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Dimensions of Empathic Therapy

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An Instructors Perspective

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I had been teaching fiction and autobiographical writing for more than 25 years. Certain admonitions had become almost rote, for example: "You cannot allow a character to die or make love on page two. There is no way a reader can care enough at that point to either experience loss or to enjoy the happiness of a stranger, even if the stranger is, in the case of autobiography, the writers own self."

This was a hard lesson in humility, always, for the beginning writer who felt that whatever was most important to herself, in her own life, should somehow immediately translate into a story that would be of interest to anyone encountering it.

"Being told stories that are too personal before you know the cast of characters is like looking at photographs of someone else's grandchildren, which is something you can only do if you already care about the grandparents. Caring about someone else's joys and pains in their details can only come gradually." "And yet," I would continue, "if you cannot find a way to create an immediate illusion of empathy on page one, the reader will not find the impetus to continue." We would speak of the necessity of helping a reader to enter into the experience of another as if she or he were already inside that other, even though in the beginning of any written text, the reader knows nothing at all about the one who is wrestling for attention.

The more that my students were able to grasp certain basic principles in the creation of empathy, the more easily I found they were able to solve fairly complicated problems of narrative structure and voice. I wasn't prepared for the richness and complexity of the reactions to the mandate not to take reader-involvement for granted, when I found myself leading a memoir writing group for women who were victims of extreme trauma, who for the most part hadn't yet developed much sense of self- worth.

It was a time when memoirs by unknown men and women were just beginning to be taken seriously by the reading public and suddenly there was a roomful of women, many of whom were

uneducated, coming from backgrounds of poverty, sexual abuse, and war, wanting to write book- length projects about their own lives. Most of them were mothers who were deeply concerned about telling their stories so that the cycle of patterns passed down through generations might stop.

In response to the need that these women expressed, the town of Southampton had offered us space in their Cultural Center. The New York State Council on the Arts and the Long Island Fund for Women and Girls offered us support. I didn't realize, back in March of 1996 when this started, that this was to be a project that would change my life.

As I think back over the first week of our meetings, when I still didn't know what to expect, the first person I picture is Dorothy. She takes out the pictures of herself and her two sisters, to show to each newcomer, whoever will look, calling herself "poor little Dorothy." "It is time for me to tell little Dorothy's story," she says over and over.

The photographs are nearly 50-years-old, and date from the time when Dorothy discovered her father in bed with her two sisters. When she reported this to another family member, the four children were sent to an orphanage where they spent their growing-up years. She tells us how in her own search for love she had lived with a man who had abused her children. When the story had come out, she had even gone to court against her children, to try to save the man. But so much has changed since then. Writing from the inside about what made her repeat such a terrible pattern might help other mothers and daughters, she says.

Next to Dorothy sits Pat, but unlike Dorothy, she tells nothing about her own childhood. She seems a bit out of place in the group. She says she wants to write about home schooling and home birthing, and why she made those choices in the mothering of her own two children. She writes even less than she speaks, but only every once in a while there is a hint of something beneath the surface, as easily, almost too easily, whenever she comes to a line, poorly rendered because it is so incomplete, evoking experiences in nature, she will burst into tears.

Then Hazel comes. Time is a funny master, when it comes to memory. In this case two events a year apart are fused, because their consequences were eventually so intertwined. It is a dangerously icy night when we first hear what is to become the familiar sound of Hazel's metal crutches as she makes her way

pantingly, but without halting through the double sets of heavy doors, her face expectant and beautiful, and her whole being lull of words.

As the details of her story come back, as she first told them without even looking around to see who her audience was, everything about her seems to ask for our empathy: the fact that she was the "well child" in a family where three of the children died of sickle-cell anemia, and that therefore a serious birth injury which caused severe back pain was never looked into in childhood, when she might have been saved the paralysis that afflicts her now; the fact that she out of the family's surviving six children (out of nine) is the one who, wheelchair bound, has returned to Southampton to take care of her 80-year-old mother, rushing around in her wheelchair baking eight coconut custard pies for her mother's birthday; that even paralyzed she raised her own child and the child of the sister who died of sickle-cell anemia, sending them both through college.

This whole list, which we received rapid-fire in our first 10 minutes with Hazel—as similarly we had received Dorothy's "list"—of course inspired tremendous compassion along with an almost unbounded admiration.

Yet I found, simultaneously, even as Hazel was still speaking, I was becoming increasingly worn-out, and almost counterintuitively a distance was developing between us. I could see, as I looked around the room, that the other women were beginning to have a similar experience.

What had happened? Everything being told was ordering me to know that I cared, but I found that in another part of me I was warding the caring away. I was turning the woman in front of me into a stranger, a case history.

I think it is important for me to say here that as the child of a therapist there were things I had absorbed, both life-giving and intrusive, that ran in my blood and deeply colored my way of working with other people.

For me the teaching of writing provided an important way of reaching into the recesses of parts of the self that had been silenced, while providing the boundaries—the sense of aiming for a product that was separate from the self—that I never was allowed to know in childhood.

I have carried inside me, ever since I was old enough to have my own knowledge of the psychoanalytic process, a deep respect for the delaying of insights, until the patient is ready to properly feel them. I would come to realize, very profoundly, as I worked with Hazel and the other women in the group, that the joint mission of delaying of empathy, and striving for it even before it can properly occur, was one of the most precious things that the writing of autobiography could offer to people who had grown up feeling wounded and alone.

Hazel had been right in the middle of giving the goriest imaginable description of her birth, told in the Black "Church English" of her preacher father, when I stopped her. I will never forget her words as she described the way her father had been told that because of her position in her mother's womb there was no way for both the mother and the baby to survive, so with seven children already at home, they had no choice but to dismember this new one.

It was a quite conscious decision I made at that moment not to ask why they didn't attempt a Cesarean, nor to probe into that Biblical rendition of the "beginning of the dismemberment with forceps," that scarred her forehead and permanently maimed her spine, "before my mother suddenly cried out God Bless and I was born!!"—and then suddenly, when I felt that I should have been listening most intently, I felt caught in a nightmare so private that instead of feeling anything more, I was warding it all away into the area of another person's fantasy, perhaps not true, and even if true, not having anything to do with me.

"We must backtrack," I said to Hazel. "While once we have known you a while, we will care about this very profoundly, for right now there is no way a reader can enter into this with the depth of feeling that you deserve."

In the course of her rhythmically galloping crescendos and diminuendos, equal only to the sermons I later was to hear in her church, she had mentioned that when her younger sister Cathy became pregnant at the age of seventeen, she had asked Hazel, then twenty-two, if she were to die from sickle-cell anemia after giving birth, would Hazel agree to raise her baby.

The doctors had told Cathy never to get pregnant, Hazel said, for that would hasten her death. And even as Hazel said those words, I knew that this was where her written story must begin. It was a place

where even a stranger might feel empathy: a midway point where caring would be inevitable, yet we would have time to get to know the characters as slowly as we realistically must. I could tell, also, by looking at Hazel's face, that this was a place where she was able to let her own feelings give way to respect for the listeners' separateness, until she found her proper way and voice. It was neither too close nor too distant from caring.

I cannot describe what it meant to help Hazel to "stay in the room" with her sister long enough, for what turned out to be over a hundred pages and many months of work, so that we were all able to feel the story in its full impact.

Every woman in the room helped Hazel to stay there, caring for every detail, even before Hazel could dare to know how much she herself cared.

Every woman helped her to slow down, until the scene with the sisters in the room took on all of their childhoods and all of their hopes and fears.

It took a great deal for Hazel to be able to write of how furious she was that she who was ostracized by the family for having a child out of wedlock, who had not wanted to have a child, must accept the fact that her "baby sister" had gotten pregnant very deliberately, in absolute defiance of the doctor's orders, so strong was the mandate inside Cathy—as Hazel would finally be able to depict it—to make life.

I will never forget Pat's and Dorothy's tears when Hazel arrived at that moment, deliberately delayed until the reader could feel the full impact, when Cathy finally says: "If I die, will you promise to raise my baby."

Although it had been this very line, when Hazel spoke it on that very first night, that had been my beacon to know where Hazel was going, it was important that she take ever so many pages and months of writing time to get there, in order for true empathy to develop.

As I worked with the women in the group, I was very careful not to get into areas that I felt untrained to handle, minding that admonition from psychoanalysis, not to stir up premature insights. The fact that we were writing with the deliberate goal of creating finished products for others to read

made it relatively easy to separate what was needed for a reader—that is, a narrative structure where not too much was learned to soon—from what the writer herself might otherwise have been seduced into revealing too quickly, had "self-expression" rather than formal production been the intent.

I had long ago observed that when not enough play space (in Winnicott's sense) existed between writer and product, the reader would be forced to over-identify, in a counterproductive merger. Or else she would detach herself entirely, in the kind of effort to break free that I had experienced when Hazel first began to tell her tale.

Hazel's writing was moving forward at a rate that was leaving most of the other women in the group behind. Part of it was a natural narrative gift, taken from her childhood of listening to religious storytelling, but as I thought of the wonderful lilting Irish story telling voices that Pat had grown up with as well as the immigrant languages that many of the other women had heard, I knew that something else was at play.

What aided me in not attempting to tamper with bringing up insights that might be detrimentally premature was the fact that material that a writer wasn't ready to deal with was invariably so poorly written or so badly misplaced in the text, there was every reason to implore the writer to save it for later, without going into the psychological reasons why.

I will never forget the time when Hazel tried to deal with her memories of incest too soon. It was in the middle of a section she had been writing when she first began to take seriously the fact that her newly pregnant "baby sister" might die, and for many reasons this was a very difficult section to write. Suddenly she broke with her voice and inserted a story in the voice of a previously absent older sister whom she clearly disliked, a story so obviously out of place in the text and of such an intrusive quality, it so broke the emotion occurring between the two sisters and so violated my listeners trust, I found myself escaping into wondering what I would be having for dinner, always, for me, a sure sign that a writer has "gone off."

Deliberately I had trained myself not to listen too carefully, when I found my mind naturally wandering, that way I could replicate what would probably happen to a reader. I had found it was helpful to the writers in the group when I shared these mental wanderings, so that they too could begin

to experience their own lapses in attention, and know where their writing had begun to fail.

Because I knew that Hazel wrote well and wanted to be pushed, and also that she had a good sense of humor, I was able to tease her about the moment when I started to wonder quite specifically about whether I wanted fish or vegetables. Usually the group members enjoyed my sharing of those mental meandering, which so echoed what happened to the reader once the tension of being inside the head and the heart of another had been broken. But this night the others in the group, who were not yet relaxed enough to listen as selectively as I did, were positively furious at me. How could I talk about wanting to eat dinner when Hazel was writing about her uncle's brutal sexual attack on her when she was 8 years old, they had asked.

For a moment I too felt embarrassed and ashamed. Then I drew a deep breath. I began to explain that this was too important a memory to give to a false voice, that of the disliked sister, where it was sure to be diminished and lost, and that it did a disservice to Hazel, who clearly was all there talking to her hurt pregnant other sister, to break into such a moving moment in that way.

It was the first time in all of Hazel's writing that I'd heard her express so little empathy for herself, and I had reacted by not even hearing the content. While for the other women in the group my "not hearing" had a momentarily jarring effect, for Hazel herself it would occasion a major breakthrough.

Meanwhile Dorothy, whose telling of her story evoked such instant empathy, had stopped writing almost entirely, still coming to the group but mostly putting herself in the role of the one who would be deeply moved by the writings of others, continually showing the "sweet" pictures of her sisters and herself to every newcomer and saying: "I was the one who was punished for speaking when I was a child. When I told people what I had seen, all four of us children were taken away from our mother and put in an orphanage.

"Now it is time for little Dorothy to try once again to speak."

But once she had said this, it was as if she had no other words. She could neither find "little Dorothy" in a true sense, with the more three dimensional rounding of adult retrospect, nor be with her in replicating scenes that would bring back the confusion by not trying to protect all the players from the

reader's listening ear. Only once when another woman in the group suddenly turned on me and said: "But you don't understand why I am so afraid to tell my family secrets, because your life wasn't threatened every day, you weren't beaten!"—and going around the room every woman said, yes, she'd been beaten, I had said, "But no Dorothy wasn't." It was then that Dorothy had to confess that her sainted mother had beaten all of the children brutally, and we began to speak of the ways in which she was kept from telling her full story out of the need to keep her mother, beautiful, innocent and good.

Pat, on the other hand, after 6 months of writing about being a good mother in her choices of home birthing and home schooling, listening avidly to everyone else's childhood stories while leaving her own childhood out, suddenly began to write about watching her father rip off her mother's clothes and call her brutal names, in response to her mother's affair with her grandfather. As she began to go about trying to recapture what it was like for her to be a child, she would go down on the floor and try to rediscover her childhood ways of praying, looking backwards in order to rediscover the language, as she alternated her movements from the computer to the floor and back up.

There was a great deal of concern about not wanting to seem like victims among the women in the group, and not wanting to "whine" or elicit pity instead of respect, and this in turn led to our beginning to talk about aggression, as we found examples from the works of such writers as Jamaica Kincaid and Dorothy Allison in which all of the feistiness and spitefulness of the child in danger was vibrantly portrayed, and all of the frailties of the others around were let in, works in which no characters or family members held either all goodness or all badness, and even "victim children" were never entirely passive.

We spoke about the activeness of hope and of joy, and how hard it was to portray those beautiful or hopeful moments which are the legacy of every survivor, when the writer already knows how those hopes will be dashed. It was then that Pat wrote her first real breakthrough piece, "The Green Bottle," about being taken to a doctor because something was wrong with her nerves, and being confused even in memory about why in this family where there was never enough money for medical help they had chosen to take her there.

When she came into the room that day I could tell that something major had released in her face. "It is strange," she said, "I used to think it was so terrible and frightening. Now I know that they were all just

people, and it was a shame, but this is what they did, and it happened." In the course of her writing two incidents she had never put together were suddenly combined by a link that now seemed both creatively interesting and plausible: "Perhaps it was because I knocked my brother unconscious with a mallet" and "They had taken me to the doctor." With the passive Pat gone that protected the anger that this unprotected child must have felt, and the angry Pat allowed on the scene, suddenly she was no longer merely the empathic listener. Her writing took on all the poetry and the emotional complexity of the books that she loved to read.

"It just happened. And there it all was. I neither loved them nor hated them, nor did I try to understand them," she repeated. "It was no longer a haunt," she said in a voice I will never forget, as the word "haunt," used that way, from then on took on a special meaning also for me.

As Pat began to experiment—and again I think of Winnicott's play space—with techniques and voices separate from the attempt merely to relive her trauma, she came in one day with that wonderful lilting "I've got threeeeeee kids and a dog. I can't just say those words. I've got to sing 'em. Give them the rhythm my father did when he was drinking . . . " And then suddenly she was really inside her father's voice, his words melded with her own lilting with all the sung remembering.

She had pushed aside an enormous milestone in coming to terms with her ambivalence around giving up the demonized pictures of her parents that she previously carried, and letting in the empathy that allowed her to write that last line, half her father's and half her own: "I'm just a kid myself, a kid who needs love."

It was not accidental that this happened around the same time as her giving up the notion of "Patty perfect," finally daring to create the Pat that we could really love, so sad and so angry. At about the same time we noticed she could write about beautiful experiences in nature without crying, but could give them enough fullness so that we, her listeners, cried instead.

As one by one the women in the group let in more empathy for previously demonized and hated family members though allowing themselves to recreate scenes and memories more fully, the challenge was extended to the group as a whole: to care about all of the players all along that complex chain of "story," cause and effect, and to deal with the writing blocks and breakthroughs that such unexpected

caring suddenly calls forth.

Hazel had taken quite seriously my mandate not to let something as powerful as an incest memory be trivialized by bringing it in at a moment when neither the writer nor the narrator could feel it, and several months had gone by in which we had all but forgotten the incident with uncle Bob, so busy were we with what went on between the two sisters. But now the Hazel teller, 22 years old in book-time, was seated in a hospital room, while her mother, so absent for Hazel, tended the sick, pregnant Cathy.

How differently this time we were able to approach the 8-year-old child, sitting between the tall weeds, hiding from the taunts of her teasing sisters and brothers as she took in the sensuousness of the earth and sunlight, trying to make herself happy, catching bugs, far away from the others who would mock that activity, calling her dirty. How poignant was that moment when uncle Bob comes down to the child's level and takes her into his lap, giving her the cuddling she so craves, and helps her catch the small fascinating creatures, seemingly sharing her fascination which the others just think is dirty and strange. And how terrible then is the betrayal, the pain of the uncle's most brutal and most heartless rape of a child. How painfully alone is the child in the bathroom, in her blood and confusion, as she tries without knowing what has happened to wash herself clean.

All changed for the child who was Hazel in that moment, yet there would have been no way for her to have written of that expectation broken without the slow months she had spent letting a deeper kind of caring for herself develop.

I will never forget Dorothy's tearstained face as Hazel read, nor how Dorothy spoke so softly of loving the child who was Hazel, nor how Pat, who was not very physically demonstrative, had cried alone in her chair, while Dorothy came over to hug Hazel.

At the close of our session, I warned Hazel not to be surprised if she had a hard couple of days, having revealed so much that had been dark and secret before. Not surprisingly, the following meeting, Hazel looked tired and worn, and confessed that she had not slept. She, who had written constantly since she joined the group, had been unable to write.

What Hazel gave as her reason, however, was something that I wasn't prepared for, and it came to

me as a piece of a wisdom that I had been looking for, almost without knowing it, over many years.

> "I was completely devastated by how much you all cared," Hazel said. "I had promised my 8-year-old child, my inner child inside me, that I would never betray our secret. It belonged to the two of us only, and whenever things would get hard for me she would come to me and comfort me. We were all alone with this always, and now, by telling other people, I have betrayed her."

I looked over as Dorothy sat in her chair, saying: "But Hazel, I would give anything to do the kind of writing that made people care so much for the hurt little Dorothy," and I knew in that moment that what was blocking Dorothy most was her not understanding what would upset the person who once, long ago, had had no listeners, to abandon that past child and pattern, by suddenly having listeners now.

> "And I feel especially terrible that I had told this secret to white people, when no one in my own family or community knows," Hazel added.

I thought of Dorothy's holding Hazel, after Hazel finished reading; Dorothy's pink suntanned hand resting so lovingly on Hazel's darker shoulder, Hazel's crutches, lying like some sort of reminder at their feet.

Interestingly, when it came to the moment in Hazel's writing, several months later, when she was looking down at her baby and suddenly saw the baby's father's eyes, Dorothy would be among those who dared Hazel to write about the happy and romantic moments of the sexual experience, before Hazel had felt so abandoned and betrayed.

> "All I feel about him is bitterness and hatred," Hazel had said. I wanted to do away with my baby when I saw her father's features in her."
>
> "But you must have felt something else," Dorothy and the others had said.

Months later as Hazel spent long homebound days in rekindling in writing the romantic feeling that had led her towards Walter, we would speak of how betrayal couldn't be real unless there had been something beautiful once, to have been betrayed. She would arrive at the moment when the feelings of her 22-year-old self allowed her, even though her memories of her uncle and her fears, to wish for full sexual consummation with Walter, writing slowly about the sensuality of the preparatory bath, her lighting of candles and to the rhythm of jazz pulling down the bed covers in waiting, when suddenly she looked in the mirror and instead of herself she saw "a very sad and frightened little girl, with reddened

eyes and hands holding her face.

> "She was angry with me. She spoke, and shame became my patron. 'Look at you, what are you doing?' she cried out. 'Please, no don't do that, you know he's going to hurt us . . . I tell you all the time that we can't ever, never do anything like that, not ever . . . How could you forget what happened to us!' "

With a precision of feeling that to this day sends goose bumps up my spine, Hazel had brought back the inner voice of the 8-year-old "abandoned," to whom she felt she had broken her promise on that day when she first told her secret.

> "I had no immediate feelings, as my body seemed to sink deep, deep into an abyss. A river of water sprang from my eyes . . . I could hear myself crying but the sound was hollow because above it all, the little girl was yet scolding me for my actions. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' I pleaded over and over again. 'I just wanted to feel like everybody else. They all say it's O.K. if they do it when you're ready, and want them to. It's only bad if they make you do it . . . Can't you understand that? . . . I won't let anybody ever hurt us again."

Hazel knew nothing about the literature of incest or dissociation, and yet, in trying to explore her empathy for the frightened parts of herself she wrote: "I was sure my little girl was there, for we were inseparable and somehow I could feel her about, yet something or someone else was also present in my bedroom. I could feel that other someone in me, wanting to come forth, be recognized and it was oblivious to my presence and the presence of my little girl."

Was the precision of her thoughts or the Victorian quality of her language more startling as she wrote: "Seemingly, I had split into three personages, the me (which was my real self), the abandoned, (my sad little girl) and now appeared the broker, who would mediate the me 22 year old "me's" desire to be appropriately sexual and the fears of "the abandoned" who only remembered how she wished to be comfortably held?

I will never forget the expression of release on Hazel's face when later, in a dream sequence the "me" let go to all its power to forgive, telling the still reticent "abandoned," who still won't allow herself to be touched, that "some hearts are very cold and uncaring and that was not supposed to be, and whoever had mistreated her was so wrong and probably unhappy themselves . . .

"Then I began talking about a real heart, true and loving caring heart. About a heart that would never leave her alone again . . . " In a passage reminiscent of some of the lesser known passages in Hans

Christian Andersen, as "the abandoned" still rebuffs her advances, she continues to explain "that some hearts are so unhappy that all they know is how to spread sadness, and loneliness, isolation and misery. But that's because they, at some time in their lives, felt just like she was feeling," until finally "The little girl turned around and looked at me. She never spoke a word, but I know she was feeling happy because she reached her hand out and wanted to hold mine. Just as I reached and touched hers, the door to the apartment opened and in walked Walter."

It had been a long journey for Hazel to find the love for the hurt, abandoned part of herself that had been seen by no one. And yet, I wonder, did Hazel, Pat and even Dorothy, always, in some small surviving corners of themselves, keep pure that love, feeling that it could only stay intact in most dire secrecy?

More than anyone else I have worked with Hazel was able to share her fears about allowing others to enter into the circle of her carefully guarded self-empathy, and also eventually to share the joys of making known the parts of her that even through the worst times of her trauma kept the love for the abandoned child alive.

I thought once again about my refusal to give lip service empathy to the unknown person behind Hazel's initial "case history" of her trauma, before she had chosen to show us the whole person, striving for integration, whom we too had needed time and slow introduction in order to love. How empowering it was to show that fuller person whom the other might care for, only ever so slowly, as one was able to leave behind the unlistened-to self and to accept care.

I thought about how slowly Pat had let us see enough of her family interaction, so that our feelings, as listeners and readers, for the people who had hurt her, would never gallop ahead of her own.

And what about Dorothy, who for all of her seemingly immediate evocation of empathy, repeated with the advent of each new stranger, seemed ultimately to be leaving herself behind.

What Hazel had said about feeling that she had betrayed her "8-year-old abandoned" by letting us listen to her story and care, along with Dorothy's not being able to understand why Hazel or anyone should feel that way, gave me an important clue as to how to work with Dorothy.

While Dorothy continued to "protest too much" about wanting nothing more than to have others care for "little Dorothy," Hazel's description of her unexpected ambivalence when that care finally came, made me begin to suspect that underneath her many statements that she wanted to be heard, Dorothy probably carried a similar, or even much stronger ambivalence about leaving the old unheard "little child Dorothy" behind.

Deliberately I stopped trying to help Dorothy speak. I stopped trying to help her understand her silence by replaying over and over again the source of its roots. For a while she stopped coming. But even after she came back, I decided to take her word whenever she said that what she wrote was not worth reading aloud and let her come and go without trying to encourage her. She came, she said, because even when she herself couldn't write she said it made her feel empowered to see other women breaking through.

Only every once in a while a woman would join the group who, to my horror, would say that she envied Dorothy her story, for it would make such a good book. And inside myself I would get very angry, understanding why Dorothy was holding back, not wanting the compassion that came from the cruelty of life experiences one could not control.

I know there were those who were confused when I continually warded away the advances of all who were trying to force Dorothy to write "because her story was so important to be told." But it was only when everyone else in the group was finally comfortable enough to "let" Dorothy relax and listen, even if she never again felt the urge to write, that Dorothy said, "I found a whole new way to start." She then began to read to us about walking with a woman who was dressed in black from head to toe, trying to reach up to a partially covered ear which finally came down to her level and whispering: "My Daddy did something bad. He hurt us," trying over and over again to find the words for what her father did, while she watched a finger cover the unknown woman's mouth, gesturing a shhhhhh she barely was old enough to understand and saying "You must never speak of this again, or you will burn in Hell. It is a sin to speak like that."

Each detail of that little bit of prose that day rang vivid and true, coming from the time before the silencing had happened with the child's quite natural urge to speak, when nuns were blackened

creatures with big ears and fingers who did not have names or reasons to say what they did, and fathers weren't supposed to do things that children couldn't understand.

And after Dorothy read, when the discussion centered on why her approach had worked, she said, almost in little Dorothy's voice, "This time I'll let you talk about me." Surrounded by the other women who for so long had offered their listening ears, I felt that she had come at last to know that she could speak also alone, and find her own way slowly, to her own self empathy, even as she wrote about the moment of a silence that had been imposed on her, the breaking of the silence would belong to Dorothy alone.

As I watched not only the breakthroughs but the backslidings, I thought about how only when the shapes and rhythms of revealing were within one's own speed and control, could true empathic sharing come. Only then could the caring of another—whether stranger, reader, workshop friend, lover or family member—be given to a whole and richly modulated self. Never ever, no matter how powerful, could a story be separated from its teller, and given away to another.

I felt that it had been a long journey for us all.