

Memoir's Arrogant I/Eye and How to Teach It Humility

Blind Story: One without a point

When I began writing *Going Blind*, the story of my father's blindness, memoir seemed to be the natural and inevitable form the story would take. For several years, when people asked me what I was writing, I said, "A memoir about the secret of my dad's blindness." Memoirs are about secrets. Unlike biography or autobiography, memoir is about moments rather than the complete story of a life, birth to death. My memory of my dad's life and my knowledge and understanding of blindness are filled with *blind spots, blind alleys, blind pigs, blind hedges, blind curves*--treacherous, all treacherous. Unlike biography or autobiography, which attempts to tell the whole story of a life, or at least a long chapter, memoir thrives on such incompleteness. Fiction, with its option of omniscience, can pretend to know everything, including the hidden feelings and motives the characters themselves don't understand. Fiction writers can and must invent to fill the empty spaces

Some memoir writers do the same, silently letting memory, fact, and imagination slide into each other. In a *Rain Taxi* review of Ben Yagoda's recent study, *Memoir: A History*, Don Messerschmidt says that for Yagoda, "the past four decades will likely go down in literary history as the golden age of autobiographical fraud. . . . 'Memory is an impression, not a transcript,' says Yagoda, and he is at pains to point out that a truthful story comes not from hard facts but from the heart. 'That is the baseline position of the modern memoir.'" Writers and critics defend this artistic practice with a rationale that doesn't persuade me to follow it. Memory is half invention anyway, they say; much of what we think we remember as having actually occurred, we really fabricate from scraps and the odd verifiable fact. Someone--I don't remember who--once said that memory is like a crazy woman who throws away bread and hoards brightly colored rags. I certainly agree that memory is not made of whole cloth. To find out how changeable, subjective, and contentious memory is, all a memorist has to do is spin a family yarn in the presence of her sisters and brothers. Still, I chose not to patch my memories with invention fitted in with invisible seams. Instead, I claim my memories, in all their treacherous incompleteness and falsity, admit what I don't know, and include stories delivered to me by my sisters and brother, as well as by wide-ranging research. When I invent or guess, I say so.

The very incompleteness of individual memory can pull the memoirist toward something even wider, deeper, and more fraught with danger and discovery than a single human life. Those gaps in memory can lead memoirists toward research of many kinds--conversations with people whose memories can piece out their own; explorations of history, geography, popular culture and economics; visits to graveyards, archives, the old home place. The best memoirs, the ones I admire and enjoy, aren't so much the story of one person's life as the story of the world she or he inhabits. I agree with William Zinsser's assertion in *Inventing the Truth* that "a good memoir is also a work of history, catching a distinctive moment in the life of both a person and a society" (15). I would go further. Good memoirs tell the story of the worlds in which the individual or familial life unfolded and then critique those worlds and their hidden assumptions.

In writing my memoir, I soon discovered that the story of my father and our ordinary family in the little world of Mandan, North Dakota, intersected with many other lives and worlds--my father's Irish ancestors, the Mandan, Arikara, and Hidatsa Indians who lived like us in the Missouri flood plain, the few black people who came into our grocery store in pre-civil rights United States, the Japanese people from the West Coast detained in an internment camp in Bismarck, North Dakota, the world of visually impaired people, the Catholic Church of the 'forties and 'fifties. When I began writing, I knew almost nothing about these bigger worlds. I set out to learn, well aware that historical accounts, too, are full of blind spots, whole blank areas drowned out by the flood of imperialism, colonization and willed forgetting. Part of the work of memoir is to rescue crucial historical events from such forgetting. It can do that only by paying the most scrupulous attention to what happened, when, why, and to whom. As honest scholars admit, some information is lost forever. But I've learned as much as I could and documented the facts that seem authentic. I hope the gaps, holes, and blind spots in my writing will pull others into the conversation--in agreement, disagreement, correction.

Another strength of memoir is that the form is still being invented. Though spiritual autobiographies reach all the way back to St. Augustine in the fourth century and Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, contemporary memoirists feel free to shape the form to fit their material. They range from Ian Frazier's *On the Rez* to Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* to Vladimir Nabakov's *Speak, Memory* to James Frey's notorious *A Million Little Pieces*. Diary, memoir, autobiography, personal essay slide into each other.

But in spite of the fluidity and capaciousness of the form, I see memoir, especially contemporary memoir, settling into some drearily familiar patterns. Memoir can reduce itself to tales of trauma and disaster. In *Living to Tell the Tale*, Jane McDonnell says that memoir is peculiarly well suited to accounts of personal or communal disaster. Each war, each earthquake or hurricane, each plague, each genocide fattens the collections of memoirs on bookstore and library shelves. In his provocative article, "The Memoir Versus the Novel in a Time of Transition," Jay Parini says that the events of the 20th and 21st century have beggared the human ability to invent stories. Truth is so strange and terrible that only memoir, accounts by eye-witnesses of terror, victims of torture, and perpetrators of war can tell these stories in a way any reader will believe. They can say, "I was there--in the Trade Tower, in the concentration camp, in Baghdad, in Columbine High School, in the shelter for battered women, in the slums of Limerick, in the school where little boys were raped." What happens to ordinary lives and quiet survival in the wake of this flood of memoirs of trauma and tragedy? Do they, too, become unbelievable, or, worse yet, uninteresting?

Memoir can become a vengeful blaming of parents, siblings, and that all-purpose whipping boy, "society," for all the anguish and dysfunction of one's life. Following St. Augustine and his many literary sons and daughters, memoir can also be confession--a tale of sin, repentance, and forgiveness. As William Zinsser says, "The national appetite for true confession has loosed a torrent of memoirs that are little more than therapy; the authors bashing their parents and wallowing in the lurid details of their tussle with drink, drug

addiction, rape, sexual abuse, incest, anorexia, obesity, codependency, depression, attempted suicide, and other fashionable talk-show syndromes" (5). We can all think of numerous examples of memoirists who confess with obvious relish a wild past; it's almost as if only the sex, booze, drugs, and abortions make their ordinary stories interesting enough to tell. I know that both writers and readers find solace and encouragement in these stories of recovery and redemption. Still, these memoirs have a disheartening sameness of tone: a graphic, unsparing honesty that somehow excuses the pleasure the writer takes in retelling and reliving these events. It's a pleasure akin to recounting the mean things your parents, sisters, and teachers did to you. You get to confess their sins to the world and then look good for forgiving them.

Another pitfall of memoir, one that is common though not inevitable, is the arrogance of the *eyes* that see and the *I* who tells the story. We spoke often in the latter half of the twentieth century about the authority of experience. The *eyes* assume that what they see is what exists; the *I* is convinced of the authority of experience. This tendency is understandable, in light of the many attacks on the person and the reaction: an insistence upon uniqueness (the favorite word of many of my students), a refusal to be boiled down to blandness. But I see in this claim to authority several questionable assumptions. The first and most obvious is that my experience proves a general truth. I grew up hearing such claims as these: "You wouldn't like Negroes if you'd been in the army and had to live with them." "You wouldn't like Negroes if you lived in St. Louis. We had a black maid and she stole from us." The opposite assumption is also troubling: I can speak only for myself, but what I experienced is true, real, and interesting *because* it happened to me. There is a self-absorption in this invoking of the truth of experience that is both narrow and dangerous.

I don't know if I have avoided these kinds of arrogance in Going Blind, but I've tried. I've been a member of a Benedictine monastic community for more than forty years. Two or three times a day, for all these years, I've prayed the Divine Office, almost always with a group of my sisters. The Divine Office, or Liturgy of the Hours, or Work of God, as St. Benedict calls it, is a collection of songs, readings, and psalms, prayed or chanted in turn by two choirs. We don't choose the psalms to fit our mood. The lesson of the Divine Office, one which it takes years to learn, is that prayer and life itself are not just about me and my feelings. They are about and for a world as wide as the horizon. So, we sing psalms of grief and exile when we are feeling happy and at home-- "I walk in the valley of the shadow of death..."-- and psalms of homecoming and exultation when we are lonely aliens-- "We come back, we come back full of joy, carrying our sheaves."

Memoirist and poet Patricia Hampl, who has prayed with monastic communities for many years, describes the way the Divine Office decenters and stretches those who pray it:

In my experience, it is unique, this sensation of being drawn out of language
by
language which the Divine Office occasions. Praying, chanting the psalms, draws me out of whatever I might be thinking or remembering (for so much thinking *is* remembering, revisiting, rehearsing). I am launched by the psalms into a memory to which I belong but which is not mine. I don't possess it, it

possesses me. Possession understood not as ownership, but as embrace.
The embrace of habitation. Hermitage of the word. (76)

This kind of communal remembering, Hampl says, is “not. . .individual story, not. . .private fragment clutched to the heart, trusted only to the secret page.” Rather:

Even in the midst of high emotion, the rants and effusions that characterize the
the
psalmist’s wild compass, there is a curious non-psychological quality to the
voice.

This is the voice of the intense anonymous self. It has no mother, no father.
Or it borrows, finally, the human family as its one true relation. This is the
memory of the world’s longing. (77)

I am no psalmist and do not claim to have plumbed the world’s longing. But I believe the best memoirs have some of this anonymity, and I wanted to try for it. This decision runs counter to the writerly wisdom that urges writers to aim for the particular: this detail, this moment, this place, this conversation. In doing so, we are told, we will draw our readers into our experiences. Concrete particulars are important, of course, but lately I’ve found myself shut out of memoirs by just those particulars, especially the incessant pop-cultural references that seem to depict a narrow, land-locked, time-sensitive slice of life—and assume an audience as culturally aware as the writer. While I usually admire Anne Lamott’s writing, her 1999 memoir, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, abounds with offhand references to Mary Lou Retton, Harry Dean Stanton (whoever he is), Jennifer Anniston’s figure and Robert de Niro’s mole, *Galactica* and *Home Improvement*.

The final temptation of the memoir form is to write what the *Oxford English Dictionary* calls a *blind story*, one without a point. I wanted to do more than tell my father’s story, pieced together from a few old letters, interviews, and memory. I certainly wanted to do more than tell my story and that of my family. Even telling the story of the many groups of people I named earlier was not enough. Frankly, I wanted to make a point, an argument. I wanted to help change minds and attitudes about many kinds of blindness and the actions they engender.

My publisher insisted that I title my book *Going Blind: A Memoir*, but it’s more like a collection of essays which begin with questions, those caves in our knowledge that pull us from light into deepest darkness. I’m speaking here not of that boring thing students dread but of the classical definition of the essay, whose name comes from the French word *essayer*: to try, or test, or assay an idea as one tests raw ore for precious metal.

An essay is an attempt that may or may not be successful. It is strenuous. In thinking and writing, the essayist meets resistance from the recalcitrant ore, reluctant to give up its gold.

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