Amy E. Robillard

Children Die No Matter How Hard We Try: What the Personal Essay Teaches Us About Reading

Much has been made of narrative fiction's capacity for evoking empathy on the part of its readers, and Suzanne Keen has recently expanded her groundbreaking work on this subject (*Empathy*) to consider life writing as a special category of nonfiction that, like fiction, invites readers' empathy ("Life Writing"). Before Keen made this revision, Leah Anderst critiqued Keen's exclusion of all narratives referencing the real world from those that evoke empathy in their readers by analyzing the multiple and complex enactments of narrative empathy in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Doris Lessing's *Under My Skin*. Both Keen and Anderst pay careful attention to the workings of empathy as affect, questioning, for instance, the extent to which a reader experiences the strategic narrative empathy an author intends for her to feel (Keen, "Life Writing"), or the ways in which a life writer may be able to "empathize with a parent in spite of the many reasons they may not or could not have done so in the past. Narrative allows them to move beyond their own personal positions. It allows them to do, for themselves, something they could not do in life" (Anderst 287).

Neither Keen nor Anderst names the personal essay in her work, and neither is it my goal to make a similar claim on behalf of the personal essay. Rather, I want to make a more basic point about what the personal essay can teach us about our reading practices and habits; whether we experience empathy for the author notwithstanding, the personal essay's insistence on challenging clichés and refusing simplistic answers reveals the ideological disciplining and the commonplace expectations we carry with us. When the context in which a personal essay is read is a writing class, such ideological revelations can prove powerful for both teacher and students. What is taken for granted in work like Keen's and Anderst's is that readers

approach an author's work ready to engage on that author's terms. What ten years of teaching the personal essay has shown me is that we have to remind ourselves, again and again—and *again*—that we live in a society that asks us, always, to come up with the easy answer, the quick fix, and the happy ending.

As a teacher of writing and rhetoric, I often ask my students to think carefully about the things in life of which they are certain. How did you come to be so certain? What might it take to challenge that certainty? But the most important question I ask them, the one I always want them asking themselves, is what does certainty *do*? How does it make navigating the world easier, more comfortable? On the other hand, what does *uncertainty* do? What will you do to squash that uncertainty, to trade it for certainty?

I don't see it as my job to undo their certainty, but instead to help them examine their certainty, to hold it up to the light, to twist it and turn it and to see it from multiple perspectives. One of the best ways I know how to do this is by teaching the personal essay. To read a personal essay is to notice the ways in which a reader has pulled from this and from that, from experiences she had when she was ten years old and from last week's dinner conversation with friends. And to write a personal essay is to rethink all aspects of our lives, the experiences that inform who we are today, the remarks that we can never let go, the interests that have kept us enthralled for years, even decades. So much of our certainty—for all of us, not just our students—comes from a desire to hold on to our most cherished beliefs.

This all sounds so positive and insightful. Idealistic, even. But it should come as no surprise when I tell you that students often have a difficult time abandoning their cherished truisms and commonplace beliefs about why we do the things we do, even in the face of personal essays that complicate such truisms again and again.

For every essay I teach, I ask students to consider the simple question, How *else* might this have been written? The aim of this question is to voice the expectations and commonplace beliefs that many readers might have when approaching an essay about, say, the death of a beloved dog or an adoptive father's ruminations on his daughter turning thirteen. We talk about what I've come to call the "Lifetime

movie" version of essays, imagining the ways in which *what happened* in an essay might make its way to Lifetime. The adopted daughter runs away to locate her biological parents only to find that her mother lives in a trailer and her biological brother sits in prison and her adopted parents really *were* the best family for her. That kind of thing. The goal is to familiarize students with the power of cultural narratives to inform our reading practices and our assessments, interpretations, and judgments.

This work is as slow-going as ideology is invisible and pervasive. When I teach undergraduates about the concept of ideology, I ask them to think about it using the metaphor of marinade. As products of an ideology, we are the meat that is being marinated. The marinade is the ideology—the coherent set of values, beliefs, and ideals that guides our thoughts and actions, that shapes our perception of reality, and that largely remains invisible. When a piece of meat has marinated in a mixture of seasonings and sauce for a long time, the marinade becomes *part of* the meat. It infuses and is therefore inseparable from the meat. One can no more easily remove the marinade from the meat than one can remove the brain from the body. And a piece of meat needs time to marinate. One cannot marinate a piece of meat in five minutes, just as one cannot subscribe to a new ideology in a week. Likewise, it takes time and persistence to become aware of the ways in which ideology disciplines us to feel some things and not others, the ways in which dominant ideology *schools* our emotions. In her landmark essay, "Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion," Lynn Worsham distinguishes between dominant pedagogy, following Bourdieu and Passeron, as the "power to impose meanings that maintain and reinforce the reigning social, economic, and political arrangements as legitimate when in fact they are entirely arbitrary" (221) and pedagogy as we more commonly understand it in relation to education and teaching. Worsham writes that the primary work of dominant pedagogy "is to organize an emotional world, to inculcate patterns of feeling that support the legitimacy of dominant interests, patterns that are especially appropriate to gender, race, and class locations." Further,

> pedagogy binds each individual to the social world through a complex and often contradictory affective life that remains, for the most part, just beyond the horizon of semantic availability, and its success depends on a mystification or misrecognition of this primary work. In particular, pedagogy provides and limits a vocabulary of emotion and, especially to those in subordinate positions, it teaches an inability to adequately apprehend, name, and interpret their affective lives. This is its primary violence. Primary pedagogic work mystifies emotion as a personal and private matter and conceals the fact that emotions are prevailing forms of social life, that personal life always takes shape in social and cultural terms. (223)

Essays such as Cheryl Strayed's "The Love of My Life" demystify this work of dominant pedagogy by making what Arlie Russell Hochschild calls "feeling rules" visible in ways most students have never considered before. Strayed writes explicitly about the rules of grieving; we are taught to feel certain things at certain times for a certain duration of time. We are expected, following a loss, to be over it after one month or maybe two months and if we are not, we are told that there is something wrong with us. Strayed writes, "We do not help them; we tell them that they need to get help" (299).

Years of teaching the personal essay have shown me that we are schooled to *read* in particular ways, and that these ways mirror the ways we've been schooled to feel. At a time when scholars in composition are recommitting themselves to understanding the relationship between reading and writing (Robillard; Allen; Jolliffe and Harl), I want to share two instances of reading gone awry in order to consider how the personal essay, with its challenges to cultural commonplaces and ideological truisms, makes us aware of the ways our reading practices mirror ideological disciplining.

Just Try Harder

About midway through the Spring 2013 semester, my students and I are discussing Emily Rapp's essay, "Someone to Hold Me." Rapp begins by recalling her days as a student at Harvard Divinity School, where she worked as a chaplain at SpeakOut, an organization dedicated to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender support. Rapp acknowledges the speakers' bravery and tells us that most of the time, her job was to listen and offer tissues across a desk. But one day Stacy, a man transitioning to a woman (from Steve to Stacy) tells Rapp that she'd been harassed on the bus on the way to the bureau; someone rudely shouted, as she got on the bus, "What are you?" Rapp responded to Stacy's story with, "People just talk." Stacy, unsurprisingly, wasn't comforted by this. Rapp writes,

> Stacy made a weird, low sound, briefly covered her mouth in a gesture of what appeared to be surprise, and then dropped to her knees and held up her arms to me. She asked me to hold her, please, please, she said. I sat in my chair, unmoving, as she pleaded with me. I could write a feisty paper about Nietzsche's theories of morality, but I couldn't sit in a room with a truly suffering person for one second. I was mute, helpless, ridiculous. I could read her face: the desire to connect, the way it might feel, and I knew if I held her it would not be chatty or breezy as our exchange had been moments before.

Rapp reveals that she thought of this moment recently as she sat with her two-year-old son, Ronan, who is dying before her eyes of Tay-Sachs disease, an always fatal neurological illness. In a space of desperate loneliness and grief, Rapp understands now why Stacy asked Rapp to hold her. "I wanted somebody—anybody—to hold me, break me, annihilate me as if this might prove that I still existed, that I could still exist after my son died in this medieval way, that I could go on, experience some kind of rebirth after this, be a phoenix, rise up, be resurrected, the girl Lazarus."

The relationship between the story about Stacy and Rapp's current experience watching her toddler son dying is clear enough to me: she's finally at a place in her life where she can understand Stacy

in a way her twenty-two-year-old self never could. So when I asked students to think about the relationship between these two stories, I was struck dumb—I was speechless—when one of my students said that Rapp probably feels like she's not trying hard enough. She didn't try hard enough with Stacy and now she's not trying hard enough to save her son.

Actually, I wasn't struck dumb. It was all I could do *not* to say, "Are you fucking *kidding* me?"

She's not trying hard enough to save her dying son? Other students pointed to Rapp's description of Ronan's bedroom as evidence of Rapp's lack of effort:

> The nursery has been converted to a hospital room with a suction machine, an oxygen machine, a therapeutic bed. All the books he'll never read have been moved to another room; all the toys he cannot touch because he's paralyzed have been packaged up and taken out of sight. Two *Dia de la Muertos* figurines remain to guard the door.

This passage, they said, shows that Rapp had just given up. Even if Ronan can't *touch* the toys, he could at least *see* them. In that moment, in class, I took a deep breath and broke from my script, so to speak. I asked how many of them were studying to become teachers. More than half raised their hands. I asked them to pay special attention as I revealed to them that this was a moment I could never have predicted, no matter how many times I read this essay. What does a teacher do when a student says something so antithetical to the spirit of the essay? She takes a deep breath and leads them back to the text, to the line that comes immediately after the passage they cited as evidence: "Fifteen years later I understood needing to be held in the face of abject pain—the connection between desire and death—that Stacy revealed to me on that cold winter day in Boston." And when I did this, when I pointed out this line, my heart was beating very fast and I was probably shaking a little bit. Because I was angry. I was angry that students could say such a thing about a woman whose two-year-old son is dying. That they could believe that if she just tried a little harder, maybe she could save him.

It wasn't until after class, as I told a colleague about this moment, that I realized that that was exactly it. We live in a country whose dominant ideology tells us again and again and in so many different ways that if we just try hard enough, we will succeed. If we just try hard enough, we will get the college degree and the lucrative job and the gorgeous spouse and the two healthy children. It's people who don't work very hard who don't get these things and, because they didn't work very hard, it's their own fault.

Rapp reminds us of the emotional disciplining we're all, each one of us, subject to, and she reminds us that we don't have to give in to it:

> The world can be a horrible place at times, but we don't have to participate in this, we don't have to harden our hearts as we're taught and told to do, in order to survive or be sexy or attractive lovers or perfect parents or interesting people. We do not have to make ourselves into mysterious gifts, waiting to be chosen or read or understood by those who will earn us, unwrap our secrets, and then what? We can be something more authentic, and speak from a different place, a different planet.

We can *read* from a different place, too, from a more authentic place, only once we recognize the ways we've been trained to fit our interpretations into culturally palatable scripts.

In a different iteration of the personal essay course, I took a few minutes at the beginning of a class period to talk with students about the conventional ways they were concluding their brief analyses of the essays we'd been reading. While the content of their analyses articulated well the complexity of the essays, nine times out of ten, their concluding paragraphs contradicted that complexity by glossing over it or by simply denying all that they had written before. Concluding paragraphs would assert that, though the essayist had experienced the biggest loss of her life, she was actually better for it because her mother was no longer suffering, or that, though the essayist struggled to reconcile the effects of his father's alcoholism on his own life, he would be okay because he understood his father now. I asked students about this will to tidiness. Were they aware that they were doing it? Did they realize that they were contradicting so much of

what they had just finished writing for two or three pages? That's when a student told me something that I'll never forget. She said that in high school she was explicitly told that she needed to find the silver lining: if the person lives, that's great because he's still alive. If he dies, that means he's no longer suffering. We learned, she said, to turn anything into a positive. I asked the others in the class if this had been their experience in high school. Many students nodded. Some said that they hadn't learned it quite so explicitly but yes, they had been trained to always find the positive. Students were (are?) being trained to find the moral of the story, the cultural commonplace that will shore up their beliefs in dominant ideology. The personal essay, with its direct assault on dominant ideology's stories, provides one of the best ways I know to combat that training.

Averting our Eyes

During Spring 2017, I taught for the first time two essays together: Miah Arnold's "You Owe Me" and Lacy M. Johnson's "On Mercy." I had taught Arnold's essay a few times before, but this was the first time I had paired it with Johnson's. In her essay, Arnold struggles to understand what brings her back, year after year, to the pediatric cancer ward where she teaches poetry and prose for Writers in the Schools to children who "die, no matter how much I love them, no matter how creative they are, no matter how many poems they have written or how much they want to live" (29). Arnold shares with us the stories she tells herself about how long she will stay, what she can and cannot endure, and her inexplicable inability to say goodbye to these children. "I grow too close. I say: If Khalil dies, I won't be able to continue working here. Since I have known him since he was seven and he's twelve now, his death is the line over with my presence in this institution cannot cross. Khalil is too full of life" (32). Arnold returns to this belief again later in the essay when she writes, "I always knew I couldn't work there any longer if he didn't live." And then, "When Khalil died I thought, on one level, I can't go back. But in the world of the living the reality is that I can't leave just yet. I can't leave Darrian. Or Amirah. Especially Amirah, because she is eight, a

little girl from Egypt who loves the Disney princesses and the color pink, but who is one of the most strange and grave souls I have ever met." She stays, but she tells herself, "if Amirah dies, then I can't come back anymore" (35).

Arnold speaks directly to the ways we have been emotionally disciplined to respond to stories about children dying, as my students had done. She writes, "People don't mind being reminded that ten-year-olds die so long as they get to hear the story of that child's life, so long as it is a story of resilience, a story about a soul raging on long after the funeral because it touched so many people's lives and changed them for the better" (31). If this essay were a Lifetime movie, each child Arnold came to love would pull through at the last minute, and the bond Arnold had established with that child would be lifelong. But life is not a Lifetime movie, and Arnold watches child after child after child die. She does not take lessons from their situations; in fact, she introduces a coworker, Nicole, an elementary school teacher, to speak these lines:

> The teacher I took over from said we are supposed to take lessons from all this," she says shaking her head, "Take lessons? If one child has to suffer so that I can learn a lesson, I'll skip it, thank you. Learn a lesson! We're not here to learn; we're here because we can be here, and because the kids need people here with them. We are *here*. End of story. (35-6)

Again and again, she asks herself how she manages to stay, though she realizes at one point that the question presumes a single answer: "For some reason that I realize, finally, doesn't matter much at all, I stagger under the weight of the losses I have encountered with these children, but, miraculously, I haven't fallen. I am a Dixie cup, and these children's lives and needs are hundreds of oceans, and by some incredible grace I have been able to contain them" (37).

In addition to asking students to consider the Lifetime movie version of events in the personal essays we discuss, I often ask students to pay attention to how many essayists devote time to other's responses to their situations. So much of the pain we experience in our everyday lives can be traced back

to other people's ideologically disciplined responses to what they do not understand; illness and grief are perhaps the easiest examples to call to mind. A diagnosis of cancer or the death of a loved one are, always, twofold crises: there is the obvious crisis of the physical and then there is the crisis that comes with managing other people's often thoughtless responses to the first crisis. Of her job at the hospital, Arnold writes,

> I say it is the most important thing I have ever done, it is the one job I cannot quit, That, so far, has proven to be the truth. Few people want to hear much more than this about my job, though. Some people actually scowl when they hear what I do, whether it is because they are upset or don't know what to say, or just feel bad, I don't know. (41)

Unless we can understand a child's death the way Arnold describes earlier in the essay, as a young life whose soul rages on, changing lives for the better, we have a hard time hearing about it. "We prefer to assign morality to death," Arnold writes. "We prefer a world in which we take risks—we rebel, we resist, we transgress, we love, we gamble—and sometimes we lose. That makes sense; that is tragedy. One of the reasons I can't stop going to the hospital: the kids don't avert their eyes when they see each other" (41-2). Children have not yet been disciplined by dominant ideology to avoid one another' eyes, the site of love and affection and fear and longing. Children look at one another in ways adults seem no longer able to do.

Remarkable, really, that the first line of Johnson's "On Mercy" is "The sight of the children rattles me every time." Johnson, too, teaches writing in a pediatric cancer ward, though the question she pursues in her essay is not what keeps her coming back but something much bigger: what is mercy, and who deserves it? Johnson immediately admits her discomfort with looking at the children. "They sit around a tiny table in a too-small classroom, the walls stacked high with textbooks and technologies they will never use. The frailest ones wear hospital blankets draped over their shoulders. IV trolleys trail and beep behind them. Chest catheters peek out from under their clothes." Her teaching partner is a ten-year veteran of this placement who tells Johnson that one of her students had died this morning. "She tells me about the

kind of boy he was by recalling the tiny details of his manner with the other children, a metaphor in a poem he wrote one day during the many years she knew him. There is a pause during which I can think of nothing useful to say." The first time I read this, I immediately thought of Arnold. Could this be her? Of course it was. I would have to teach this essay along with "You Owe Me."

Johnson tells us early in the essay that her teaching partner is quitting after ten years. "She says she meant to tell me earlier, but then she got the news. It's been ten years of this for her, teaching writing to children who will die. She needs time. She needs space. She needs a break. I hug her once, hard. It's the only thing I have to give." This is the last mention of this teaching partner (she gets a new teaching partner soon thereafter), but my impression was that students would want to speculate about whether this really *was* Arnold and, if it was, what had made her finally quit. As I often am, though, I was wrong about students' curiosity about Arnold. We talked about the possibility briefly, but spent much more time discussing the differences between the two essays.

The focus of Johnson's essay is not teaching in the pediatric cancer ward but the concept of mercy: what it is, who gets it, how it is dispensed and at what cost. Her focus becomes clear when she writes, following the passage I quoted above, "We tend to associate mercy with alleviating pain and suffering, but also with reducing punishments, and relieving our guilt. During the year I teach writing in the pediatric cancer ward, thirteen men are executed in Texas, the state where I live, one of whom is Lawrence Russell Brewer, who was sentenced to death in 1999 for the murder of James Byrd, Jr." The rest of the essay is a meditation on mercy by way of the juxtaposition of the stories of children dying of cancer and men who have been sentenced to death by lethal injection.

Johnson reports that Brewer's killing of Byrd was "to be the first of many murders he would commit as part of his initiation into a white-supremacist gang affiliated with the KKK offshoot Confederate Knights of America, which he joined in the Beto I Prison Unit in Texas." Brewer expressed no remorse for his crime; in fact, he said, in the moments before he was executed, "No, I would do it all

over again, to tell you the truth." Johnson notes that Brewer's remorselessness sets him apart from most death-row prisoners, who often beg at the last minute for mercy. Johnson considers as well the case of Troy Davis, widely believed to be innocent, who, in his last words, begs for mercy not for himself, but for those who are about to take his life. "May God have mercy on all of your souls."

What is mercy? Is it lethal injection because it is the most painless? "Painless because it relies on a combination of three drugs: an anesthetic that sends the prisoner into a deep coma; a paralytic, which prevents the prisoner from involuntary movement; and lastly, a dose of potassium chloride sufficient enough to stop the prisoner's heart." But Johnson is quick to point out that lethal injection is not always painless, that it fails in any number of ways. "'Man,' says Clayton Lockett in 2014, in Oklahoma, as he writhes in agony on the gurney. The IV has been placed incorrectly; his vein is ruptured; the midazolam has entered his tissue rather than his bloodstream; he is pronounced unconscious; he is injected with vecuronium bromide to paralyze his body and potassium chloride to stop his heart; and yet he wakes up, raises his head, and tries to rise from the gurney."

Next to this institutional treatment of a body Johnson sets this scene: "Today I learn that the girl who wears a bright neon wig has had surgery to remove the tumor from her back. When I knock on the door to her room, the nurses are trying to move her in the bed and she cries out in pain. No words: only a single, involuntary wail. She is skeletal, bald, sobbing while they lift her on a white sheet and move her only slightly." Johnson joins the girl and her siblings in the room and together they make up ridiculous stories as only children can.

It is here that Johnson comes to the biggest insight of the essay, the thing she has come to say: "I think there are different kinds of mercy: big Mercy and little mercy." Big Mercy is anonymous and omnipotent, the stuff of divine retribution. "Big Mercy teaches us the first lesson of righteousness: that other people are not as human as we are. No one deserves to receive big Mercy and no one deserves to offer it either." But little mercy is everywhere, and it is so little that perhaps we often mistake it for

something else. It is another kind of mercy. "The kind that arrives as a child sitting briefly on your lap, as a poem, a letter, a loving hand on your hand, a piece of paper cut with tiny scissors, held by strips of tape to a wall or window. Little mercy teaches a lesson, too: that everyone is human, just as we are. There's no one —*no one*—who doesn't deserve that kind of mercy." I underlined these lines the first and second time I read them, put a star next to them. They're the very reason I read and teach essays, the moment of insight that comes from particularizing again and again. They're the kind of lines I can carry with me. What happens next, though, catches me by surprise. In fact, it takes me a bit to figure out what Johnson has just done with my emotions.

She writes that she wants a little mercy for the girl in the bright neon wig, who is no longer expected to live. She has been moved to a different hospital, where she is undergoing experimental treatments. Johnson keeps up with her via the girl's mother's postings on Facebook. She writes, "In these pictures, which I visit, she is completely alone, perfectly preserved behind a window, staying exactly the same: bald, pale, skeletal. Her younger brother has outgrown her. In one photo she's pressing a hand to the glass of the quarantine room; outside her younger sisters stand together—their blond ponytails, their t-shirts and leggings and mismatched socks, their hands on the glass—pressing back." Then, a section break. And then this: "On Lawrence Russell Brewer's last day, he speaks to his friends and family by phone in a booth no bigger than a water heater closet, separated from the people he loves by a pane of glass, by armed guards, by a sentence that is coming to an end." Johnson describes in detail what Brewer had requested for his last meal. I make a note in the margins of the way Johnson connects the two sections with the visual of the child and the prisoner being separated from loved ones by a pane of glass. It is only when Johnson reminds me that the family of James Byrd, Jr. is watching the execution that I realize who I have just been feeling empathy for. The remorseless white supremacist killer who would have done it again if he could have. I am angry with Johnson for making me feel this, even for just a moment.

Suzanne Keen would characterize this, I imagine, as a form of strategic narrative empathy. Keen writes, "Authors' efforts to use strategic narrative empathy show their ambition to reach target audiences with representations that sway the feelings of their readers…. Sometimes motivated by the desire to effect social change or raise awareness, narrative artists employ representational techniques aimed at moving their readers" ("Life Writing" 20). It's dangerous, of course, and Keen admits this, to speculate about Johnson's intentions: did she mean for readers to feel empathy for Brewer? That, for me, is not the point. The point is that I felt duped by a personal essay, the genre I love the most, and it made me realize that I don't actually believe that "There's no one—*no one*—who doesn't deserve that kind of mercy." But maybe *that* is the point.

Maybe this wasn't actually a case of reading gone awry, as I characterized it earlier. Maybe my reading of "On Mercy" did exactly what it was supposed to do: exposed for me the ideological disciplining I've been subject to, the expectations about what I believed I was *supposed to feel* for Brewer, for anybody separated from his loved ones by a pane of glass. I was supposed to empathize with him the same way I empathized with the girl with the neon wig. But their situations are far too different. There is simply too much to take into account. No matter how hard I try, I cannot empathize with a cold-blooded killer.

Johnson admits early in the essay that she has "never been good at compassion, which might be one reason why I'm here. I teach writing in a pediatric cancer ward because I get paid to do it and because compassion challenges me in ways I don't always rise to meet." There are times when compassion is not the best response. Compassion *should* challenge us all in ways we don't always rise to meet. Catherine Newman, in her essay titled "Just. Don't." writes, "while I do believe in goodness, in compassion, I don't believe in smiling while men spray their hot and aggressive horribleness into your face."

Holding

It took Emily Rapp fifteen years to understand the raw need that had moved Stacy to ask her to hold her. Fifteen years and a dying toddler. Miah Arnold held the children she worked with in the pediatric cancer ward because it was one of the only things she knew she could do:

> His legs were skinny and dry. It scared me when he was on my lap; it scared me to touch him because he was dying and I knew, already, I loved him way too much. But when he sat in my lap, I tried to be the steady warmth he needed from me. We would write out a poem and I knew that what he wanted, what he needed, was the feeling of my shoulders wrapped on either side of his own shoulders. I helped him write—a loose hug that lasted at least the length of a single poem, but often, toward the end of his life, a hug that lasted the entire class. (40)

In the beginning of her teaching year, Lacy Johnson is uncomfortable with holding the children.

> The girl in the neon wig asks to sit on my lap and doesn't wait for me to answer before climbing aboard. I'm uncomfortable with this. I dislike being touched by anyone, most of all strangers, and have not forgotten the prohibition against physical contact with children who are not my own. But the child on my lap leans over the table. Her right hand holds down the paper while she scribbles furiously with her left. I place my hand on her back. A tumor bulges on her shoulder underneath her shirt.

When her teaching partner tells her that she is not coming back, Johnson writes, "I hug her once, hard. It's the only thing I have to give." What do our bodies know before our minds do? Or what do our bodies know that our minds cannot?

In her short story, "Dottie's Bed and Breakfast," Elizabeth Strout makes what seems like a simple point about what I have characterized in this essay as the ideological disciplining of our affective lives and an *awareness* of that ideological disciplining. Dottie is, as the title of the story suggests, the owner of a bed and breakfast who one day finds herself recalling a formative reading experience from her childhood.

Strout writes, "Dottie was just at the age when she read this that her heart, so naïve in spite of what she had already learned about life, or rather what she had already absorbed about life, because people absorb first and learn later, if they learn at all, Dottie had been, at the time she read this article, at the age where her heart almost came through her throat as she imagined the woman who opened the door" (192). *People absorb first and learn later, if they learn at all.*

We absorb the beliefs of those around us. We absorb but do not learn that if we try hard enough, we can get what we want. We absorb but do not learn that it is best to avert our eyes from those who are not like us. We absorb but do not learn that children who die provide life lessons. We absorb but do not learn that every human being deserves compassion.

We absorb but do not learn the crucial value of human touch.

The personal essay, with its insistence on exposing such ideological beliefs, reveals the ways in which our reading practices mirror what we have absorbed.

Works Cited

Allen, Ira James. “Reprivileging Reading: The Negotiation of Uncertainty.” *Pedagogy* 12.1 (2011): 97–120.

Anderst, Leah. “Feeling With Real Others: Narrative Empathy in the Autobiographies of Doris Lessing and Alison Bechdel.” *Narrative* 23.3 (October 2015): 271-290.

Arnold, Miah. “You Owe Me.” *The Best American Essays 2012*. Ed. David Brooks. New York: Mariner, 2012: 29-42.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Managed Heart*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1983.

Jolliffe, David, and Allison Harl. “Texts of Our Institutional Lives: What Are Our Students Reading and Why?” *College English* 70.6 (2008): 599-617.

Johnson, Lacy M. “On Mercy.” *Guernica*. 1 October 2015.

Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel*. New York: Oxford UP, 2007.

---. “Life Writing and the Empathetic Circle.” *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 42.2 (September 2016): 9-26.

Newman, Catherine. “Just. Don’t.” *Full Grown People*. 25 May 2017.

Rapp, Emily. “Someone to Hold Me.” *Salon.com* 11 July 2012.

Robillard, Amy E. “Prototypical Reading: Volume, Desire, Anxiety.” *College Composition and Communication* 67.2 (December 2015): 197-215.

Strayed, Cheryl. “The Love of My Life.” *The Best American Essays 2003*. Ed Anne Fadiman. New York: Mariner, 2003: 291-307.

Strout, Elizabeth. “Dottie’s Bed and Breakfast.” *Anything Is Possible*. New York: Random House, 2017: 181-208.

Worsham, Lynn. “Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion.” *JAC* 18.2 (1998): 213.345.