

WRITING NAKED:  
THE BENEFITS OF EXPOSING  
YOURSELF THROUGH MEMOIR

Bella Mahaya Carter

I used to believe that if I wrote what I wanted to write, I'd be arrested, my parents would disinherit me, my husband would leave me, and I'd end up living in the streets. Thoughts about self-exposure can be irrational—and scary. It's hard enough to do the work of mining memories and turning the chaos of life into literature. If I ruminated over possible responses to my work before it was written, I'd never get anything done. The Muse shrivels under a microscope.

An award-winning author once said that the best way to get through writing a memoir is to be in denial that anyone will ever read what you're writing. I get this. In the writing classes I teach, *Write Where You Are: The Art of Being Present on the Page*, lesson one is about getting out of your own

way so that what wants to come *through* you is free to do so. I tell my students no one will read their work (for now). I encourage them to give themselves permission to say anything—without judgment—and to release their shame.

Inevitably, my students let it all hang out, and their ugly, beautiful, naked selves shimmer and shine as they shed inhibitions and reveal secrets. This is possible in a space that feels safe, in an environment where acceptance trumps judgment every time, and when you know that nobody “out there”—especially the people you’re writing about—will know what you’re saying, until or unless you are ready to share.

And more often than not with my students, that day arrives. They *want* to share. They may be scared. They may be insecure. They may worry what people will think, but once a story wraps its delicate tendrils around a writer’s heart and mind, the writer *needs* to address the complex task of unraveling it. This process sometimes leads to the creation of a manuscript. My students write because they have something to say and something that needs to be *received* in order for their work to feel complete.

Veteran writers realize what they write is larger than they are. They understand that people buy and read books not because readers care about the writer, per se, but because readers long to see themselves reflected in the pages of the books they read. They are looking for clues to help them navigate their own lives.

By the time my students are well into book projects, they’ve matured as writers, at which point denying that anyone will read what they’ve written stands at cross-purposes with their goals. After all, they’ve *chosen* to write a book. If they’re doing things right, they’re already cultivating a readership across multiple platforms, through blog posts, social media, readings, conferences, and more. They *want* people to read their book.

This is an auspicious moment in which, if you're open to it, a shift occurs. You realize that denial, as a coping mechanism, may compromise your creativity and self-expression and rob you of opportunities for healing and growth. Beneath this directive to be in denial that anyone will read your writing lurks the disempowering notion that it's not okay to speak your truth.

I slip into the numb illusion of safety that denial offers when I think—consciously or not—that by writing I'm doing something wrong, or when I worry that others might be hurt by my words or will disapprove of me or what I'm saying. I go into denial when I think I don't have a right to express myself, or that there's something wrong with me for saying the things I'm saying. In the past, I've taken these thoughts very seriously.

It was a relief when I learned that just because I have a thought doesn't mean it's true. I am not my thoughts; I *have* thoughts, but I am no longer constantly fused with them. Resisting the natural inclination to identify with my thoughts means that when I become aware of them—I *suck as a writer; I'm not good enough; no one will ever give a shit what I have to say*—I recognize that they are *just thoughts*. I can choose to believe them and invest time and energy in them, which will enlarge them—or not. This “or not” part is where life—and writing—gets juicy. It's where fun and magic happen. I've been experimenting with this lately, choosing to see limiting, hurtful thoughts for what they are: expressions of fear. And not just *any* fear, but destructive fear.

There's *productive* fear, and then there's *destructive* fear. Productive fear is a response to a real threat in our environment. It is present-moment-focused and keeps us safe. Destructive fear happens in our heads. It stems from our imagination, from scary or unpleasant stories we tell

ourselves about something that happened in the past or that might (but probably won't) happen in the future.

Understanding this can lead us to ask ourselves, *What choice will I make? Am I going to listen to Destructive Fear, who has a reputation for being the world's biggest liar? Or am I going to honor my desire to write and express myself, which is a generative, creative, and Soul-affirming process? Which do you trust—Destructive Fear or your Eternal Soul—to guide you through your writing and your life?*

The insecurities I mentioned above, which catapulted me into denial as a coping mechanism for my writing in the past, were fueled entirely by my Destructive Fear. He called those shots. He had me running for cover and hiding underneath denial, a form of banishment.

My Soul doesn't believe in hiding. She is light and luminous and sees this glow in others. Through her eyes, humans, with all our foibles and flaws, are magnificent. She applauds my efforts to bear witness to my life experience, which is a sacred act—sacred because it's a labor of love, rooted in my desire for understanding. She prizes storytelling, inquiry, and authenticity.

When she hears, "It's not okay to speak your truth," she lets out a deep belly laugh and says, "Are you kidding? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard!" My Soul knows that speaking my truth is essential. And she knows my intention is to express *my* truth, and that all truth is subjective.

I tell my students to go for the *emotional* truth of their stories. Sophisticated readers understand that a memoir is a construct, an act of *creative* writing and re-membering. I'm less concerned with reporting things exactly as they happened—no one can do that—than I am with conveying the emotional center and integrity of a story, which requires tools of fiction, such as scene making and dialogue.

One could argue that our *lives* are a fiction, since we make things up as we go, creating one event after another with our thoughts, emotions, and actions. We are creative beings on and off the page.

Let's face it: memoirs are subjective. The same family event narrated retrospectively by five family members will sound like five completely different stories. We each have our own lenses through which we view the world; there is not one clear, definitive truth. We remember what we want to remember. We bury painful memories. We edit the narratives of our lives every day, often without realizing it. This isn't a bad thing; it's a survival mechanism—and it's who we are as cocreative human beings.

Remembering this helps me realize the story I'm telling represents a sliver of life's gigantic pie. It's not absolute, nor am I attempting to tell anybody's story but my own. I may reference family and friends, but what I say about them reflects upon *me* more than it does them. It's *my perspective*. When the intention I hold in my heart is a loving one—meaning I'm speaking honestly about my experience from a place of empathy, rather than harboring a hidden agenda, such as trying to get back at someone who hurt me—the outcome is positive.

I have no control over how others will respond to my work or to me. “What others think of me is none of my business,” the saying goes. Still, I'm a caring person and am mindful about protecting the privacy of people who show up in my memoir by changing names and other identifying characteristics. And if I have the slightest inkling that something I've written might hurt a loved one whose relationship I cherish, I get their permission before publishing it. I yanked a poem about my husband from my poetry book because he wasn't ready for that information to be shared. My husband means more to me than any poem.

It's helpful to remember, when you're working on something fresh, that *you* get to decide when and how you'll share it, and with whom. But these decisions come later—*after* you've got your story down on paper. Life circumstances change over the course of writing. Time eases sensitivity around many issues, and things you think will be a big deal to others often turn out to be nothing. So much depends upon how you, the writer, hold a particular subject. The people around you are mirrors: they reflect back to you ideas you carry but disown, ideas you'd rather not harbor and may not realize you do.

What make memoir writing, and the exposure that comes along with it, so rich are the opportunities it presents for personal transformation and growth. The process asks us to cope with the feelings our writing draws out. It challenges us to practice acceptance and forgiveness, toward others and ourselves, which enhances the quality of our lives. It also challenges us to remember that there is nothing wrong with us, that what we do or say is honest and brave. It gives us permission to stand tall, to know that our anxiety and fears—our so-called imperfections—are fine. The lesson in all of this, which is a practice, involves saying yes to our dreams and to ourselves—repeatedly. It means granting ourselves permission to be who we are, and to share ourselves through our writing, and to know this is an act of generosity of spirit. Anything else is a lie.

Writers in general, and memoirists in particular, are called to show up in their writing and their lives wholly and unapologetically. Exposure is daunting only when a lack of self-acceptance lurks in the shadows, when egos swell, and when validation is sought from the outside, instead of within.

My work and life rise to a higher level when I refuse to buy into someone else's ideas about what is and is not possible or

acceptable for me. It's sometimes hard to keep my center, to stay grounded in my own truth. This happens when I'm criticized, but also when I'm congratulated or praised. If I believe what I say or do is not okay or not good enough, or that I'm unworthy of a compliment, nothing anyone says will change my mind.

Few things in life are more unsettling than the thought of standing naked in front of a crowd. Even standing before a crowd fully clothed scares the daylights out of many people. I've heard this fear harkens back to caveman times, when, if you weren't part of the crowd, if you were left alone, you might end up as a wild animal's dinner.

"You're exposing yourself a lot," my editor said to me in response to a comment I made about feeling uncomfortable as I neared the finish line of my memoir.

I've struggled to bare my Soul in front of those I love and trust first, starting with myself. I try to make peace with my imperfections; forgive my bad choices, my tempers, my cruelties, my insensitivities; and learn from my mistakes. It's a practice. So is self-acceptance, which is my biggest challenge and perhaps the most important thing I teach in my writing classes. It's as important as the writing. I teach art and craft, and I teach my students about platform, publishing, and reading their work in public, but I also teach them how to stand in their truth, how to dust themselves off and shine—as the exquisite naked writers they are!

Recently I read *The Art of Possibility*, by psychologist Rosamund Stone Zander and her husband, Benjamin Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic. They write about Michelangelo's famous description of how he worked. He believed that inside every block of stone or marble dwelled a beautiful statue. He removed the excess material to reveal the work of art within. Great teachers have the opportunity

to chip away at whatever gets in the way of their students' self-expression. We writers can do this, too—for ourselves.

“Your eye is on the statue within the roughness of the uncut stone,” Benjamin says about teaching. I couldn't agree more. Shame (which thrives on secrecy and denial) is excess material that needs to be chipped away. So is pride, fear, blame, resentment, jealousy, and self-doubt—all noisy distractions that prevent us from bringing into the world what longs to be expressed *through* us. In other words, we get in our own way.

The notion that you need to deny that anyone will read what you've written to get through your memoir certainly has its place but will take you only so far. Why swim in murky waters teeming with eels ready to bite you with shame and fear when you could rise, like a phoenix, out of ashes and flame, resurrected and transformed?

Publishing memoirs will be fraught as long as we continue to protect our shame, as long as we believe, on any level, that there's something wrong with what we're saying or doing—or that there's something wrong with us.

As memoirists, we are in a unique position to reinvent ourselves, which requires compassion, insight, forgiveness, and love. Maybe mastery and enlightenment aren't achievable goals, but questing for them lightens my load, lifts my Spirit, and illuminates my path.

Nakedness—in the sense of seeing and accepting myself *as I am*, and allowing others to see my authentic self—has been a recurring theme in my life. I have been blessed with the gift of transparency, though at times it has felt like a curse. In my writing and in my life, I tell it like I see it. I strip naked. Not because I'm an exhibitionist, but because I'm a healer.

And I cannot heal what I cannot see. I cannot clear what I'm unaware of. My negative habits and behavior patterns



have their way with me—until I become conscious of them. Once I realize what’s going on, they dissolve. It’s like shining a light onto a shadow—the light of awareness makes the shadow disappear. So I keep trying to illuminate my foibles, scars, aches, and pains, keep trying to remain connected to my Soul, in order to know myself better and to live my life as fully as possible. As a writer, I do this in public—I speak *out loud*—hoping that people will see not me, but themselves, in my story.

\* \* \* \* \*

BELLA MAHAYA CARTER is a poet, author, writing teacher, and coach who believes in the power of writing to heal and transform lives. She’s the author of *Secrets of My Sex*, a collection of narrative poems and the forthcoming memoir, *Raw: A Midlife Quest for Health & Happiness*. Her poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction appear in *The Sun; Lilith; Calyx; Two Review; Onthebus; Pearl; Literary Mama; Quill & Parchment*, and elsewhere. Her work has been anthologized in *Grandmothers’ Necklace*, *Writing Our Way Out of The Dark: An anthology of Literary Acts of Bravery*. She’s a featured columnist at [Shewrites.com](http://Shewrites.com), and maintains her own blog, *Body, Mind, Spirit: Inspiration for Writers, Dreamers, and Seekers of Health & Happiness*. Visit her online at [www.bellamahayacarter.com](http://www.bellamahayacarter.com).