On facing your history through your art

Writer Melissa Febos on what writing about your own life can teach you, the need to periodically reinvent the way you work, the value of ignoring your email, and why the best way to learn how to write is simply by writing.

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As told to Resham Mantri, 2921 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Inspiration, Adversity, Mental health.

There was an essay you wrote for *Poets & Writers* titled "The Heart-Work: Writing About Trauma as a Subversive Act." There was a passage that I'll just quote:

"That these topics of the body, the emotional interior, the domestic, the sexual, the relational, are all undervalued in intellectual literary terms and are all associated with the female spheres of being is not a coincidence. What I mean is this bias against personal writing as a sexist mechanism founded on the false binary between the emotional female and the intellectual male and intended to subordinate the former."

I appreciated this sentiment, your writing in general, and your reference to Maggie Nelson's work in this arena of the personal. If you could just talk about that, and also, whether you think there's been any shift in the last few years of acceptance of the personal memoir essay or story.

That essay came out of a decades-long frustration with the handling of memoir, and particularly, memoirs and personal writing in general by female-identified writers. Especially in contrast to the ways that personal writing by male-identified writers was handled, both by critics and readers and interviewers and just across media.

I had just seen so many female writers in my classes, which are almost *always* mostly female writers, who just were wincing constantly in the anticipatory fear of being called self-indulgent or navel-gazing or domestic in a derogatory way, but that's what I like to read and that's what they like to read. I think if you talk to any sort of female memoirist, I have never met another one who has not had the experience of having to constantly redirect in interviews away from personal questions or insulting commentary that insinuates we just transcribed our experiences and that's why we were able to publish a book instead of the incredibly arduous work that goes into turning *any* kind of raw material into a book.

I don't think it's changed, actually. You know what I think has changed? I think what we're calling the Me Too Movement, which maybe will be referred to as a wave or mini-wave of feminism in the future, if we live so long to be able to look back on it, what it has done in the last few years is that we've become more insistent and more willing to look at the obvious facts—that sexism governs everything about our culture.

In another line from that same essay, you wrote, "I don't believe in writer's block; I only believe in fear."

There’s a lot of ways to talk about this but in terms of writer’s block, every block I’ve ever had, every metaphysical obstacle and every obstacle inside of me that has prevented me from doing something that mattered to me always factored down to fear. It was really a matter of, in most cases, lowering my standards, and it was this kind of perfectionism. Like, I can’t write badly, I can’t fail, I can’t be rejected. If it becomes okay to be rejected or to fail or to stutter in your attempt at something, then it becomes more possible to do it. If I have to do it perfectly the first time—and my default is that it should be perfect the first time—then I become immobilized.

That sort of statement came out of my own experience, but also out of just watching my students and my friends and my peers, and really identifying what that block was. It’s not inability. It’s not like a skill, it’s not like an intelligence. It’s just fear, the fear that someone’s going to say it’s navel-gazing, the fear that it’s not going to be perfect on the first try, or that you don’t know how to write a book. Nobody ever knows how to write a book.

Does your writing process feel knowable to you and possible to dissect for others to understand?

It does until it completely self-destructs and I have to start over again and completely redefine it, but I’m a very pragmatic person with a circumscribed process. It’s usually associated with a particular form. If I’m writing in a particular form, I develop a process for it. I am comforted by systems. I really enjoy them. I love making lists, I love outlines, I like drawing maps for things.

After I wrote my first book, I started writing pretty straightforward personal essays and I developed a very clear process from note taking to outlining to drafting to revision. Right at the point when I felt I had come close to mastering that form, then I started writing *Abandon Me*, my second book, and the essays were fundamentally different in terms of their structure, conception, and content in many ways. I had to completely scrap my process that I had mastered and really start from scratch, which was heartbreaking but also totally thrilling. The thing that lets me master it is the thing I inevitably grow bored with. It has to be constantly changing, everything from relationships to practice to jobs.

For *Abandon Me*, what was your technique for cataloging moments that felt like they should be written about? For example, did you use an app like Notes on your phone when you had an idea, and then transcribe it later?

I do use Notes on my phone because I have lots of ideas when I’m driving and also when I’m running. I commute to my job, so I drive and listen to music and there’s almost another plane of thought that you rise or descend into. It’s a great place for harvesting ideas or finding solutions to things in the work. I get high on endorphins when I’m running, and I often think of solutions to things in my work. I am a very active note taker. Partly, this is a response to having a very bad memory, which is a serious hindrance for a memoirist.

The content of *Abandon Me*, is largely about this really intense, harrowing, toxic relationship that I had and also meeting my birth father for the first time. I didn’t intend to write about either of those things as they were happening, but you just know the experiences that are ingraining themselves on your consciousness forever as they are happening. You recognize, “I am being changed right now.”

But I think in some ways, it’s also a psychological form of sublimation. When something is very painful and I’m struggling emotionally or psychologically, I understand that writing performs a kind of alchemy on it that makes it valuable, that makes it worth it, and in the moment when I’m suffering, I want some promise that it will be worth it. It makes it easier to withstand whatever’s happening in the moment.

I took lots and lots of notes and then once it becomes a thing that I am writing about, then the process really sort of shifts, and I have all of these lists and drawings and note cards. The essays for *Abandon Me*, as I was writing them, I didn’t have the access that I usually do to the full narrative. I was being driven much more by image and phonics and more poetic devices than the typical narrative devices I use to organize an essay.

I had to devise these weird almost divination-evoking methods. I made a mobile at one point and I had a lot of drawings. I did a lot of cutting things up and laying them out on the floor and taping them together in different

configurations and putting them on the wall.

But yeah. I spend a lot of time going back to those initial notes. I would be lost without my notebooks and the notes. It's my job to keep track of things as a memoirist and essayist, but also, it is easier, the first time after you meet your birth father, who's a career alcoholic, to go park your car in a gas station and take notes while you cry, rather than just cry. It's really like helping with the hor d'oeuvres at a party where you don't know anyone. It's easier to have a job.

In *Abandon Me*, you wrote, "Impulsivity, according to the philosopher, is the symptom of the person trapped in her corporeal present, accessing only her practical memory. Despite their contention, both philosophers support what I knew empirically by 15, to exist in my body and to hold the memory of my history was to be searingly awake." You go on to say how you were not awake then, held by the forces of impulse and desire, not yet aware of your history. What brought you to that point of understanding?

A big part of it is recovering from addiction because I have a very intimate knowledge of compulsivity and one definition of which is an act repeated to relieve a mental obsession. I identified a lot of compulsive and impulsive behaviors I had experienced as intense or problematic behaviors. I came to understand they were actually an attempt to self-soothe and treat a deeper underlying problem, which came from depression or family dynamics or historical trauma or any number of things. Just being a human being is a hideous, traumatic, undignified experience a lot of the time.

All of us have any number of legitimate reasons to want to quiet what's going on inside of us by doing something outside of us. It was really that. When I got sober and I spent a lot of time thinking about why I had been a drug addict, I followed it back to this impulse to soothe or protect or survive a feeling that felt unwithstandable. It just made me feel much gentler toward myself. Just like a little animal that's chewing on its foot. You don't want to punish that animal or be like, "You're morally depraved, you fuck-up!" You want to set it free, right? Once I started thinking of the parts of me that were hurting and had hurt me as wounded, I became much more willing and able to care for them and set them free. Writing is one of the ways that I do that.

I am a person who requires a lot of maintenance to not chew off my own foot, which is a burden sometimes, but also a gift because I get to participate in my own mental health by going to therapy and doing my writing and going to support groups and having really meaningful relationships with other people and actively trying to remain in conversation with my body, which I'm always trying to divorce.

It's a really intense U-turn to stop doing that stuff and to instead self-reflect and educate ourselves and look for information about the things that scare us, including what's inside of us. In many ways, *Abandon Me* is about doing that—about reaching an endpoint with my behaviors where I start to look elsewhere in my family's history, in my country's history, in my personal history, and trying to make sense of those things before I reach for another thing or person outside of me.

Can you speak about your personal editing process and also how important other people's eyes are?

That's something that every writer and probably every artist needs to figure out for themselves: at what point in their process to bring other eyes in, because it can be tricky to do it too soon. I am very susceptible to other people's perspectives. I'm a Libra, I'm a woman. If someone else has a convincing point of view, it's really easy for me to get onboard with it, and that can be threatening to my own vision for my work. I need to wait until my work has reached a certain integrity and I know what the skeleton and the foundation and the general thrust of it is.

And then when I bring another reader in, it is usually with a specific question. Is this part of it working? Not like, "What do you think or what would you do?" Because that's a dangerous question.

I find that writers come in two varieties in this area. One kind of writer holds on to their work for as long as possible and doesn't want to let other people see it. They're often really slow to submit and they'll just work

something to death. The other kind is very promiscuous with their work and wants to send it out and get a pat on the head. I am definitely that kind of writer, so I'm constantly fighting the urge to be like, "Look! Tell me it's the best thing I've ever written!" And I really have trained myself to hold onto things for much longer than is comfortable.

Can you speak about writing communities, and if that's been important to your practice? How have you found that circle and cultivated it?

For me, having a community of writers is not just important but imperative. My conversations with friends and other writers often work their way into my work. I grew up with this idea of the writer as a loner. This weird combination of asceticism and extravagance, this alcoholic who would go to the cabin in the woods and just get weird and write for weeks on end.

I actually know people like that, but my experience and needs as a writer are in total defiance of that image. Two days alone and I can't write anymore because I start to get lonely and depressed and my thinking starts to move in a tightening circle.

My work thrives in community and I, as a person, thrive in community. I've lived in New York for 20 years now and I just collect people. It's through my recovery community and my academic community and my feminist community and my activist community. There's writers in all of those places and coming through grad school and former students. I collect people, because the bigger that net is, the more space we have to fall and be caught.

We all know the experience of how every painful, hard, hopeless feeling, task, or experience becomes fodder for intimacy with other people who have experienced it. That is how we connect. It's how we grow closer. It's where humor comes from. Writing is just full of problems that feel unsolvable until you solve them. To do that without company, it would just be impossible for me. There's no way.

You wrote an essay in *Catapult* titled, "Do You Want to be Known for Your Writing or for Your Swift Email Responses?" The title gives a good cursory summary of the piece actually.

Yeah, it's pretty descriptive. I had been getting emails from people who would apologize for writing back 48 hours after whatever email that they had received that they were responding to. I started admonishing people, like total strangers, being like, "Please don't apologize and say that you're being late because you're raising the standard for all of us and I can't respond to emails within 24 hours, not if I ever want to write another book."

Partly, it is a constant struggle to not let what other people want be prioritized over what I really care about. Like some little whatever email suddenly seeming more important than the book I haven't worked on. Working on the book is so much harder than writing an email, so of course you want to do the email first, but people do that for years and then feel so sad that they never wrote their book.

I think ultimately it was about letting go of being good in every area except the places that matter the most to you, and actually cultivating a B average in the areas of life that are not your number one, because you can't possibly do it all. You can be a great emailer or you can be a great writer, maybe.

What advice would you give to writers, at any point in their career, that you found really valuable for your path?

I would say one thing is the most common thing—and it is the most commonly repeated advice because it's true—which is that nothing will make you a good writer faster or more efficiently than just writing all the time. You just have to do it. Reading magazines about writers and talking about it with your friends and fantasizing, none of it will help your writing.

My second piece of advice is that it's uncomfortable, it feels wrong, but you can't wait for the voices in your head telling you to stop to be quiet, because they never will. Building a life around writing means being able to

do it despite those voices and despite all of the other things that conspire to make it hard and stop you. You just have to do it.

Melissa Febos Recommends:

1. My annual Valentine's Day mixtape
2. Being sober most or all of the time
3. Adopting a dog (and being a devoted and conscientious dog parent)
4. Long-term therapy (if you can afford it) and/or Alanon
5. Spending a purposeful period of time intentionally celibate (especially if you are the sort of person, like me, who is never single)

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Vocation
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