook feed: “What’s on your mind?” I haven’t shared my story, I want to tell them. I haven’t unburdened myself, or softly and earnestly confessed. Quite the opposite. In order to write a memoir, I’ve sat still inside the swirling vortex of my own complicated history like a piece of old driftwood, battered by the sea. I’ve waited—sometimes patiently, sometimes in despair—for the story under pressure of concealment to reveal itself to me. I’ve been doing this work long enough to know that our feelings—that vast range of fear, joy, grief, sorrow, rage, you name it—are incoherent in the immediacy of the moment. It is only with distance that we are able to turn our powers of observation on ourselves, thus fashioning stories in which we are characters. There is no immediate gratification in this. No great digital crowd is “liking” what we do. We don’t experience the Pavlovian, addictive click and response of posting something that momentarily relieves the pressure inside of us, then being showered with emoticons. The gratification we memoirists do experience is infinitely deeper and more bittersweet. It is the complicated, abiding pleasure, to paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, of finding the universal thread that connects us to the rest of humanity, and, by doing so, turns our small, personal sorrows and individual tragedies into art.