

The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: Women's Stories, Women's Lives

Julie J. Nichols

[Because] so much of women's history . . . is sewn into quilts, baked in breads, honed in the privacy of dailiness, used up, consumed, worn out, . . . [reading and writing it] becomes essential to our sense of ourselves—nourishment, a vital sustenance; it is a way of knowing ourselves.

(Aptheker 1990, 32)

The personal essay, unlike personal journals, letters, and oral histories, is not an artless form. It transforms the raw material of personal experience in the double crucible of carefully chosen language and the light of mature retrospection. A finished personal essay requires revision—a literal re-seeing. Not only does the product enlighten and engage its reader, but the process of writing and revising also generates changes in the writer as she re-views herself, her place in her community, and the meaning of her experiences.

Carol Bly, author of a fine collection of essays, *Letters from the Country*, points out that in our time, women are socialized to write their stories: "We must write our stories so that we have them, as athletes must have muscle" (1990, 247). At the same time, Bly notes, men are discouraged from writing theirs, precisely because writing one's story requires a certain amount of evaluation and self-judgment. The implication is that, in writing their stories, women are already prepared to evaluate and judge, hence are better prepared to recognize and help counter the ills of a male-dominated world.

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But certain aspects of the LDS culture can bar even women from enlightening themselves through personal narrative. Since 1984 I have taught English 218R—Introduction to Creative Writing, with an emphasis in literary nonfiction—at Brigham Young University. In these classes, I have watched men and women resist coming to terms with the contradictions of their lives. For Latter-day Saint women, in particular, such resistance comes from three general sources: lack of time, because setting aside large blocks of quiet, self-reflective time is difficult when you're busy rearing children, caring for a home, and more often than not, working; lack of knowledge about women's stories, which are infrequently mentioned in the scriptures and only recently making their way into Church lesson manuals; and fear of recrimination from family or from official sources for expressing negative emotions, disagreement, or deviant thought processes.

Both men and women grapple with these problems, but Latter-day Saint women may feel more pressure to keep busy, write the family documents, perfect themselves, and nurture. The positive public image many women seek leaves little room for inevitable negative personal experiences or emotions.

In my classes, I try to help would-be memoirists overcome these barriers by providing structured time, abundant reading material, and plenty of theory and practice. Working together, we establish the personal narrative as the prototypical discourse (Langellier 1989, 243). We learn that telling a story forms the basis for *all* discourse. We read the works of women writers whose lives shape their material, from Julian of Norwich and Margery Kemp in the Middle Ages to Annie Dillard and Alice Walker in twentieth-century America, to Latter-day Saint women writers such as Emma Lou Thayne, Mary Bradford, and Helen Candland Stark. We perform writing exercises that allow memory and feeling to rise to the surface and find form in words. (The suggestions in Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* and *Wild Mind*, and in Gabrielle Rico's *Writing the Natural Way* are my personal favorites.) Though these exercises are not always successful, when my students finally push through their resistance and produce fine essays similar to the ones that follow, we all reap remarkable rewards.

The first reward of producing a polished personal essay is pleasure—on many levels. Lorinne Taylor Morris took English 218R twice because the first time she took it, she struggled with an essay about her mother's death for months, saying to me several times, "I don't even know what I'm trying to say here." I encouraged her to continue to work with it, praising the understated tone and the importance of the story itself. When she finally came to a satisfactory ending, she said, "Now I know what I meant. I thought I was writing about how I

always felt left out and how I tried to let my dad's efforts be enough. But I needed my mother to help me know who I was. I know that now. This is an essay about me as a woman."

Regeneration *Lorinne Morris**

I was five years old when my mother died. Her death didn't seem to change my world much then. I just received more attention from relatives and neighbors, was all. In the two years since she had been diagnosed, she had evolved from my caregiver to a sick person whose bedroom I had to stay out of while the cancer ate at her body. I learned over those two years she could not care for me, so by the time of her death, I thought I had become used to living without her.

My father had begun taking over for Mother by making the family meals. He also woke us up and got us ready in the morning. I insisted on having my hair in ponytails like my two older sisters, and though he tried to part my hair into even halves and get the ponytails straight, they always came out crooked. After he left the bathroom I'd climb onto the counter and tug up on one ponytail and down on the other. It just wasn't the way it was supposed to be.

As the years passed my needs changed, and so did my father's role in my life. In junior high one day I received a wink from a boy who sat a row in front of me. My friends told me this was because he liked me and wanted "to go" with me, but I didn't know what "to go" with someone meant. I found Dad that evening outside doing chores just as the sun was setting and leaving just enough light to see his faint shadow. I guess he sensed the seriousness in my voice, because he put down the bucket of feed and sat on the upper rail of the fence while I unfolded the dilemma of my day. I can't remember now what he said, but it was dark before we came in.

When I became a quiet, emotional teenager, I realized my mother's death meant her absence from my life. During my high school years when I wanted some comfort, I often imagined what it would be like to have a mother. I would sit at night on the front steps and imagine my mother coming outside to sit by me. She would quietly open the front door, sit down next to me, and put her soft, middle-aged arm around me. I wasn't really sure what she would do next, maybe tell me not to cry or listen to me for a while. I would eventually stop my dreaming and go to find my dad.

But last summer the absence was relieved for a moment when I learned to bottle tomatoes. I used the old empty jars that had been on the shelves in my grandma's fruit room for years. They were covered with dust and spider webs. Some even had tiny dead bugs in the bottom. It took me hours to wash them all. Then I took them to a neighbor's house where she taught me how to blanch the tomatoes to remove the skins, then to quarter them and press them into the bottles. She showed me how to take a knife to remove the air bubbles before steaming them to seal their lids. Together we bottled over a hundred jars.

I took my bottled tomatoes back to my grandma's fruit room, and one by one I placed them on the dusty shelves. As I bent over, picked one of the bottles up, and placed it on the shelf, I saw my mother. Like me, she bent to pick up a

*Student essays used with permission.

bottle, placed it carefully, and stood back to admire the work she had done. At that moment she was there with me, doing the things she had done that I was now beginning to do. I understood that we are connected in ways that go far beyond death, and I whispered, "Welcome home, Mom," and she whispered, "Welcome home, Lorinne."

Pleasure, the first reward of a story well told, is not only cerebral but often physical—leaving both writer and reader feeling peaceful and relaxed. Lorinne experienced further pleasure; as she wrote, she discovered a new sense of herself, a sense that she belongs, even though her mother died long ago, to the community of mothers and daughters participating in rituals many Utah LDS mothers and daughters share. For the first time, she recognized her rightful place in that community.

Anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff has formulated the notion of "the great story" (in Prells 1989), the set of stories by which we live our lives. LDS women may be centered by stories such as: "women should be in the home," "church attendance is a measure of spirituality," "families are forever," or "repentance and change are always possible." Lorinne's essay partakes of the "great story" that says, "Everyone needs a mother; no one can take a mother's place." Meyerhoff goes on to say that personal narrative is a "little story," a story that is true for one person rather than for an entire culture. People's "little stories" can have conservative or radical effects on the "great story." The following untitled essay by Kathy Haun Orr can be called conservative because it corroborates the "great story" that mothers are perfect. Like Lorinne's essay, it also provides pleasure—in this case, the pleasure of humor:

My mother can do everything. Every year my sisters and I got Easter dresses made especially for us, and dresses at Christmas for family pictures. She made the bridesmaid dresses for my oldest sister's wedding because they couldn't find any they liked in the stores. The dresses were lavender with white lace trim, tea length with a long, full ruffle and a v-waistline to match my sister's wedding gown. Then there's me: I've never even touched a sewing machine except to turn my mom's off when she forgot. The first time I sewed a button on was last semester when it came off my coat and my roommate wouldn't do it for me.

My birthday cakes were always decorated with whatever I requested, from Mickey Mouse when I was three to a two-tiered cake with frosting floral arrangements when I turned sweet sixteen. I did take a cake decorating class with my best friend our senior year of high school. I loved the class, and the teacher, but my roses looked like big lumps of lard, and my clowns always fell over like they were too tired to sit up.

My mother is the very definition of domestic goddess in the kitchen. Leftovers taste great, everything's nutritious and yummy, and she can make desserts that make your mouth water just looking at them. Until I left home for college, the only things I could cook were toast, grilled cheese sandwiches, and chocolate chip cookies. When I got up to school, my roommates mocked me in the kitchen and gave me quizzes on all the different utensils and their true use.

My mother is into all sorts of crafts, like grapevine wreaths and quilts and the artwork for her silkscreening business. I know how to use a glue gun—I used one once to hem some pants.

Kathy concludes the essay by saying that despite the gaps between her mother's achievements and her own, her mother's love and encouragement are qualities she fully intends to pass on. The essay is fun to read and allowed Kathy to safely express her marginal position within a pervasive "great story."

Both these essays focus on a key role in a woman's life: the mother role. Being a mother is a pinnacle of accomplishment for a Latter-day Saint woman. Unconsciously or consciously, many LDS women examine their own propensities for this role with varying degrees of satisfaction or trepidation, seeking first (like Lorinne and Kathy) to connect with their own mothers and then to come to terms with the differences between their own mothers, their own individual leanings, and the "great story" about motherhood. Writing personal narrative encourages and facilitates this process.

It is especially liberating for my women students to realize that personal narrative needn't always agree with the "great story." According to Meyerhoff, the "little story" can also radically question the "great story." Often its power lies in its ability to interrogate and correct the inadequacies in the larger cultural narrative. When Nellie Brown was my student, she tried to write pieces about her frustration with what she saw as the voiceless, nameless position of women in the Church. Not until she wrote "There's No Place Like Home" (*DIALOGUE*, Spring 1992) was she able to connect her childhood experiences, which don't fit the LDS "great story" about women as good, nurturing mothers, and her current discomfort. In all of her efforts, Nellie sought to name the origins of her wounds and to find balm for them. It was this essay, written after our class was over, describing in fearful detail moments of abuse and denial, which finally had the power to initiate real healing. It is a moving and powerful piece in which Nellie interrogates two "great stories." The first is that mothers are perfect (Kathy's essay also corroborates this). The second is what Nellie's mother told her: little girls shouldn't speak about wrongs done to them. Fear of reprisal may have silenced Nellie until she wrote this essay, but her story powerfully imagines a better way. "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" asks T. S. Eliot's Prufrock (1971, 4). Nellie and other writers like her do so dare, aiming to change the universe for the better. Toward the end of her essay, Nellie says:

I am ashamed of [these memories of cruelty.] [They] force me to admit that my mother was a child abuser. . . . I feel that I should say I love my mother, that

she was a good woman just trying to do her best. . . . But I can't defend her. Saying those things doesn't change our relationship. It doesn't make the memories go away. . . . It doesn't change my fear of having children, . . . [N]ot because I can't overcome my past, but because maybe, without knowing, I haven't overcome it yet. (1992, 5-7)

Writing the essay, for Nellie, was a step toward overcoming that past, a step toward creating a new future, a healing act that helps heal readers as well.

Personal narrative can also teach. Kristin Langellier notes that family stories may inspire or warn family members about the consequences of certain activities and also keep stories alive that are important to the family's solidarity (1989, 262). Such stories might begin with a question: why are things the way they are in this family or community? Telling personal stories that pursue answers may clarify complex questions. Beth Ahlborn Merrell's essay does just that.

No-Name Maria
Beth Ahlborn Merrell

Ten years after my own baptism I buried myself in the waters again . . . and again . . . and again. It was a great opportunity for me to recall the importance of baptism. I did my best to prepare myself, that the spirits waiting on the other side would not be mocked.

I was baptized thirty-seven times for Maria. She had no last name. No birth date or place. No family information. Only the location of her grave.

I inquired of these Marias. A temple worker told me that these Latin-American women had been buried in graves without proper markings. Because there was no information, they were baptized with the symbolic name, Maria. I couldn't help but wonder if I had done any good in being baptized proxy for thirty-seven women who had no names.

Before leaving the temple, I received a printout with the information on the thirty-seven women I had served. No need looking over the names. All Marias. But I did look at the locations. Panama, Guatemala, Nicaragua—almost all Central American countries. At the bottom of the list were five women from Tegucigalpa, Honduras. My heart jumped and burned.

August 29, 1924. Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Julia Eva Valasquez, seven years old, stood on the banks of the mountain river that ran through her family's estate. Her older brother, Roberto, fished while Julia twirled on the banks, watching the ruffled layers of her silk dress floating like magic in a rippling circle. Confident that she would dance with the best one day, she moved to the Latin rhythm that played inside her head. Bending close to the water, Julia smiled at the face she saw mirrored on the glassy surface of the pond: dark hair curled daintily around a heart-shaped face the color of creamy coffee. She flirted with her reflection, placing a lotus blossom behind her ear.

Julia never heard the revolutionist behind her. Perhaps the music inside her head played so loudly that it drowned out any snapping twigs that might have warned her of the silent murderer. One moment she was looking into the reflection of a smiling girl, the next she was seeing the reflection of a revolutionist

raising a machete over her body. His double-edged knife whistled as it fell toward her head.

Instinctively she rolled, blocking the blows with her right arm. Roberto flew to protect himself and his sister, but his struggle was brief against the attacks made by men who came to proclaim their right against the suppression of Honduras' upper class. I've never heard anything about how my great-grandmother and Uncle Roberto found help. Roberto carried deep scars in his skull for life. Julia's dreams of dancing were shattered; she lost her right arm from the elbow. Their white mansion burned to the ground; their parents and siblings died in the flames.

I often wonder how my great-grandmother managed without two good arms and without the extended family support upon which Latins depend. But the details of my heritage are scarce. She died before I learned to speak Spanish. She died before my first-generation LDS mother taught her the gospel. She died without telling us the names of her parents and siblings. She died, and this is all I know of her life.

Records in Central American countries are incomplete at best. Government documents are burned periodically in the chaos of political revolutions. And when the fires die, the dead who leave no families are often buried in common, unmarked graves.

I look back at my printout. I asked to be baptized for a relative, but my mother told me it was impossible given our dead-end genealogy. I did not receive a heavenly visitation from a member of Julia's family; I have no physical proof that I served a relative in the temple. But in my heart I am grateful that gospel blessings are not limited to those who have proper burials or grave sites. I look forward to the day when I can perform temple ordinances for another no-name Maria.

In this essay, Beth understands that the rituals performed in the temple are not in vain. She also establishes connections with the community of her family, as did Lorinne and Kathy, as well as with the community of Latter-day Saints who work in the temple. Like Nellie, Beth also negotiates with a puzzling aspect of the "great story," and she asserts herself as a writer who can respond to her circumstances with a story that provides answers for her as it holds and moves its readers.

Further, by making her story a woman's story, Beth refutes the "great story" that assumes that canonized writings (scripture or official Church histories or manuals) are the only authoritative ones. Writing ordinary women's lives thoughtfully and imaginatively makes them extraordinary, gifts not only for posterity (the *raison d'être* for most injunctions to write personal narrative) but also for interested contemporaries.

Similarly and finally, a carefully written personal narrative can inspire other Latter-day Saints. Linda Paxton Greer's essay-in-progress is too long and still too rough to reproduce here except in summary, but her story is remarkable. She explains that she had seven living children and had just learned of her unexpected pregnancy with another when she was diagnosed with cancer that needed immediate and

prolonged chemotherapy. Medical professionals advised her to terminate the pregnancy. Though both Church counsel and reason reassured her this was an acceptable way to save her own life, she furiously rejected such a course of action. Over several weeks she wept, consulted authorities, and prayed. Finally she had an experience in which she saw an image of herself interacting with her posterity and profoundly regretting the absence of one lost child. The image helped to clarify her path. She chose neither abortion nor chemotherapy; eight months later she gave birth to a large, healthy boy, her cancer in complete remission.

I do not see this an anti-abortion story. Instead it affirms the reality of the Spirit, even and perhaps especially for women in anguish about their roles as mothers. Women, too, are heirs to the gifts of heaven; it is a woman's privilege to defy "reason," conventional wisdom, or male authority, and to hold fast to her inner sources of light. Stories like this one belong in the *Ensign*, in Relief Society manuals, at the General Conference pulpit—as do all the essays recounted here, and myriad others written in my classes and elsewhere, and those as yet unwritten. For the Latter-day Saint, writing personal essays like these yields the rewards of pleasure; an increased sense of a valid place in the community; the opportunity to participate in the "great story," either conservatively or radically; and the chance to heal, teach, and inspire. Personal essays make available the "little story" and empower readers and writers to live fuller, more productive lives.

To overcome two obstacles to receiving these rewards—lack of time and lack of knowledge—LDS women (and men) can take classes, ask for or make for themselves protected time, and form writing and reading groups. They can make solitary commitments to write, read, and honor the personal writing of other women (and men). Writers can enter the essay contests offered by *Exponent II* and the *Ensign*, submit work to LDS and non-LDS publications, and require that more illustrative stories in Relief Society manuals be by and about women. But in order for that to happen, of course, the stories need to be discovered and written.

Overcoming fear, the third obstacle to producing personal narrative, may take more concentrated effort. It helps to know that even professional writers feel fear when faced with the task of writing personal narrative. When Bulgarian linguist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva was asked to contribute a brief sketch to a book of women's autobiography, she protested that it is nearly impossible to write about one's own life accurately: "The disturbing abyss between 'what is said' and undecidable 'truth' prevents me from being a good witness," she said (1987, 219). But, in spite of her discomfort, ultimately she agreed.

Latter-day Saint writers, perhaps especially women, might take her words about personal narrative as their creed:

Should I shy away from it? I think of Canto III of Dante's *Paradiso* where the writer, having had visions, hurries to push them aside for fear of becoming a new Narcissus. But Beatrice shows him that such a denial would be . . . a mistake [precisely] comparable to the narcissistic error. For if an immediate vision is possible and must be sought, then it is necessarily accompanied by visionary constructions that are imperfect . . . fragmentary, schematic. . . Truth can only be partially spoken. And it is enough to begin. (1987, 220)

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