

Empathy Starts with ‘I’

One of the most common frustrations for young writers is the experience of not being able to ‘feel’ their way into the viewpoint of their fictional characters. For the writers I’ve worked with and taught who have mental-health related disabilities, particularly Aspergers Syndrome and other types of autism, the difficulty is far more commonplace. The Creative Writing terminology for this is point of view or POV. If I cannot imagine myself under the skin and into the sensibility of another, whether that other is a fictional character or a living person, then I cannot connect with their story: its pain, joy (and idiocy) and, ultimately, see how the story of another is also my own. The inability to empathise is not just a concern for creative writers. Dr Bruce Perry, researcher in mental health and the neurosciences puts it like this: ‘failure to empathise is a key part of most social problems [including] crime, violence, war, racism; and of psychiatric and neurological conditions such as autism and depression.’ (Perry 2010)

Chapter 1. Empathy and the Brain.

The biological narrative behind empathy is that evolutionary processes have shaped our nervous systems so that we have the capacity to sense the inner state of another person: empathy is a survival mechanism because it matters to our emotional and physical health. Another narrative is that empathy underlies just about everything that is good about humanity; or to put it another way, what makes society work: trust, altruism, collaboration, charity. Love. We survive because we can love. We love because we can empathise.

During one of the early meetings of the Empathy & Writing Research Group at Bath Spa University, the head of Neuropsychology, Dr Alison Lee, remarked that there was a tiny site in the hippocampus, or frontal cortex of the brain, that neuropsychologists call the ‘empathy hub’, and that this site is enabled when we say, write or read ‘I’. The more the empathy site is activated, the stronger and more influential it becomes. I had one of those moments where I *knew* I had just heard something deeply significant, and this paper is a round-up of the key ideas I’ve been exploring since, and how they intersect. It is a slightly different angle on theory of mind.

Psychologists use the term ‘theory of mind’ to refer to our ability to think about the inner workings of another person. Theory of mind also relies on the frontal brain which is quite recent evolutionarily; only humans have this cortex, and all of our creative activity takes place here.

Neuroscience now knows that the brain is adapting and reconfiguring itself all the time, and also that, with a little understanding and discipline, we can each do a huge amount to change unwanted behaviour; that we can switch circuits in the brain like a train switches tracks. In his new book *The Hope Circuit*, the psychologist Martin Seligman, whose theory of learned helplessness is acknowledged by clinical psychologists internationally, explains how even depression can be re-routed. Not so long ago, the only way of altering the brain was to either remove parts of it, run an electric current through it, or to medicate it.

Ken Kesey's 1962 novel *One Flew Over The Cuckoos Nest* was based on the author's experience working in mental health. Kesey didn't believe the patients he was looking after were insane, but that society had rejected them because they did not fit the conventional ideas of how people were supposed to act and behave. This idea had been around for a long time even before the 60s, and now finally we are backing up theory with clinical research. Many personality 'disorders' are now (more empathetically), being called neuro-diversity.

The brain responds to language prompts, so even a thought sends a chemical signal that can either make us feel uplifted or miserable. If we are told something again and again, or think the same thing repetitively, a neural pathway is created to accommodate this. The brain's circuits are in fact more like plasticine than train tracks because they can very easily be remodelled. So it's absolutely *true* that what I think is what I am and who I am. In this age of accelerated knowledge, the neurosciences are humming with new discoveries – identifying dazzling networks of interconnecting signals and chemicals in the brain.

We now know that the same network lights up when I perform an action as when I see someone else perform the same action. This is why I might find myself either smiling inanely or weeping over what some actors on the TV are doing, hoping no one has seen me. My brain doesn't know that they're actors, because it has been trained to read emotion from facial expression via networks called mirror neurons. The greater our awareness of our own emotional and bodily states, the more mirror neurons are activated and the better we are at reading others. When my brain reads or writes 'I', it cannot tell the difference between the 'I' that is me, and the 'I' that is other. So the networks that produce *my* feelings also make sense of the feelings of others. So, empathy starts, literally, with 'I'. With you, with me, with 'I'. Intimacy with ourselves is vital to any other form of intimacy. When, for instance, we write in a diary or journal, as if in dialogue with ourselves, we can, literally, rewrite the brain.

Around about now I should remind you, (and myself) that I am not a scientist or psychologist. I am a writer, editor and teacher. But I have lived-experience of a trauma disorder and a fascination with what happened to my brain. I self-medicated in several ways, including by writing novels safely set in far-off places and other times. I noticed, over the years and the novels, that the same themes would arise again and again, like pieces of something surfacing in an archeological dig. Without my realising it, writing became a dialogue between parts of myself and helped me to put some of the pieces back together.

Novels – especially first novels – are frequently semi-autobiographical, because telling stories is a survival mechanism and we are compelled to tell our own story first. Our sensibility, however, is usually revealed not in the story itself but in the voice which underpins a narrative, and this is what makes us unique. *Voice* is the deepest expression of who we are and describes the uniqueness of a piece of work, and a body of work, whether we are poets or painters, mothers, academics, scientists or politicians.

The depth psychologist Ira Progoff, whose own body of work I am studying, believed that the greatest creative work is one's life, and that one of the best ways to see the recurring patterns and themes in our lives, is by initiating dialogue with ourselves. I will come back to this. Meanwhile, the brain is merrily rewriting its own software; constantly modelling itself on the life it perceives. Because we think in narrative form, the brain, too, seeks out narrative, and narrative seeks *meaning*. The author Flannery O'Connor said: *I write to know what I think*; Joan Didion said: *I don't know what I think until I write it down*; Stephen King said: *I write to find out what I think*.

There is great power in the writing which comes from unearthing our authentic voice. The poet and short story writer Grace Paley urges us to take courage in the sound of our own voices: *There's probably a natural grammar at the tip of your tongue. You may not believe it, but if you say what's on your mind in the language that comes to you from your parents and your street friends, you'll probably say something beautiful.*

Chapter 2. The Psyche.

Since it is with my brain that I am observing the workings of my brain, I choose to believe that the pathways to awareness are not all neurological. The insights I gained through writing fiction, led to doctoral research into creativity and subjectivity: how the matrix that we sometimes call the Unconscious mind or the Psyche appears to have an almost supernatural wisdom, and how to access this. This 'source' is present in those moments when we are astonished by some idea or realisation which appears to have come from outer space, or in the symbolic language that seems to deliver coded messages we dream.

In a recent essay published in the science journal *Nautilus*, the author Cormac McCarthy reimagines 'the' Unconscious (though it seems to be slightly misleading treating this as a noun, which suggests that it is located in the physical dimension) as a kind of archaic entity for which language is far too contemporary, as an explanation for the way, in dreaming and other altered states, the symbolic represents the real. The Unconscious might then be seen as the keeper of humanity's wisdom: a kind of mothership hard-drive that holds all that we upload to it, over a lifetime, or, if you like, several lifetimes. But its currency is not literacy, it is instinct.

There is some interesting thinking about the development of language historically, and the synchronous receding of instinct and intuition, across cultures. The surgeon and author Leonard Shlain suggests in *The Alphabet & the Goddess* that the process of learning alphabetic literacy changed the human brain, forcing it to bypass its instinctual and imaginative faculties in favour of language, which is a rational system. Incidentally, he also points out that the time line for the development of written language coincides with the receding of the cultures in which there was feminine-divine. It is possible that our species became patriarchal and scripture-oriented as it became literate. But this is another paper.

Maybe, then, the Unconscious has only recently come to terms with language, and *maybe* the brain is its gatekeeper, allowing certain language signals to trigger a creative or instinctual response.

This finally brings me back to my conversation with the neuropsychologist Dr. Alison Lee, who told me that when the brain registers ‘I’, it cannot distinguish between the ‘I’ that is me and the ‘I’ that is other. In spite of being the most mysterious and sophisticated organ, the brain, it seems, is also easily misled. In creative writing the use of ‘I’ is called first-person narration and is most often used in fiction to create intimacy and confidentiality with the reader because, as we now know, our empathy hub is being enabled.

I have been exploring the ways in which certain types of creative writing can positively impact on the brain and, potentially, change it, both supporting us to be *more* empathetic, with ourselves and others – and also *restoring* empathy where it has been over-written or bypassed, often as a result of abuse or trauma.

First person narration, especially life writing and journal writing, is also, potentially, a fast-track to finding one’s voice, as a human and as a writer. The structured journaling technique I’m working with is based on the work of the depth psychologist Ira Progoff, who was a student of Carl Jung and who advanced Jung’s research into creativity and the Unconscious. Progoff’s method takes the shape of a series of dialogues, within and outside of the self; with one’s body, with works, with other persons, and even historical figures, or wisdom figures from myth. His method is designed to bring the inner and outer into alignment. Progoff saw all creative practise as a dialogue – an exchange between the artist and the art.

Of the many authors who have used journaling as a personal and creative tool, my favourite is perhaps Virginia Woolf who famously lived with depression. In *A Writer’s Diary* Virginia Woolf speaks of the value of journaling in allowing unfiltered access to the rough gems of our own minds, ordinarily dismissed by the self-censorship of ‘formal writing’: *The habit of writing for my own eye loosens the ligaments. It resemble[s] some deep old desk, in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through. [Then] come[s] back, after a year or two, and find[s] that the collection had sorted itself and refined itself into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of life, and yet with the aloofness of a work of art.*

A common theme in Virginia Woolf’s writing about writing is that it is a search for meaning: she said that, when she wrote something down she could ‘turn it over in the light’ as though it were now whole.

The work of the American Social psychologist James Pennebaker, one of the leading researchers into creative writing for therapeutic purposes, reflects Woolf’s observations and suggests that written narrative – whether it is fiction or not – is predestined to find meaning. Information is processed by the brain in such a way that when written down it must have an identifiable composition that makes sense of the story parts. In effect, as we write we instinctively create structure: cause; outcome; resolution. There is something mysteriously powerful in the construction of a narrative, as anyone who has done time digging around inside their head and heart will know. Pennebaker’s research also reflects the life-work of the anthropologist Joseph Campbell, who proposed that *all* story, from ancient mythology through to genre fiction and life-writing, follows an identifiable pattern.

Campbell wrote volumes and volumes on comparative mythology, believing that we are inexplicably drawn to shape written narrative as a journey that maps a route through some aspect of life; that narratives are quests: for purpose, for answers and, again, for meaning. We write to make sense of our world and what has happened to us.

Abusers are often playing out a narrative that is their own version of normal: the brain has, unwittingly, laid down a darker pathway for them to travel along. In his book *Trauma and Memory*, leading trauma expert Peter Levine explains how overwhelming emotion can interfere with proper memory processing. Traumatic memories are caused by a breakdown of the brain systems responsible for creating autobiographical memories. The trauma becomes trapped, not just in our brain but in our bodies. It is replayed over and over as anxiety or panic, or as a more serious psychological disturbance, and it floods the body with chemicals and hormones that we can experience as depression. The frontal brain is shut down, which is where creative thinking and the 'empathy hub' is. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, is often the end result; a chronic condition in which any reminder of the original trauma trips the injured brain circuit and continues to cause pain until the memory is rerouted, or rewritten.

Chapter 3. Journaling.

So we arrive separately at three aspects of journaling that have potential for transformation: literally rewriting the brain, tapping into the psyche, or unconscious processes, and cultivating empathy by writing in the first person. One of the most powerfully transformative journaling techniques is dialogue. Ira Progoff found that, in choosing any aspect of life that has become uncomfortable – an emotional or physical condition, a person, a social institution, an event – and establishing a dialogue with it as an entity, like writing a script with two characters: the 'I' that is me and the 'I' that is grief or illness or a behaviour or an institution etc., we set up an access portal to answers and insights which, arguably, are latent in the psyche.

The brain is sculpted by what we tell it and expose it to. The brain recognises 'I' as the self. When we write, say or read 'I' we are immediately empathetic, so writing in the first person is actually a means of gaining compassion first for myself. Without this, I cannot be compassionate of another because empathy actually means that not only is 'I' *me*, but also that 'I' is *you*.

The intersection of psychology, neurology and contemplative practise has also been the subject of numerous recent studies into mindfulness and brain chemistry, including *Buddha's Brain*, by Rick Hanson, a neuropsychologist and mindfulness teacher, and Richard Mendus, a neurologist. *Buddha's Brain* reveals how the way we think sculpts the brain, and how some of the greatest teachers in history changed their brains and then changed the world.

We are, and we aren't, on this journey alone. If we are fortunate we will find our fellowship, whether it is in family, friends, partners or colleagues. But we are still responsible for our own actions and need to live with ourselves. Writing to ourselves and for ourselves, without judgement, could be one of the most intimate and fulfilling relationships we will ever experience. 'I' is someone

who knows you intimately, who will listen; who understands what you have been through, thinks you're amazing and wants you to succeed and thrive and to be nothing more than you.

The implications for research into empathy and narration are far-reaching, not only in the fields of mental health and trauma recovery and in Creative Writing, but also in the creation of an accessible practise for any person or institution who is interested in promoting wellbeing and individuation.

Leonard Shlain, author of *The Alphabet and the Goddess*, was diagnosed with a brain tumour while he was writing his last book, *Leonardo's Brain*. His daughter, who was by his side in his last moments, said that she could *see the thoughts dancing in his eyes as he started to slip away, and he looked amazed.*

He kept saying *wow*.