

What I Learned from My Own and Other People's Writing

In 1997 I moved to Tennessee to take up university learning and -teaching, which I did to escape the Golden State's relentlessly cheerful "can do" mantra. True, California and my American husband facilitated my transition from immigrant to naturalized citizen; however, the Golden State also relegated me to the "freeway flyer" status common to lecturers unable to attain full-time positions. We flew down the freeway from one college campus to the next, taught expository writing classes, and filled our cars' backseats with boxes of essays to be graded at night at the kitchen table. Students and teachers alike got the short end of the strategy.

"Know thyself," said a Greek philosopher 3000 years ago, though failing to explain how we might get to know ourselves. In 1970, his edict was updated by a psychologist. "Disclose thyself," wrote Sidney Jourard in *The Transparent Self*, "and you will know thyself."

That left open the question, how do we disclose ourselves? Jourard died young in a vehicle mishap; he was unable to update his book. For me, the challenge remained: How might I disclose that two of my siblings took their lives (at eighteen and thirty-one), while the third died as if in reiteration of our mother's too-early cancer death? I was the firstborn; I should have kept my brothers alive. Mother's death, and the sibling deaths that followed, brought guilt, shame, and anger that held me in bondage for decades.

When I learned of Jeffrey Berman's lifelong quest to overcome the memory of a friend's suicide I realized, I was not alone.

I moved to the South leaving behind adult children and a husband increasingly subject to bipolar mood swings. (Sadly, he refused to take the medication that would stabilize his condition.) With a Master's degree in English from UC Davis, I enrolled in a doctoral program in

the Volunteer State that taught an innovative approach to teaching expository and other types of writing.

I studied Berman's books while struggling to compose an acceptable dissertation. Although departmental constraints prevented me from emulating his teaching style, I centered my dissertation around "the Berman method." Graduating in 2000 at fifty-nine, I stayed in Tennessee and began teaching full-time.

When Berman, then a newly-minted English professor at New York State University at Albany, learned of a college friend's suicide for which he was wholly unprepared, it prompted him to examine writers with suicidal ideation and their output, including Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (which caused a slew of copycat suicides) and William Styron's *Darkness Visible*. Berman also explored writers who subsequently took their lives—Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Ernest Hemingway, and Anne Sexton. He offered graduate courses in "Surviving Literary Suicide" and "Literature and Psychoanalysis," plus an undergraduate writing course, "Diaries to an English Professor." For the latter, he'd chronicled his graduate students' responses to their readings, expanded into a book. In *Diaries*, he acknowledges the loss and anger he suffered over his friend's suicide.

Berman's approach to teaching struck a chord. I was (and am) vested in writing that leads to self-disclosure. Fortunately for me, he published several books explaining how and why he encourages encounter situations among college students. I concluded he was familiar with the Encounter Group Movement that gained ground alongside the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and '70s. Initially sponsored by the Catholic Church, the movement quickly spread to other denominations. Our Methodist Church in Santa Cara had its own variant, which my husband and I strove to follow (long before Tennessee was a gleam in my eyes).

The goal of the encounter movement is to strengthen the ties between spouses by developing knowledge of the self and insight into the spouse through self-disclosing exercises, among them letter-writing to each other with follow-up conversations. Even today, relatively few people know how to engage in self-disclosing dialogue, and even fewer are versant in asking follow-up questions. In the movement, guidelines and regular check-ups by knowledgeable lay leaders encouraged individual growth by explaining and fostering self-disclosure. Berman, it seems, transported the encounter idea into the classroom. If spouses could get to know each other's significant incidents, why not college students?

In *Risky Writing: Self-Disclosure and Self-Transformation in the Classroom*, Berman explains his assignments, which he gave, one at a time, in expository writing classes.

The first assignment asked students to draw up a chronology of ten important life events, each explained in one or two paragraphs.

“Provide enough factual material for the events to be known to another person. . . . focus on the past but also suggest the kind of person you are now and how you might be in the future.”

For the second assignment, each student exchanged her or his autobiographical chronology with another student. After that, each student composed a biography of the interviewee.

“Your classmate will read your chronology, interview you for additional material, and get to know the salient details in your life. You will do the same with your classmate.”

The students are reminded to be sensitive and accurate, with suggestions that the writers telephone their interviewees and read the first draft to him or her. In conclusion of this assignment, each student provided 25 copies (one for the teacher and one for every classmate) of the finished version, which were required to be at least two single-spaced pages long.

“We will read all the biographies over the next two to three weeks.”

Assignment three paired each student with another student to select one item from the chronology. After ascertaining the classmate’s willingness to collaborate on that particular event, the student writer would expand on it. The assignment was to be structured like an essay rather than an interview. Each student was asked to bring two copies of this essay, one for the teacher and one for the classmate interviewed.

Each student was thus paired with two classmates and worked with them to produce two different biographies—an interview and an essay—based on the autobiographical paragraphs and follow-up “interview” conversations.

“I did not ask the students to identify how many of the ten events in their autobiographical chronology they deemed risky subjects,” writes Berman, observing that “death, love, and birth were the most common topics in the autobiographical sketches.”

Risky topics were academic dismissal, the breakup of a relationship, parental separation or divorce, sexual assault, eating disorders, depression, death, and binge drinking. Berman was careful to pair risky writing assignments with non-risky ones. He also offered options such as remaining anonymous and speaking with the professor if they felt uncomfortable or anxious about their disclosures.

Nineteen of the 24 students alluded to the death (in descending order of frequency) of a grandparent, friend, parent, or sibling. Sexual assault was the most painful to talk and write about, and so was parental divorce. A parent’s death by suicide was one student’s utterly risky event.

Berman selected four student essays for inclusion in *Risky Writing* (after obtaining each student’s consent) adding in-depth discussions and follow-up commentary. The essays illustrate

“the dynamics of risky writing,” he observes. “The writer discloses, often hesitatingly, a painful or shameful event and then returns to it, often weeks or months later, offering additional details.” Sharing traumatic experiences with classmates who previously were strangers developed the skills needed to foster encounter-type relationships.

Berman’s self-disclosure strategies, plus the experience of having participated in an encounter group, prompted me to reflect on how we might develop insight into the self and others when group leaders or guidelines are unavailable. With internet information but a click away, we may follow the Encounter Group Movement as it exists today, investigate strategies to address racism or political movements that marginalize certain groups, and the unfair privilege of “people who deem themselves white,” a Ta-Nehisi Coates definition of “the other.”

Other paths open to readers are today’s memoirs. Memoirs often deal with traumatic events in the lives of these writers. Reading them, we learn of the long-term effect of trauma and absorb the strategies writers have used to overcome adversity. Surely teaching styles like the Berman method paved the way for courageous disclosures in today’s memoirs. What novels were in previous centuries, memoirs have become choice readings today.

Anyone who yearns for meaningful change can construct a chronology of important events, exchange, and discuss it with a significant other. What if my neighbor, who lost his wife a few years ago and hangs out with me, drew up a ten-event chronology of his life, and I did the same, and we exchanged our writings? It may prompt us toward a “Know Thyself” encounter.