

Why Remember, Why Tell?

A reluctant memoirist reflects on the challenges of the genre in India, the disclosure of sexual abuse in/to the family, and why a public telling matters.

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I When my father died in the summer of 2014, following a diagnosis of liver cirrhosis, my tears would not run. He was an extraordinarily gifted, charismatic man. But he had courted death for years, and I had hardened my heart to let him go. Then, our unfinished conversations began to haunt me. I wanted to tell my father about how bountiful, but difficult his love was. About chronic sadness, his and mine. I wanted to tell him of the shattered spaces between childhood and adulthood that I had walked for years, unaccompanied. As I was writing all this out, a long conversation with a dead parent that I had no intention of sharing with anyone, let alone publishing, death came visiting again. This time, it was a beloved animal companion, a beautiful black Labrador who had walked a complicated life journey with me, who had fought very hard to keep me in the world when I was ready to leave for good. I then understood something about how my words had swaddled my grief, how memories that cut to the bone can also salve, how forgiveness is not about letting go or making peace, but acknowledging to what, or why we had held on with anger or sorrow.

Writing my memoir, *If I Had to Tell It Again* (HarperCollins, 2017), every single draft, over three years, has been like breathing.

Sharing it with the known and unknown, has been entirely different.

What had been steadily stripped down at the writing table, now quaked to walk into the streets. It quickly became clear that it did not matter how well informed and progressive we felt, how often we chant that abuse and breakdowns could happen to anyone, the blanket of shame has not lifted, merely turned translucent. A memoir, I was told, was self-serving, selective, distortive, and unfair to both the living and dead. The more I explained, the more defensive I sounded. And then, I stopped explaining. The objections and accusations had sliced to the marrow. I viscerally understood why there are such few memoirs being written in the country, why even fewer are willing to write about the fault lines in family topographies.

Even as the memoirist frets about silencings, her thoughts eventually gravitate to the merits of speech, especially when what is being said aloud is an emotional truth. To tell a difficult story without being victim or accuser, to write with restraint and compassion, all the while respecting the literary artifice that has opened this space of telling, to hold oneself accountable, all this my typing fingers mulled on. I wanted to honour two beautiful spirits, father and animal companion,

who had taught me the contours of generosity and loyalty. With each word, my mind vacillated between dreading unkind readers, and a conviction in remembrance as resurrection. Never had I felt more lonely or afraid as a writer.

Writing a memoir, after all, is considered betrayal. Or crass, or exploitative. This is nothing new; there have been enough memoirists before me who have had to defend themselves against these charges.

Is it a betrayal? Am I bartering away my family's privacy, opening the floodgates for thoughtless cruelty?

During a moment of great uncertainty, a few weeks before publication, I called up my editor to say: I want to withdraw the manuscript. Let it never be read. Or if you wish, I can

fudge the details and call it fiction. Not that fiction has ever felt anything less than real to me, but I have known how a writer can hide in its folds; true, in the most threadbare disguises, but something to deflect the anger and gaze.

It is entirely your decision, my editor said gently, but what is the point of writing a memoir if it isn't brutally honest?

Yes, what is the point?

My father loved me intensely, almost obsessively. He was an influence like no other. Nearly everything I pride in myself, I can trace to him. In his lifetime, I never found the courage or language to tell my father what his trust and faith in people had done to my childhood. I never told him what the insides of my depression looked like. I had not been able to reach out to him, to help him when he was dying. My heart was splintered with grief.

If publishing was a betrayal of kin, then not publishing would have been self-inflicted injustice, an abandonment of the wounded child-self, and the latter had long ceased to be an option. This still does not answer why the memoir made it to print. So I have to explain some more.

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Depression is perhaps the reason one turns into porous volcanic rock. One senses and absorbs unhappiness in the vicinity, and it becomes hard to turn away. Living as a teacher in a town brimming with young people, one is invariably embedded in the national statistics (a suicide committed every five minutes in this country, a third of those between the vulnerable ages of 15 and 29). Sometimes one is part of the story. Sometimes one hears the stories and learns to forget. But sometimes, they simply won't go away. Like the student who went to his hostel bathroom with a bucket that contained a rope, a bottle of alcohol, razor blades and kerosene. An ordinary

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bucket turned into a chilling suicide kit. He had visited several online sites for information on how to kill oneself, how to do it painlessly. The choice would be self-immolation, not at all painless, and death would follow. This happens just a kilometre or so away from me, as I am writing about my father.

It is very hard to stop thinking about this student. Why? His family must still be asking.

I worry for my students, for all young people around me. I can vouch that the percentage on the ground is far higher than official estimates. It is an epidemic, and we are miserably failing our young people. As I tried to burrow into my memories of my father's life, a project begins to take shape at my university.

With approvals from progressive university officials, and the grit of student volunteers, a mental health facility is set up for students in our campus-town. We were able to create a safe and comfortable space, away from the hospital, with the assurance of complete confidentiality, create easy access (at no charge) to psychologists and psychiatrists invested in this age group, and put together resources that did not speak "to" students but spoke "for" them. Now, every day, a young person walks through those doors, brave enough to ask for help. And each of their telling is a new world unfolded.

I have known too many people who talk about mental illness in other people's families in disparaging or repulsive or fearful tones. And just as many times I have seen this means a willful blindness to anxieties or sadness in their own family members, or at least a refusal to extend the same compassion as we do to other health conditions. Why do mental struggles always happen to those other families, the ones we will avoid, and why do we insist on pretending it has not visited our own?

I would not wish this dark visitor on anyone, but if a way out suggests itself, however tenuous, if there is a toehold and a sliver of light, it brings with it enormous possibilities. My life bears witness. New journeys, reinvented selves, resilient life skills, one step definitely forward even if there are other steps that recede. I have urged too many students to speak up, begged them to look the stigma in the eye, to then choose to silence myself.

While writing my memoir, and even before that, I always believed it would be harder to come out about mental illness than, for instance, child sexual abuse. After all, this country has seen intense activism in previous decades to educate people about child abuse. But, my experience has been the opposite. When a sprawling family tree remains impassive towards the suffering of a child within its fold, even after the abuse is revealed, it is the most earsplitting silence one can fathom.

We are easily indignant and self-righteous, as we demand that child rapists be hanged, as if the punitive is the only solution to allay our collective guilt. As if passing a law is one way to stop thinking about it, and move on. The word "abuse," in particular, has become overexposed and diluted to the point that it does not really register. Or if it does register, it turns into an event or a series of events, with little consideration of the long-term traumatic aftermath. It is as if we only understand penetration, some rupture, some horrific breach of a child's body. I say this

as someone who has experienced penetration as a 10-year-old, by an abuser who was careful not to cause physical damage that would be noticed by family. The pain I experienced had felt too shameful for words, and was outside the realm of my vocabulary. All I managed that night was a telling that was limited to showing the evidence, semen on underclothes, and this went unheeded. While I have several memories of the nights preceding this particular one, the nights that followed are pitch black in my memory-scape, even though I continued to sleep in the same bed as my abuser, even though I remember other events from those months. My telling must have been tied to my remembering, and both were gone. Three decades later, when I repeated the telling, I was told it was impossible, that I had never shared a bed with that man. There it was, that black hole again. Perhaps what we need is not more nooses for rapists, but more family spaces where these stories can be heard, believed and supported. Perhaps the telling, not the rape or the abuse, is the breach, the betrayal that we truly dread.

When you are ill or your life's edifice comes crashing down, it is quite likely that someone will take you to the hospital, encourage you to get back on your feet, because that is about fixing, and fixing we understand. Now, try talking. Try talking about family, about the past, about secrets that simply cannot and should not be left buried in our psyche. This becomes no longer about fixing, but requires unconditional acceptance of the sharing. But, somehow, in our social spheres, it has become the fault of the one who tells: You don't remember right. You should have spoken up back then. You can stop talking about this now. You certainly don't have to publish a book about it.

This is when it can get terrifying: how poorly we react, the cruel thoughtless things we say, how we drizzle the platitudes, walk away.

Too many of us are dying all sorts of deaths every day. It is appalling how we strive to keep such a death under wraps or glaze over it; pretend it will evaporate.

It won't. Being in the world is hard work.

When I was 31, I was absolutely sure that I would not live to be 32. I knew I would be missed, but I also believed that the world would move on. It felt as though my story was just another leaf in the rainforest, that it would not matter at all whether it was said or heard or not. I am now 44 and I have come to realise it matters, both the telling and the listening. Unlike what many people quickly assume, I did not write a memoir to get things off my chest and as therapy, nor did I write it to clear the air and showcase suffering. Writing is not an activity; it is who I am in the world.

I forgive you, were the last words that came to mind just before my father's body was taken to the morgue. It took three years and a memoir to know what those words really meant.

I remember you.

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An abridged version of this article appeared in the print edition.