

# Rummaging through Our Attics: Using Grief, Trauma, and Personal Experience to Enrich Our Literary Efforts

**Presenter: Shelli Spotts**

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Good afternoon and welcome to my living room where I will be recording today's panel session. My name is Shelley Spotts and I teach writing, creative writing, and freshman writing and advanced composition and rhetoric at Brigham Young University. Our panel today is called Rummaging Through Our Attics: Using Grief, Trauma, and Personal Experience to Enrich the Literary Effort.

So I wanted to start out by telling you a story. Since we're gathered here digitally through the wonder of technology. Let me set the scene for you.

Growing up I moved a lot. I had a litany, by the time I got out of school, that I had memorized in response to the question that is the first question anyone asks when you go to college. Where are you from, and it's really hard to pin down a hometown. When you have moved as much as I had moved.

So, the litany went something like this. I've lived in four states, I've lived in nine cities. I've lived in 17 houses and no. My dad was not in the military because that was always the follow up question, right? So, although I say that I had lived in nine cities. It was more like towns. Sometimes very far out of town we lived in a lot of really interesting places.

Some of the places we stayed for very brief portions of time. Some of the places we stayed for longer. As a family, we wove our way through the tall red woods of Northern California through the mist and rainy seasons of the mountains of Oregon, through the wind swept plains of North

Dakota. And finally, when I was in high school back to Utah, where both of my parents had been born and raised. It was an adventure.

And as an avid reader. It was something that I connected with very, very clearly, because sometimes I felt like I was meandering my way through the scenes and settings of my favorite books. when I read Little House on the Prairie and they are in Minnesota. I could clearly picture the landscape, because I spent a long time in those windswept plains of Minnesota.

I attended schools like the school in Northern California with a pond out back where we would catch frogs at recess and Wade knee deep in the mud where the library was a bookmobile.

That came once a week wonder of wonders and and just exploded my second grade mind with the with the literature contained in this in this bus.

And where we walked home every day for lunch because the school was not large enough to have a lunch program.

It was an interesting way to grow up and it was always changing. It always seemed to have something new going on. It has colored my writing.

Both my nonfiction and my fiction and a lot of ways. So now let me tell you another part of the story. When I was 12 years old, we lived in a small yellow house in Fargo, North Dakota, a little four bedroom bungalow on a tree lined streets with beaches trees on either side of the street. We were three blocks from a little mini store where we would ride our bikes every summer to buy Penny Candy and soda.

My shared a room with my sister, a small room with white bookcases and overstuffed chair and blue floral drapes hanging from the windows that matched the blue floral pillows on our bed.

I have very vivid memories of this House of the way the light slanted into the room late in the afternoon. Of the rustle of the wind through the maple tree in our backyard. I seem to have memories of climbing to the very top of the street, although I'm sure it was only a few feet from the ground.

But one of the most vivid memories I have of this place is of overhearing my father late one night on the phone, sobbing. He was a large man to me.

Especially since at the time I was fairly young. He had always seemed confidence, and full of confidence, and full of bravado, and full of great stories and songs. He played the guitar and he just created.

an environment that was welcoming for all of us. But at 12 I was dimly aware of the discontent sort of staring at the edges of our family life.

Of increased budgeting of the lines that were suddenly etching themselves down my parents faces. Then a week and then two, where my dad did not go to work.

And that night I was supposed to be in bed and I had crept down the hall and I heard him on the phone and I heard him say very clearly to whoever he was speaking to, that if he had had any life insurance at all, he would have been tempted to jump off a bridge for the payout to take care of his family.

I remember the shock of the words that he was saying. hearing that and turning around and creeping back into my bed, and pretending that I had heard nothing at all.

I still don't know 20 years later, who he was talking to that night, but I do know that days later, we were packing up our house again for another move And I realized something in that moment, and that was that the up rootedness of our lives. The moving from place to place the adventure that I had seen with such magic in my gaze before then was not due to exploration or adventure, but fear and loss and economic instability.

So these are both my stories, the magic and the fear, the gift of adventure, as well as the fear of the unknown.

But how do we tell the stories? What do we focus on? Do we ignore the grief to write about the joy? Do we write what I call the happily ever after approach or do we focus on those traumatic events in a way that not only almost retraumatizes ourselves in the retelling but traumatizes our listener and our reader as well.

So we have to find a balance. I have an assignment that I give my students at the end of our introduction to creative writing class. The assignment is this. They are supposed to rewrite a fairy tale.

It's the very last assignment that they have in the class, and it's a little bit of a desert assignment. The fun thing to do at the end of a lot of hard work of narrative and and getting the

hard work of figuring out your own creativity done. Right? Because they all want to write these fairytale stories? But, without fail I get stories that are one of two things. And it's been really interesting to me. Either nothing happens and everything ends happily ever after. Or you get this really dark really twisted retelling that seems to say this trauma is the only thing that defines me.

So how do we find in our own stories, the nuance, the internal truths that allow us to see past painful experiences and incorporate some of the joy? How do we balance these two storytelling impulses? As writers, I think we need to understand two things. We need to understand that we are not our most grief filled and troubled moments that although they define us.

In some ways, and they shape us in some ways, and they become the foundations, we build upon, they are not the only things that we are.

We need to give ourselves grace and compassion. We need to be able to look at the circumstances that we come from, with an objective eye.

The second thing we need to remember is this that as we are writing about our own experiences. What we are doing is we are undergoing a process of translation.

As Ursula Le Guin said, storytelling is a tool for knowing who we are and what we want. This, I think is one of the purposes of art in general.

And literature in particular to explore the depths of our human experience. It gives us the words to know ourselves. It gives us the words to know who we are. and where we've come from .and where our roots lie. But, this means also being able to connect with others in authentic ways that are rooted in empathy and understanding.

We are writing imperfect, beautiful, human moments. So what does that mean for how we use our own personal experience in our writing? One of the misconceptions that my students have is that all essay is naturally memoir. we're writing about ourselves so we must be writing a memoir. That we are telling the story of our lives wholesale. But, although memoir is essay, it actually makes up a fairly small percentage of what nonfiction is. So, if we are not writing memoir than what? As an essayist I write about a wide range of topics including family, friends, my children. My children. Wished I wrote less about them, about social topics, about political topics. Again, my children. Wish I wrote less about politics.

I've written about growing up, about growing old, about my own stories and about other stories and I really like.

The author Brian Doyle's description of what it means to be an essayist and he said that what we are, is that we are story catchers.

When I write almost everything starts from a very personal perspective. It starts in my own observations. It starts in my own reactions to things that are happening to the things I see going on around me.

But what makes it literature? What gives it value beyond simply a diary entry or a way to process grief? And as a side note here. I think we need to acknowledge that, yes, it is very, very beneficial to write grief and trauma, writing as a therapeutic tool. But, if we're going to move past that therapeutic tool and we are going to make art, what do we need to consider? So, one of the first things we're going to talk about three things. One of the first things that I think it's important to consider is how you access your stories. So the framing or the form of your stories.

How are you leading your reader into that story? In the 10th of her 10 tenants on writings, Jady Smith said, that a writer must tell the truth through whichever veil comes to hand but tell it. So I like to think of it in this way.

We are looking for. touchstone Moments. Moments that we can find and that appeal to our reader and that will lead us into the stories that we feel it's important to tell. There's an app for a popular educational tool that has an ad that runs very, very frequently with a quote by Margaret Atwood. I've seen this quite frequently with my son in the room.

She's talking about writing and she's talking about how we engage the reader. She's using the story of Little Red Riding Hood. She says, you know, sometimes we start with the once upon a time.

But sometimes we want to start with a different approach. Sometimes we start with this line. It was dark inside the wolf.

I really like that. But more than that, my son who's 19. It really struck him and it caught his attention. He really likes this ad.

He is a freshman in college. He loves theater. He loves movies. He loves telling stories. He doesn't love writing yet, although we're working on that.

But every time the ad comes on and it plays. He says something to me about it. So I asked him what he liked about it? He said he likes the surprise the unexpectedness.

The way it's sort of sideways slides into the story that he already knows. This is what it means to find an access point.

When I sit down to write an essay I spend a lot of time looking for the framework or the form that allows readers to understand, whatever it is that I want to discuss.

So, for instance, sometimes I'll start with an image. I was really struggling with an essay I was writing last year. I knew that that the heart of this essay needed to be about how we communally sharing grief, how when large events happen. The impact all of us that although we are all impacted in different individual ways, we share this communal experience. But I was really struggling with how to introduce these ideas with how to get into the story.

At the same time I was teaching a couple of freshmen writing classes. In class, one day, we went to the Museum of Art on our campus. The traveling Pulitzer Prize winning photography exhibit was there. Their job was to go around and to look at the pictures, the photographs and to do a rhetorical analysis of them.

I noticed when we came into the museum that day that there was a girl sitting on the floor in front of one of the photographs, a large black and white picture that was against the far wall.

And I didn't really think about her anymore. We did the class. I talked to the students. And then my students left.

I started packing up all my things to go and I look around and the same student is sitting on the floor in front of the same picture.

And I walked over and I looked at the portrait and it was a black and white photograph of a couple standing on the seashore.

And a couple of people closer to the water and it just shows them from behind and you could tell by their posture that they were in this moment of intense grief or pain. When you read the little placard at the side, it explained that this was a photograph taken at the moment that this couple child had been swept out to sea and run in the newspaper. The next day, so it was this embodiment of this moment of grief.

And what was more striking about it was that it had impacted this girl in a way that she had just sat in front of it for over an hour. Just absorbing all of the details and sitting with her own feelings about it. This became my access point for that essay.

So sometimes the access point is a framework that you find an image, a story, someone else's story or your own. Sometimes it can be the form that you've chosen.

So by form, I'm talking about the actual form of your written essay. We tend to think of writing, you know, we have a beginning, we have a middle we have an end. But, in nonfiction, especially creative nonfiction you can do some really interesting things with these beginnings, these middles, and these ends.

And part of that is looking at how your form can actually contribute to what you're trying to communicate.

Is it narrative? Is it chronological? Or inhabiting the form of something else? I recently read an essay by Pat Madden, who teaches on the BYU campus. It was an essay about the loss of his mother, who had passed away recently. The essay takes the form of a word search.

One of those with a jumble of words at the bottom and all of the letters in a graph at the top. you have to circle the words as you find them.

I thought this was really interesting. First of all, I think his mom was really fond of these words searches. So, the four minute self was sort of a tribute to her. But also, the text at the bottom, the words that are usually just distinct individual words. If you read them in order, came together to form the text of the essay.

But that text changed. As you looked for the words as you paused and you tried to find them within the the top portion because of where you would pause because of the connections that you would find between different words.

So solving the puzzle while reading the essay, let the reader, in this instance me, experience sort of the process of puzzle solving about loss.

What does loss mean for each of us? It's an essay that works. I think in large part because we're all searching for meaning and these experiences.

The actual reading experience mirrors the experience that we have surrounding loss and adds depth to the message.

So these borrowed forms. They're called hermit crab essays and I have I have read amazing borrowed form essays that take the form of travel essays, performance notes, letters reviews, encyclopedia entries. One essay that I have been working on that reflects on my childhood is a guide to home decorating. It begins: Take the curtains out of a box. They've been carefully packed. Because after all, you have had a lot of practice.

There should be very few wrinkles. Hang them in the kitchen window or the dining room if this particular House does not have a kitchen window large enough.

They are slightly faded from the sun hitting them in countless windows over a dozen years; but, the fading just helps to hide the faint layer of dust that accumulates between moves. When they will eventually be shaken out, washed, ironed, and carefully packed again.

So this type of essaying uses this borrowed form to discover inadvertent connections or revelations that connect the form itself to the content.

Another aspect of essay. I think that it's important to consider is how we use the narrator.

I think it's important in this moment to note, that although we are telling our own stories, that we definitely have a very clear narrator.

And one of the things that we do not use enough is the idea of a dual narrator We tend to think of the narrator as us in the moment. We're just retelling the story from beginning to end in the perspective as if it's happening in that moment.

But one beauty of essay is the ability to have multiple narrators. That in the moment us, who was experiencing this who's remembering things the way uou can remember them in your limited perspective. Whether that is something that happened last week or something that happened 20 years ago.

But there's also the you in the chair narrator/ The person who's writing the essay. The perspective, from a little bit of distance from days, weeks, months or even years past the events that we are recounting And this narrator allows us to ascribe meaning, to add complexity, to bring in new information to contrast other events that have happened. And say, this is similar to



this thing that happened, and because of these two things being contrast it, it gives it more meaning.

I believe that writing is meant to explore not explain and to connect a writer to a reader. But not necessarily to compare our experiences, but just to communicate them. So what is it that you want to communicate? How are you making connections to the reader? What role does your narrator play in what you're writing? I think sometimes we worry about using this type of narrator because we worry about whether we are going to mediate our younger self or our past self in, in some way. Whether we are going to betray those memories. And so I do see a lot of essays.

Student essays and essays that are read for journals.

That just sit in those moments that tell them from beginning to end and and then just end. When they get to the end there's no reflection and no thought no wandering among experience, no tying in of anything else. And while those experiences can be impactful and beautiful. I think they missed something. I think they are missing opportunities.

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in his collection of essays titled, *The Crackup*, that the sign of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function. Likewise, I think that a sign of a mature writer is the ability to look at some of these conflicting ideas and be able to write and reflect about them. Not discount one or the other of them just because they might have elements that conflict.

That is life writing especially essay writing is about the balance of these conflicting ideas.

So the last thing I think we need to consider when we are writing about our personal experience is the way we make connections. So let me tell you another story. Last Thanksgiving, my husband and I loaded our kids up. We took them on a road trip to California. We were going to spend the Thanksgiving weekend. We had all but one of our children with us who had to stay home and work.

And it had been a long time since we had been to California. While we were there along the way we thought we would make it an experience. So we did some fun things that we hadn't done for a really long time. We drove to Carmel, we drove down the 17 mile drive. Midway along the 17 mile drive between Carmel and Monterey is the loan cypress, which some people like to call the most photographed tree in America.

It is just ubiquitous. It is used in literature about California all the time, and it is just this startling and stark image of this lone cypress tree out on a rocky outcropping. Contrast it against the backdrop of the sea. It's beautiful. It had been years since we had done this drive. In fact, last time, that's our youngest is 16 was not even born yet.

So we thought it would be fun to do this we get out. We take pictures. We're looking at the cypress, and I noticed that that something looks different about this tree from the last time we had seen it.

Since the last time I'd seen it, when our children were much younger, there have been just some tremendous storms along the California coast.

In 2019, in February, many, many storms hit right at once and it actually cracked one third of the tree off and it fell into the sea.

So the silhouette of the tree that has been sort of this icon of California was permanently changed. So, they brought arborists out. They are looked at it and they're going, well, the tree is still healthy. Let's support it. And so they actually strapped it with different devices to the rocky outcropping. So, that in subsequent storms, it would be a little bit safer.

For me, this was a startling image because it mirrored my experience of the last year and a half. The backstory of this trip was that the purpose of the trip was to bring the cremated remains of my husband's aunt to Sacramento to her final resting place.

And the 18 months previously we had been taking care of my husband's parents who were both elderly and his aunt who was elderly. They were all approaching 90 and within that 18 months, we lost all three of them in April, then the next February and then the next August. So for me, looking at this tree, which was thriving and holding on to this outcropping and remaining sturdy in the aftermath of the loss of part of itself. This mirrored my experience.

It got me wondering about the ways that we anchor ourselves after loss. So when we're making connections and we talk about making connections in writing, this is what we talked about.

We want to write our own experiences. But how do we translate those for reader? How do we tell them our experience in a way that they not only go...

Oh, that's an interesting thing that happened. But, oh, I feel, I feel what happened. I connect with the things that happened to you. Let me tell you my story. Because ultimately, it's a communication.

So one part of essaying is sort of a resistance to making meaning for our reader, we want to indulge an impulse to wander.

If we do this right, we will find unexpected connections, insightful moments. And experiences that reflect on our past experiences in our life in a way that translates meaning for a reader.

I think too many essays focus only on that personal experience. The author assumes that it is the experience itself that adds meaning.

That instead of making connections that help the reader understand all they need to tell you is that one story. But, when we can connect to other experiences, other stories, and other journeys, it adds depth to what we're talking about. Finding these unexpected connections helps us look at the complexity of relationships. It helps us resist the impulse to reduce those experiences and those relationships to either their most traumatic or their most dramatic moments.

Iris Murdoch the British novelist, said writing stirs and satisfies our curiosity. It interests us in other people and other scenes and helps us to be tolerant and generous. In the end I think writing is a way for us to connect to translate our experiences in meaningful ways It gives us the tools to understand our own experiences as well as the experiences of others. To develop empathy and even what some might call wisdom. So, I think if we look for those ways to connect. If we look for the ways that our narrator can interact with our stories. And if we look for the ways that our form or our framework can add additional layers to meaning to our writing. It can Make our writing all the more complex, all the more beautiful, and all the more meaningful to those who are reading it.

Thank you for listening. I'll be here to answer any questions that you have. Most of all, I hope you get out there and write your stories.