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## The “So What” Factor: Making Fresh

A number of years ago, Speer Morgan, the longtime editor of the *Missouri Review*, wrote me a short note that he attached to a standard rejection letter. “I liked the honesty and detail of this piece,” it read. “The phrasing was solid if not stupendous, and the self-examination was impressive. Finally, though, it suffers under the burden of being a much written about subject and one that is extremely hard to make fresh.”

The essay to which Morgan referred dealt with, in part, addiction and alcoholism— two topics that occupy a vast amount of my headspace. As an addict and alcoholic, much of my work deals in some way with the chaos of addiction or the earnestness of recovery, and what I think Morgan was saying without saying was essentially this: *So what? So what that you’re an addict. So what that you’re an alcoholic? In a creative ecosphere where addiction and alcoholism are arguably two of the most clichéd topics around, why should I care?*

I’ve had Morgan’s comments in the back of my mind since the day he wrote them. In the essays I’ve written since, I’ve turned that idea of freshness over and over in my head, and it’s helped facilitate a realization I’ve found essential, which is that if I’m going to write about addiction and alcoholism, I’ve got my work cut out for me. It’s the familiarity of those topics that make them endlessly relevant, but it’s also the familiarity of those topics that make them endlessly tiresome. Their universality is both the gasoline in my essay’s fuel tank, and the sugar.

Philip Lopate contends that “the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience.” I don’t disagree. But that unity demands something of the essayist— freshness, as Speer Morgan suggested, which comes from rigorous and honest scrutiny of one’s work. Every essay needs to be sifted through that *so what* filter. *So what* that I drank until being awake and asleep

were the same. *So what* that I smoked crystal methamphetamine out of a hollowed-out lightbulb while my infant daughter slept in an idling car. So what that I drunkenly hung by my fingertips from a high-rise balcony in Chicago, sixteen stories above the stamped concrete, the knuckles on my fingers turning white while I swayed, wanting to let go, to fall, to feel myself surrender to the sweet nothingness of gravity and whatever comes after.

So what?

Of the lyric essay, Judith Kitchen wrote, “The aim is to make of, not up.” Scott Russell Sanders contends, “The worthiest essays are ventures into the unknown, from which we return bearing fresh insight and delights.” Vivian Gornick wrote that when she reads to find what an essay is about, she’s “looking for the inner context that makes a piece of writing larger than its immediate circumstance.”

The immediate circumstance of every writer is this: it’s all been written about before. The thing that feels unique and personal is actually ordinary and general—and that makes freshness even harder to manufacture. However, writing about one’s life, about experiences lived that will surely be lived again, needn’t be stale. When Speer Morgan used the phrase “making fresh,” which is different than *finding fresh* or *uncovering fresh*, he began with the assumption that my subject was stale, but he also began with the assumption that it didn’t have to stay that way—it could be transformed. He acknowledged the power there is not in *finding* freshness, but in *making* freshness, in creating what Mary Karr calls “the sheer, convincing poetry of a single person trying to make sense of the past.”

Yet, while there can be—and often is—poetry to be found in sense-making, fresh-making demands more: “a single person trying to make sense of the past” must become a single person trying to make sense of the past *for a reader*. The transformation is subtle, yet vital, and represents one way the writer can venture beyond the arbitrary *hope* of freshness and set out on a specific *path* towards freshness—a new road where old ideas can bloom with new perspective.

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In a 1933 essay titled “One Hundred False Starts,” F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote: “Mostly, we authors must repeat ourselves—that’s the truth. We have two or three great and moving experiences in our lives—experiences so great and moving that it doesn’t seem at the time that anyone else has been so caught up and pounded and dazzled and astonished and beaten and broken and rescued and illuminated and rewarded and humbled in just that way ever before.” When I write about addiction and alcoholism, about the life I once lived and the person I once was, about the cocaine and ecstasy, the jail cells and violence and years I leaned hard into my own destructive desires, it indeed feels as if no one has ever been so caught up and pounded and dazzled and astonished and beaten and broken and rescued and illuminated and rewarded and humbled in just that way ever before. The reality, though, is people have—person after person, time and again, in worse ways and better ways and precisely the same ways.

The path to rebirthing ideas, to remaking stories, to making fresh is paved with (and fueled by) questions, but it begins with a single one: So what? The labor of essaying isn’t recounting the experience, or revivifying the details, it’s answering this question by interpreting the “about-ness,” the “why-should-I-care-ness” the “so-what-ness.” It’s through these answers that one can deal with the great paradox of essay writing—that the lives we write about are always uniquely personal and generally the same. Leslie Jamison touches on this in *The Recovering*, her nearly 500 page interrogation of addiction and recovery, when she writes, “...I’d given up on that impossible ideal of saying what had never been said, but I also believed every unoriginal idea could be reborn in the particularity of any given life.”

Moreover, it’s not simply that every unoriginal idea *could* be reborn, it’s that it *is* reborn—and waiting to be renewed. We cannot say what’s never been said, but we can do something else: make timeworn ideas—those great and moving experiences—glisten with the dew of freshness.

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If we cognize essays as vehicles that transport us from place to place, or from knowledge to deep understanding, then form is the type of vehicle one uses to deliver the situation and the story to the

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reader. In Vivian Gornick's often-cited text, *The Situation and the Story*, she writes, "The situation is the context and circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say." What strikes me about Gornick's assertion is her last adjective clause: "the thing one has *come to say*." The implication isn't just that the writer has something to say. It's that writer has arrived *somewhere* to say it. That *somewhere*, I believe, is form. This feels to me like the logical next step in making fresh, because everything the essayist thinks about when writing, what happened and what it means—the situation and the story— already exists inside the writer's mind in a particular form. Perhaps this form (or shape or outline or image) is a record circling endlessly, playing a staticky song one has all but forgotten the words to; perhaps it's the arc of a swing moving out and back, it's rusty chain squeaking, coming into focus as it swings closer, blurring as it swings away; or perhaps it's the chaos of a skipped rock bouncing off the smooth surface of one's life, the ripples it creates expanding outward long after the rock has sunk and disappeared.

Form literally means "the visible shape or configuration of something." When we give an essay an unexpected form, even if the form itself isn't new, we change the way it's understood, and we make it fresh. John McPhee's 1972 disjunctive essay, "The Search for Marvin Gardens," still feels fresh more than forty-five years later; Michele Morano's segmented essay, "The Queimada," transports the reader into a trance-like freshness while it explores the syrupy nostalgia of friendship and travel; and Nicole Cyrus's hermit crab essay, "Hairy Credentials," which inhabits the form of a resume, makes fresh her repeated experience of racial and gender bias in the workplace.

By making fresh, the writer is exposing truth in a way that's otherwise impossible. This is important, as Dinty W. Moore writes in his essay "Rivering," "Because in an essay, or story, or poem, the truth is sometimes not in the words, but between them, in the permeable tissue that runs from moment to moment." And wrapped up in that truth that Moore brings up is also, at least in part, the answer to the "So what?" question.

So what does all this mean? It means that the subject the essayist turns over, even when that subject is, as Morgan suggested, “a much written about subject that is hard to make fresh,” needn’t be a burden. Ned Stuckey-French wrote that essays offer “...another way to find everyone’s story in one person’s story.” They also offer a way to find one person’s story in everyone’s story, and that to me is the way we make fresh in our writing. We locate the thing that matters, and then we translate it, and then we shape it anew.

Defined one way, *fresh* means “pleasantly clean, pure, and cool.” Defined another way, it means “full of energy and vigor.” Fresh can also mean “not previously known, new or different.” In nonfiction writing, making fresh certainly isn’t easy, but it is imperative. Because the best essays are always the very definition of fresh—pure and cool, full of energy and vigor, not previously known, new or different.