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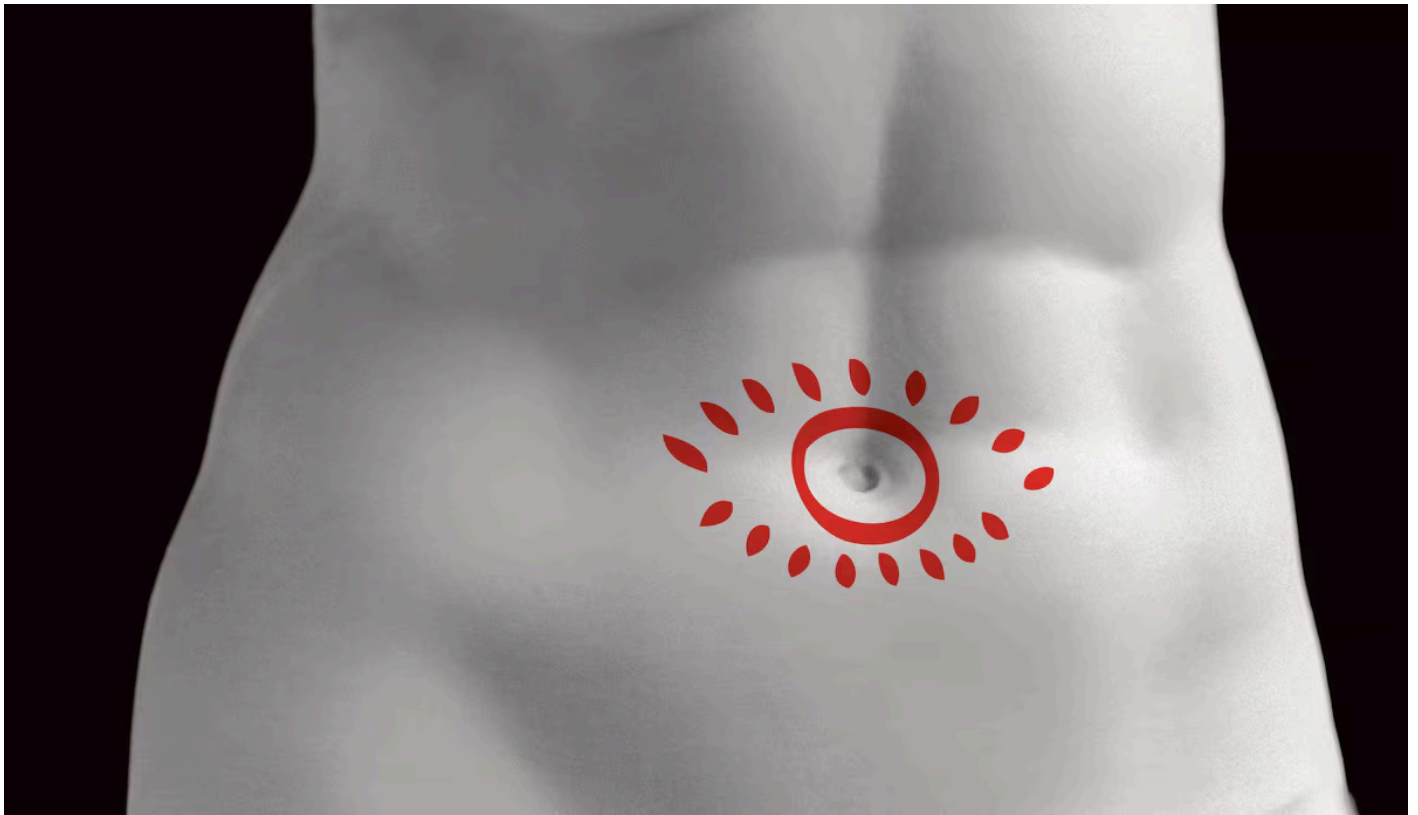
OPINION

The importance of navel gazing

LESLIE JAMISON

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One of our most dismissive terms for art made from life is 'navel gazing,' understood these days as the epitome of solipsism. But in ancient Greek culture, the navel was seen as a site of connection to the divine.

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Leslie Jamison is an American novelist and essayist, and this year's recipient of the Weston International Award, a prize recognizing career achievement in non-fiction that is administered by the Writers' Trust of Canada.

I started writing about my own life somewhat incidentally, and not very successfully. I was studying at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, which involved a lot of time spent drinking in the same bars my favourite writers had gotten drunk in, and I decided to take a nonfiction class, largely because my fiction had grown too beholden to workshop truisms and a desire to please others. Writing only felt good to me when I felt like I was throwing myself off a cliff. So I decided to throw myself off a different cliff: the truth.

The first few times I wrote personal essays, I wrote almost exclusively about the parts of myself I liked least – or the situations I most regretted. I was convinced that relentless self-deprecation was the only way to speak truthfully about myself. As it turned out, this approach didn't play out particularly well in workshop. "Is there such a thing as *too much* honesty?" one guy asked.

In the 20 years I've spent telling stories about my life since that first workshop, I've come to distinguish honesty from unmitigated self-deprecation. Artful personal narrative involves rigorously writing away from two opposite poles: total identification with the past self, and total disavowal of the past self. Both are attempts to pre-empt the reader's judgment – to say: *I can defend myself before you accuse me*. Or else: *I can accuse myself before you accuse me*. But I believe in refusing the refuge of either extreme and living instead in the mess and contradictions of selfhood, making the self neither villain nor saint, and granting the same dignity of complexity to everyone else as well. I've come to believe that the forms of rigour and tenderness that personal narrative demands – self-scrutiny and negative capability, a willingness to be the butt of the joke, to be wrong, to be surprised – are tendencies we can bring back to daily living: to move through the world with humility, humour, and compassion, to tolerate complexity, to stay curious, to revise our own stories.

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But even after two decades, I still struggle with a certain shame – as if I've failed to get over myself, or learned how to make anything else. My shame doesn't only stem from the fear that there is an unredeemable solipsism baked into personal writing, but also from the fear that my particular life is too unremarkable to bear the weight

of narrative. (The eternal question students bring to me each week in office hours: Why would anyone possibly care?) When it comes to literary fiction, we don't question the value of the "unextraordinary life" as a worthy subject – *Mrs. Dalloway* is about a woman throwing a dinner party, *Ulysses* is about a cuckolded salesman wandering through Dublin – but in nonfiction there's a sense that you need either extraordinary accomplishment or extraordinary trauma to make your story worthwhile.

In Christian theology, there's an idea called "the scandal of particularity" – the improbable but essential fact that God became incarnate as a particular man, with dirt under his fingernails and spit in his mouth. The "scandal" is not only the absurdity of divinity dwelling inside a flawed mortal vessel, but the absurdity of putting so much weight on a specific life. The writer Annie Dillard brings the scandal of divine particularity back to all of us: "The 'scandal of particularity' is the only world that I, in particular, know," she writes. "We're all up to our necks in this particular scandal."

One of our most dismissive terms for art made from life is "navel gazing," a phrase actually derived from an ancient Greek meditation practice called *omphaloskepsis* – literally "navel-thinking." (*Omphalos* is navel and *skepsis* means contemplation.) These days navel-gazing is understood as the epitome of solipsism, but in ancient Greek culture the navel was seen as a site of connection to the divine – the marble *omphalos* at Delphi, for example, was an essential site of communion with the gods. Biologically, the navel is the part of the self that marks its earliest threshold of connection: a physical reminder that we are not self-made, but always produced by forces beyond ourselves.

To me, this is what thoughtful personal narrative achieves: a consideration of self whose motivating questions and deepening insights resonate beyond the self; not through false conflation or universalizing insistence, but through a close, faithful, dynamic commitment to particularity – the infinitude of any given life as a site of reckoning and truth. This is the scandal of personal writing: the scandal of big truths dwelling inside deeply ordinary lives.

The first draft of my memoir *The Recovering*, a book about addiction, recovery and creativity, began with something like a cinematic montage of the ways I'd fallen in love with drinking: getting drunk in backyards full of fireflies, air smoky from bratwurst on the grill; cold beers drunk on the side of covered bridges. An early reader who read these opening pages told me, "I don't want to see you living your best life getting buzzed. I want to see you with your wine-stained teeth, too nervous to speak."

They were right: I was showing the dream before I showed the broken, self-loathing self who needed something from that dream. Without that desperation, the dream itself was insufferable – like a self-congratulatory yearbook entry. So I forced myself into a scene – specifically, into one of my most embarrassing nights: the night I did coke for the first time, with a guy who was barely interested in me (back then, my favourite kind!). I was wearing a winter jacket inside and still shivering, because this guy was too broke to pay for much heat, and it was an Iowa winter, and he was cutting lines with a credit card that was almost certainly actually a debit card, and I needed so desperately for this night to be the beginning of some great romance between us, so I lingered in this guy's living room for hours, practically begging him to kiss me, and then he finally said it, *are you waiting for me to kiss you?* And I sort of nodded yes, stunned at this subtext becoming so pathetically explicit, and he finally did – but seemed half-hearted, like he was only doing it because I'd begged him to, and then I stumbled home humiliated.

This was the part of me that needed to drink, and the part of me that needed to be reckoned with – not that self who was laughing in a backyard strung with twinkly lights. I didn't know that laughing girl. I'd watched her from across the yard, maybe. She was the self I wanted the world to see. But she wasn't the self I needed to write.

Best-selling author Leslie Jamison explores alcoholism in her new addiction memoir

Pivoting from backyard fireflies to debit-card-cut coke was an exercise in exposing vulnerability as the soft underbelly of swagger, showing the need before I showed the accessories and props the need gathered around itself. It was an attempt to move away from what I think of as performative confession, something akin to a humblebrag, and confession that is actually crawling around in the weeds of shame.

As the essayist Phillip Lopate likes to say, “The problem with most confessional writing is that it does not confess enough.”

What does it mean to confess “enough?” For me it has to do with following shame to insight, rather than getting stuck in either self-justification or self-laceration. Often the first story we tell ourselves about why we did something isn’t the truest version of our motivations, and our job is to get to the messier account lurking beyond the edges of what I call “the cocktail party version” of the story. It’s the difference between saying, *oh, I used to get so drunk!* but actually feeling kind of proud of those reckless days, and saying, *I stood in a guy’s doorway and literally begged him to kiss me.*

I sometimes envision this part of the process as looking for a trap door in the floor to get to the rooms of truth beneath. Finding the “I” beneath the floorboards is often a question of revision: Bearing down hard on language that wants to generalize, moralize, valorize, villainize or otherwise evade the contradictory resonances of experience. When I found the “I” beneath the floorboards of that night, who woke up with bruises on her legs and white powder caked under her nostrils, I found the origins of a dependence, which wasn’t about the cocaine so much as the begging itself: the desire to hurl myself at the world and have it give it back to myself with some edges.

Every spring, I teach a graduate course called “The Self,” focused on the art of building oneself as a character on the page, and every spring, it reminds me that personal narrative is – at its core – an act of engagement and community rather than an expression of narcissism.

Picture it, picture us: Tuesday afternoons, all 50 of us crammed into a too-small classroom with rattling heaters or broken air conditioning, sweating up a storm. The first semester I taught that course, the students started calling themselves “The Self Squad.” One young man focused on his compulsive relationship to smiling, and how it connected to a childhood spent in the back of his mom’s Thai restaurant, and to his absent father. A poet from Nepal wrote about caregiving, daydreaming, and how the women in her family related to their hair.

Every day, my students taught me – they still teach me – about the possibilities of personal narrative. If I felt hounded by the shame of solipsism when I first began to write about my own life, I've come to believe something close to the opposite: it is a deeply communal act to make art from your own scandalously particular life, and to believe in the art other people can make from theirs.

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