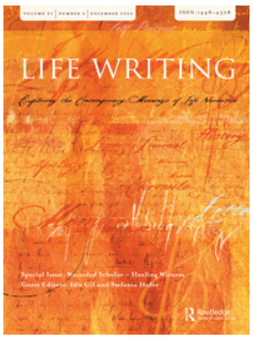

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'I Hope You and Your Loved Ones Remain Safe': Dispatch from a Teacher-Scholar-Life Writer in Wartime

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ABSTRACT

This essay asks what role a teacher-scholar-practitioner of life writing can play when she is enmeshed within a highly volatile, violent conflict along with her students who occupy multiple subject positions within the conflict. I suggest that such conditions put the scholar in a unique position first, to offer testimony to her fellow scholars. Such testimony can best take the form of a highly particularised and affectively-attentive narration of the conflict that refuses the binary of victim and oppressor that characterises much abstract theorising endemic to academic environments. Second, the teacher-scholar-practitioner of life writing may also find herself in a position uniquely suited to assist her students to find emotional comfort, meaningful knowledge of the world in which they live, and a reservoir of genuine hope within their trauma, when she turns them back upon their experiences of shared life writing and reading in the university.

KEYWORDS

War and life writing; pedagogy and life writing; trauma and life writing; binary thinking

What does a scholar do in wartime? What role can a teacher-scholar practitioner of life writing play when she is not studying a violent conflict from afar, but is, instead, enmeshed within it? Further, what should she do when the particular conflict she lives inside is projected around the world, engendering unprecedented protest in precisely the homely arena of her work – the university world – where she was trained and then trained others to develop a public identity based on the capacity to speak and write in the most particularly situated voice they could find?

Now, however, individual voices have become less interesting, even unwelcome, to large swaths of university people who are signing statements, brandishing signs, refusing complicity with or assent to an oppressive, murderous regime. Almost none of these people has shared stakes in the future of her region, but nonetheless hold strong opinions about the collectives involved in what is rendered a neat morality play though she knows it to be much, much harder to parse. Across the world, the conflict casts good vs. evil, victims vs. oppressors, the vulnerable vs. the all-powerful. It's an era of blacklists and boycotts and binaries, an era in which to support one side means necessarily to reject the other, even to call for its destruction. (*My body, my children's bodies.*)[1]

She is caught against her will inside collective identities others draw around her: the people she was born into, the nation whose passport she holds, the nation whose

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government she happens to demonstrate against ceaselessly, wearing out two good pairs of sandals over the course of a year of weekly, sometimes daily and day-long, mass protests. Yet she is guilty by association. Israeli. Zionist. (*Do you want to know what these affiliations mean to me?*) Maybe Jewish is not entirely okay either, when it includes any ties to the land of Israel or concern for the majority of the world's Jews who live there.

She doesn't see herself as a victim, but the irony of such essentialism is not lost on her.[2]

Because the truth as she knows it from her daily life is denied. It is not a truth only of *her* life, but of many real people she knows and lives among.[3] The truth she knows – of labouring, in the classroom and out, for equality and dignity for Palestinians and Jews; respecting two people's historical ties and indigeneity to the same land, and two people's rights to political autonomy; of being an ideological minority within a collective, yet still sharing a fate with that collective (whether she likes it or not: look no further than her current guilt by association) – these are truths of experience that are very difficult to transmit right now.

So there is more than the pain of war. There is the pain of a reality she knows, knows in her tired feet, ageing hands, and sun-marked skin, denied. As if a person living her life cannot be imagined to exist.

So here is what she does. In south Jerusalem, an hour-and-a-half drive from Gaza, she sits down to write to some of those others who live far away. She begins in the third person because the first person is so elusive right now, has to be fought for. She needs to tell a story that refuses what Sandra Wallman calls so aptly, categories that are 'tidier than life,' that have come to dominate the story of the war she is living; categories that 'create a world of knowing that is far from actually understanding anything. Such categories certainly do not help understand conflict situations' (Wallman 1986, 233; Korac and Horst 2023, 20). *A person like you can't exist.*

The sociologist Maja Korac, originally from Serbia, who knows of what she speaks, has observed that scholar-activists distant from a given conflict can see matters in ways that lack specificity and complexity: those who are 'systematically fighting injustices of *all kinds* often focus on particular stories of victimisation and adopt a *black-and-white* understanding of *categories* of people and their positions, finding little use for other stories' (Korac and Horst 2023, 19). *Other stories.*

She needs/I need to write an other story of war – and efforts for peace – that are not visible on people's little screens or in encampments thousands of miles from the sand and the grit and the blood; the shards and twisted metal of broken eye-glasses; the single shoe; the torn book pages; the ruined homes.

> Not a defense. (Too tidy.) Nor a systematic analysis. (Impossible.)
> But life writing: true, painful, messy.
> One story among many.
>
> ***
>
> I begin again in first person, hopeful that my reader will stay with me in the mess.

Dispatch from Jerusalem: far from the research library

In mid-November 2023, about six weeks after October 7, the fall semester has not yet begun and has no start date. Though I am a tenured professor in an English Literature

department at one of Israel's nine universities, I am spending my days very far from the research library. Neither am I working at my ongoing project to teach life writing to Palestinian and Jewish Israeli students, most of whom are encountering each other at university as fellow learners and fellow citizens for the first time in their lives.

Instead, since October 10, I spend hours every day with my cellphone on speaker, my laptop open to an unfamiliar, ever-growing database, as I match volunteers from local WhatsApp groups to prepare meals and help care for the children of reservists who have been summoned to serve with no advance notice and no end date. My closest colleague, Y., a specialist in eighteenth-century fiction and its least-known female writers, is chopping kilos of cilantro and parsley in a nearby restaurant kitchen turned-sandwich factory; the sandwiches are for families displaced from their burnt, bombed, bloodied kibbutzim in the Gaza envelope. Y. tells me that she turned around a few days ago at her station, and the dean of the humanities was drying dishes. Scholarly life has taken an unexpected turn.

Terror on a massive scale, and then war, have put universities on indefinite hold. 3800 armed Hamas Nukhba terrorists bursting into, parachuting into, swimming into, and bombing residential Israel on October 7, and then all that followed on the ground: murder, rape, kidnapping, fire, razing, all at close range, for hours upon hours upon hours – in some places, more than 20 hours of hiding in forests or at home – before the Israeli army could respond to save people in organised fashion. Until then, grandfathers getting in cars with old guns to go save their children in safe rooms that weren't safe; Arabic-speaking Bedouins pleading with terrorists to spare them and those with them; non-combat female soldiers, unarmed, overrun and mowed down in their stations, their phones suddenly going dead; victims' phones seized by their attackers to livestream terror to intimates and family members; final text and recorded messages read and re-read, played and re-played. Massive call-ups to the army, too late, too late, too late.[4]

For days after October 7, Jerusalem was silent but for intense volunteer activity. You could cross major city streets without looking both ways. Funerals had not yet begun in earnest. But the city was draped with strangeness. With the impossibility of the scale and scope. With loss so deep and wide that no one could begin to imagine it, even after it had happened.

It was not like 9/11 because in a country this small – you can drive its length in less than six hours – no one felt unthreatened and millions were touched by personal loss. By contrast, America is a vast country. Many of my stunned university students in Michigan that fall of 2001 remarked that they had never been to New York state nor city; they knew no one touched by that tragedy, nor anyone who knew anyone who knew anyone. Meanwhile, thousands of armed, masked terrorists had not entered the heart of American towns and cities, moving from family home to family home. 250 American citizens, from babies to scores of the elderly, had not been grabbed bodily by terrorists, then documented on bad video being transported by motorcycle, golf cart and truck, to be imprisoned underground as pawns of war. Each horror has its own imprint.

The war against Hamas began shortly after, first from the air and then on the ground in a war that Israelis almost unanimously supported. I understood now, in a way that I never had before, that our enemy wanted us dead, all of us. This was a hard thing to take in.

Learning on hold

In the fall, war brings with it a rushing, staticky buzz that I hear and feel vibrating inside me all the time. Many times a day, I find myself standing beside a sturdy piece of furniture – a table, or countertop – just holding on. At mid-day, I lie down on my bed, stare at the ceiling for a few moments in order to continue. Sometimes I feel chilled and shivery, then hot. Then the fever goes away. But it returns when I hear any noise (hybrid car engines) that whirs up like the public alarm sirens that sound when a missile is heading toward us. And always, that fever takes me when I see large, billboard-size photos of missing people.

In November, more than thirty percent of the Israeli student body nationwide is deployed in the reserves. Most Jewish Israelis are drafted by law to the army for two to three years when they turn 18. For two to three decades afterwards, many serve in the reserves from a few days to a month. In the university, we adapt to our students needing to make up work and exams for reserve duty but now, six, seven, eight weeks have gone by and there is no hint as to when the reservists might return to civilian life. Even were some percentage to return, the university is impossibly far from being able to start up again: in a domino effect, staff, faculty, and administration who are spouses, parents, and siblings of reservists have stepped in to support their extended families. We have no numbers to estimate the university members among the tens of thousands of people and families displaced from lost or still-endangered homes to single hotel rooms. We have no way to know how many university members number among the thousands grieving loved ones, searching for missing persons, and combing for the smallest bit of information on those taken hostage to Gaza.

Palestinian citizens of Israel cannot imagine a return to the university either. Those I have spoken with tell me they fear they will be targeted in public spaces by violent Jews seeking scapegoats or stopped by the police for random checks. They fear they will be accused of aid to terrorists on the basis of even the most innocent posts in Arabic on social media. How will they feel, they ask, on campus among Jewish students who may shun them or attack them verbally or even physically? Should they drive in Israel right now? Is it dangerous simply to leave home? They also fear reprisal from within their own communities if they are seen to be too sympathetic to Israeli suffering. Many are torn apart by concern for family members in Gaza currently under attack by the IDF; in ordinary times, their lives are deeply shaped by a military that monitors and polices them. Yet the Israeli trauma is recognisable to them, too, and includes them. It extends beyond Jewish citizens to Palestinians and Bedouins within Israeli borders: Hamas terrorists did not distinguish 'them' from 'us.' What should they do to stay safe, to stay themselves? Decry Hamas? Decry, at least in their hearts, the IDF? To be appalled by both? To understand both? To insist on the distinction between Hamas and the Palestinian people? To insist to whom?

Study – discourse, meta-discourse – gathering calmly, with smiles and warm greetings – seems the work of another world. Our bodies are tensed. Our minds are not free. Jewish and Palestinian Israelis both are waiting for that whir of sirens in the air that will rush us to shelters against missiles or, in the absence of shelters, simply to the ground. On the street, at the side of the road, prone, with our hands covering our heads, as if that would help. In the middle of the country, my cousin's two children

are experts at exiting their car and protecting their heads with their arms whenever risk nears. We are tensed, waiting for more horrible news delivered online, announced on the radio, or worst of all, conveyed personally. We are tensed to hold up against the overwhelming downward pull of people's faces on the street, the tears that emerge in the supermarket, on the bus, at a stoplight. People are still attending so many funerals, comforting mourners, supporting the families of the missing.

'People' includes me. I count myself exceedingly fortunate that, two months into the war, all three of my children are safe and accounted for. I divorced five months ago, and I am still not sure whether to count my family as four or five when it comes to their whereabouts under attack. I still text my former husband first when a bomb alert sounds, and, on October 7, he walked across the city from his apartment to mine to make sure we were all safe when no one else was on the streets.[5] One of my children, not yet understanding the severity of the situation, expressed surprise to see him unannounced. Will we shelter together? Alone? Everyone's war is different. And my war is in a newly divorced family. But war is so big it displaces divorce, even divorce after twenty years of marriage and a difficult illness. Mostly, I set aside personal mourning or quietly let it mix with the collective mourning – tears are tears – because when you live in an active conflict zone, simply knowing the members of your family are alive makes the precise definition of family much less pressing.

And so, in these early war days, I don't think of myself as a victim of trauma because I am living in my home and all my children are alive. But then I think of the way I snapped a photo of the back of my nineteen-year-old daughter, P., as she got out of the car the other day, in case something happened and we needed it to search for her or her remains. And I think of how all – ALL – the photos of young people coming across my Facebook feed are faces of the dead or missing. It wouldn't occur to me to post a photo of my live child right now for the scare it could give anyone who sees it.

I do not think of myself as traumatised. But I can recognise that I am going through something.

The proximate losses are stacking up. P.'s friend, Idan Baruch: she was training with him as a teacher in the Education Corps of the army, and now he is dead. Terrorists lit up his home on a southern kibbutz on October 7, and when Idan, 18, asthmatic, climbed out the window into his older brother's arms, they shot him and took his brother hostage (the brother died in captivity); their grandmother was murdered as well. He loved the red blossoms of the anemones that spread yearly across the south in winter.

P.'s close friend's oldest brother is dead now, too. Aner Shapira, 22 years old, musician, poet, rapper, adventurer, self-proclaimed anarchist. He died in a small roadside shelter where about thirty youth were crammed, seeking refuge from the attack on a music festival. Terrorists threw grenade after grenade into the door-less shelter. Wearing flip flops, a T-shirt, and shorts, Aner assumed command. He retrieved seven live grenades, one after the next, and threw them back out of the shelter, saving at least seven lives, before the eighth grenade exploded upon him.

Beside him in the shelter was his best friend, Hersh Goldberg-Polin, 23, who is the son of my childhood schoolmates from Chicago, who have also been my neighbours in Jerusalem now for a decade. Hersh was missing. His parents and a few dear friends spread out to search hospitals in the chaos of October 7 and 8, but they couldn't find him. More

than two weeks later, he was identified in a grainy video with half his left arm blown off, his face unreadable, in a flatbed truck of hostages on their way to Gaza.[6]

Our local schools have taken terrible losses in the war itself. A beloved homeroom and history teacher from my son's high school was killed serving in the north; the principal of a second local school, where many of my son's friends study, was killed serving in the south. The third major boys' high school in our community has mourned the deaths of six recent graduates.

There is the trauma of loss and there is the trauma of fear, 'bereavement in potential,' as one peace activist I know calls it. It has become extremely difficult to sleep: first, to fall asleep, then, to stay asleep for a stretch of time which, however short, is always long enough for something horrible to happen without your knowing it. We leave our phones on full volume, 24/7. My department chair's two adult sons are respectively in Gaza and on the northern front. My colleague N.'s twin twenty-year-old sons are in Gaza. More than fifty families in my neighbourhood synagogue community have someone deployed. My two closest female friends go three weeks of war, 21 days, then more, without hearing from their deployed children. The politics of these people vary; their fear for their children does not.

And the many, many hostages. More than 240, of 39 nationalities. Reading their names aloud takes real time because there are so many. I had been shocked at Aner's funeral when a friend said to me that Aner's parents were fortunate; it was the parents of live, stolen children who would suffer now without end.

One testimony of many: against testimony deficit

As I write this account, I think to myself: I should cut some of this material and get to the scholarly question or thesis.[7] But my critical and writing intelligence tells me that before I can get to any question or thesis about the role of the scholar, I need to establish – at least a little – what has happened here, what is happening here. This is a testimony.

It is also an offering to the reader who will read many different truths, I hope. As many as possible, so long as they are true. This testimony is shaped *as* an offering, by my sense of audience, by my sense of what others need to know in order to see beyond the binaries, the wholesale moral condemnation that can turn to hatred before you know it. And then you get sick with the thing you thought you saw outside yourself.

If you can't begin to understand what happened here, there will be other even more consequential things you won't be able to understand, and then still others. You run risks of not enough information to operate wisely, to teach or speak responsibly. Just as you do if this is the only testimony you read. Let's call it 'testimony deficit': the accruing consequences of not enough knowledge about a matter of intense public concern.

We need, I think, testimony immersion to counter it.

If you haven't been alerted to the terror felt by Israeli and world Jews on October 7 and after, and then to the extreme price Israelis have been willing to pay in the lives of hundreds of the country's own soldiers after the unwilled losses of October 7, it will also be utterly impossible to understand how many Israelis and Jews can tolerate innocent lives lost in Gaza, lives that are not those of Hamas combatants. (To understand this, you would benefit from knowing a great deal more about the Shoah, the Holocaust, a genocide that was focused, purposeful, and immensely effective, because it used every possible

means at its disposal to murder as many Jews across as many lands as possible. You would also have to know about hundreds of years of pogroms against Jewish bodies and homes throughout Eastern Europe. Images of October 7 recall other images even if the historical context differs radically.)

Fact: trauma shrinks the circle of empathy that even people who are usually widely empathic can feel. At least temporarily. An expert in intergroup psychology told my department faculty this finding months before we would return to the classroom. It was immensely useful information to me, information I passed on to a Palestinian friend who thanked me as if I had given her water in a drought.

Still, even extended or restored empathy does not give me superpowers. As witness, I can tell only this story right now because it is the one I am living. No matter how much I believe human lives are equally valuable, I am limited to one self, one body, one set of primary relations.

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Dispatch from Jerusalem: what i can't do, what i can

Questions abound in trauma time, and I don't suppose I ever realised quite so clearly that ongoing emergency gives no freedom to rest in place; it demands renewed choices, actions, and reactions. One recurring question: to whom do I owe the limited intellectual agency and physical capacities I have right now?

The university continues to pay me, for which I am exceedingly grateful and count myself extremely fortunate. So many Israelis, especially farmers and small business owners, are not fortunate this way in wartime. Having my immediate needs met confronts me, too, with the reality that money is not enough in Gaza, where people also need powerful connections and sustained miraculous luck in order to escape or survive.

The university's directives to faculty have been unclear. The dean (of the dish-drying) has sent confusing emails asking us to: 1. continue our research as much as possible, 2. contact every student enrolled in our courses by telephone, including new students whom we have never met, 3. help the university raise money for reservists' educational needs.

I have problems with each of the recommendations. Continuing our research? I suppose I could write my articles and get a jump on my publication record, but it seems both difficult to imagine and vaguely obscene, given the suffering and need around me. I cannot call my Jewish students because I have no idea what has hit them – I don't know if they are sitting Shiva, or waiting on the border inside a tank, or taking care of orphaned children or their own children; or among the more than 100,000 evacuated from their homes in the north or the south; or wounded; or terrified, or furious; or busy staffing a blood bank, or picking lemons, tomatoes, and avocados to help southern farmers, or manning a start-up sandwich factory. I am not trained as a first responder and, as my colleague Y. points out, who is going to call us after we call the students? I don't want to raise money because I believe it is the job of the state to support our reservists, and it troubles me that we, the universities, serve other populations adversely affected by this war who will get no such monetary benefits. None of

this adds up to an approach and it occurs to me that the administration of my university has no idea what to do either.

The state is barely functioning in the aftermath of October 7. But the people are; it turns out there *is* such a thing as 'the people,' it is not only an 'imagined community,' but thousands of actual human beings from diverse communities and ethnicities working in concert with each other because there is an ongoing emergency. People have also elected to be intensely busy because the alternative to action is total paralysis.

I get emails from multiple grassroots initiatives, seeking academics to teach children displaced in massively traumatic circumstances, many having lost parents and siblings, some murdered in front of their eyes. Now these kids need makeshift schools adjacent to their hotels and hostels. Likewise, organisers are seeking teachers as well as social workers to work with displaced elders who survived attacks and now face the sudden removal from their homes and the loss of their lifetime friends and partners.

I read each email I receive and eventually I say yes to one, thinking I could run a creative writing group for middle schoolers, or a picture-book circle for young children, but then when someone calls me to set it up, I turn them down, guiltily. I can't imagine leaving Jerusalem. More explicitly: I am *scared* to leave Jerusalem. (In fact, it will be almost two months after the war breaks out until I leave the city for the first time.) Suddenly, the city limits mean something new and definitive to me: is it magical thinking? Home means safety? The practical fear that the intercity roads could close and I won't be able to get back? Wanting my children always to know where they can find me, especially in this year following the divorce? Maybe the simple fact that Jerusalem is targeted by missiles much less frequently than other cities? All true, but there is also something else.

Volunteering as a teacher feels overwhelming to me. Too close to my ordinary life. I can't teach right now because it takes too much of what is deeply me. Just imagining myself teaching brings tears to my eyes and throat.

I tell my father, who lives in New York and is following the news anxiously, that I am spending my days coordinating volunteers for reserves' families. He listens to me and asks, as an aside, 'Aren't you overqualified for that?' He has hit on something, but it is not about qualification. It is precisely because this work is not mine, because it is distant from being a teacher-scholar, that I can devote myself to it and feel satisfaction at the small, good things accomplished. What attracts me isn't the ease of the work – actually, it isn't easy – but its distance from my ordinary. It reminds me that nothing is normal and that it is all right not to be functioning at full strength so long as I am doing something for other people that makes their daily lives a little easier.

I can write

At the same time, though, an opposite impulse ties me to my ordinary life. That impulse is writing.

When I look back through the wartime archive that is my email and my WhatsApp, I can see that it took me about 48 hours after the news of October 7 to begin to write.[8] I remember the moment when I realised I needed to write everything down because it was all so surreal I was not sure it was happening. Then, too, so much was happening from minute to minute that I felt in danger of losing all sense of linear time. It was on October

8, still just within hours of the first rush of horrific news, the first shocking reports of the missing. My daughter P. had just showered and combed her hair and climbed into bed. I came to tuck her in though I'd been trying lately to see her as an adult. Then she whispered to me, as if a whisper would protect it from coming true, 'Ima, I'm afraid that Aner and Hersh are dead.'

I whispered back, 'I know. Me too, honey.'

My archive tells me that on Oct. 10, a longtime friend and colleague at the Jewish Book Council in New York writes to ask if I am safe and then offers the following: 'If you feel comfortable and would like to share any real time reflections with our readers, we would be able to share them on our platforms.'

This is all I need. I begin to write. My file is labelled, 'War.'

At the same time, I begin to send personal emails to many of the Palestinian students I have worked with in recent years. I write short messages, telling them I am thinking of them and that I am praying that they and their families are safe and that we all get through this terrible time. I write to them and not to my Jewish students because I can see the way that Jewish Israel is mobilised, the sense of unity (impermanent, entirely fragile), the outpouring of support for those who are suffering most immediately. I assume (perhaps wrongly) that they will be taken care of.

I write to the Palestinian students because I don't know what they are experiencing. I don't know where October 7 hits them, what it means to their identities as Israeli citizens or as Palestinians who live within Israel's internationally recognised borders, or as family members of Gazans. I honestly don't know what these students think of Hamas. I don't know what most of them think of the State of Israel. Because I am their professor, I do not want to put any student in a position of needing to affiliate in any way before me. My genuine desire to know the complexity of their position cannot be translated into even one direct question. What I do I know is that they study in Israeli universities with the approval of their parents. I know, because they have told me, that some have grandparents who see Jews explicitly as their enemies; some Arabs accuse such students of normalisation; they don't want them to vote in elections either. What I describe to myself as the essence of the political reality – '*No one is going anywhere. Here we all are. Here we will remain.*' – is taken as surrender in some of their families. (Many Jewish Israelis feel precisely the same way.)

Almost all the students write back within a few days. Everyone is shaken, everyone is praying for safety. To a former graduate student, I really love, a student with whom I have had long and sometimes difficult, always illuminating, exchanges, someone I hope will remain my friend for decades, I write only, *Hi E., these are horrible days and I imagine they are very painful for you. And I am thinking of you in the midst of it all.* She writes back, *I thought of you too and wanted to reach out but couldn't find the words. During these times, I hate that I can understand both Hebrew and Arabic – so much violence, such stark black and white, so much hate and lack of compassion and inability to hold complexity. I hope you and your loved ones remain safe.* We are only about two hours drive away from each other – she lives in Haifa – but I feel as if we might as well be on opposite ends of the universe. At the same time, it is E. whose image and voice will come to my mind regularly over the months of the war.

A second student writes back to my short message months later, explaining that she changed email addresses, she has only just gotten the note: *thank you for remembering*

me, especially in these hard times, it warms my heart. At the beginning of this terrible war, I got into a depression and could not leave my bed for over 2 weeks because of the sorrow I felt in my heart. But thank God my family, friends and I are all safe. Unfortunately, we get used to this complicated situation. She will be leaving Israel for America, she hopes, in spite of her love for the land. She has fallen in love with an Arab-American. She hopes to see me at her graduation, '*(finally!!!).*'

A third: *Hello prof., I hope this email finds you and your loved ones well and safe. I sincerely appreciate your concern for our safety, likewise I wish to see better days for all of us and pray to God to keep everyone safe and make this crisis end very soon.*

I wrote to another student, whom I taught in a few courses:

> Dear M.
> I am thinking of you in these awful times. Studying together at the university gave me the hope for a shared future. These days are not hopeful. But I still have some hope. And most of all, I wanted to say that I hope you and your family are safe. May we meet up again on the other side of these days.

M. wrote back at length: *Dear professor*

> Thank you for reaching out. It is important to remember that we are all in this together. The bond we formed while studying at the university was a testament to our shared goals and dreams. The situation at hand may have dampened our spirits, but I believe that hope still exists within us. It is in these difficult times that our strength and resilience are put to the test.
> I want you to know that my thoughts are with you and your family. Safety and well-being take precedence above all else. May you find solace and peace during this time, knowing that we will get through this together.
> I am confident that we will reunite on the other side of this challenging period. Until then, please take care of yourself and your loved ones.
> Best,
> M..

These 'bonds' were forged in a life writing classroom where we studied life narratives from a wide range of historical moments and subject positions, ending closest to home: contemporary Jewish Israeli and Palestinian narratives (Blumberg 2021).[9] This shared study was not easy, not for the students, nor for me as their teacher, their guide. Confronting ignorance in oneself and in others is not a simple nor a painless education. But it *is* education, and many students know it when they feel it. We also wrote snippets of autobiographical narrative working silently beside each other, breathing together. Those of us who wanted to, shared aloud what we had written. I remember the shared laughs, the questions, expressions of appreciation, the different accents and qualities of human voice, and the surprises at overlapping experience. I want to say that not only did our bonds emerge in the practice of reading and writing lives but also, that when I taught other courses of literature to similar groups of students, such bonds did not emerge.

Life comes of life writing

To take a step even further back, the courses in life writing themselves came about because I am a longtime life writer who turns to writing in order to make sense of my

past and to see possible futures.[10] Before moving to Israel ten years ago, I had written two memoirs which explored learning and then teaching. Both books, I discovered only after the fact, focused on how my belief in human equality shaped the life of study for me. And both books raised the problem of priority: in a world desperately in need of rich, nurturing education for all, where would I put my energies?

This question stemmed from my sense of double identity: American and Jewish. I grew up in the United States, a third-generation American who was educated in exclusively Jewish and Hebraic schools, summer camps, and youth groups. As a minority, American Jews who wanted their children to know as much as possible about their heritage had to provide appropriately dedicated environments. At the same time, my American and Jewish values often overlapped, especially in my commitment to human equality which I was raised to understand as both a religious and a political truth and ideal.

As I got older and became an academic, affiliating as both an American and a Jew felt complicated by the specific question of where and whom I taught. I devoted fifteen years of an academic career to teaching in two universities in Michigan (where I was the first Jew some of my students had ever met). I was absorbed all the time by matters of race and class – not so much as the objects of my research as in their unequal representation in the classrooms I taught in. When I wrote my second memoir, I was able to articulate that I had long thought of teaching as a form of service, that my service had been defined by my national affiliation, and that it took as its community other Americans. My aspirations took a national form: what sort of country do I want the United States to be? How can I help shape it?

After about fifteen years in Michigan, having given birth to three children and taught hundreds of American college students some mix of literature, history, ethics and religion, I began to wonder if it was time to re-orient: to continue to do my work, but move it elsewhere. I began to wonder if I wanted to emphasise my religious-ethnic identity over the national, and to serve instead within the large-umbrella Jewish 'community.' Did I want to exchange the particular struggles in American education and culture for those defined by Jewish concerns? Where did the Jewish future excite and challenge me? My husband and I also asked jointly where we wanted our growing children to affiliate.

Decisions of this kind come rarely (historically and globally speaking, people have rarely been free to choose their place) and they are so big, so consequential, that they boggle the mind when one stops to think about what exactly they may alter and influence for generations to come; what they make possible and what they preclude.Such decisions are also extremely difficult to narrate as matters of reasoning or ideology because they transpire in subterranean ways: in the body's hint, prompted by individual and collective memory, laden with family meaning, shaped by myth, and expressed in something more like poetry than prose.

Thus, any account I can give in a few paragraphs here is not nearly satisfactory. In 2014, my family and I moved to Israel. In a way, without intending anything grandiose, I would say we moved our family project to Israel. My husband and I were both already dual citizens of Israel (I was born in Israel in 1970 and my husband had become a citizen as a young adult); we were both fluent in Hebrew and committed to passing on a vibrant Jewish and Hebraic culture to our children; we were religiously observant Jews as well.

But there was an explicitly political dimension, too. I am of a transitional generation of American Jews. My parents were born at the very end of WWII and grew up in step with the modern state of Israel which profoundly moved and galvanised Jews around the world in the aftermath of the emptying of Europe's millions of Jews into the gas chambers and mass graves of the Nazis. In Israel, established in 1948, a new Jewish culture was being built whose achievements – far more than its compromises and violences – were emphasised by world Jews. In my generation, Jews were born into a world with a still young and hopeful Jewish state. Jews were newly confident after the victory of the 1967 war and most were unconscious of how the war's consequences would only compound the moral dilemmas still unresolved from 1948. It took until our teens for the narrative we had grown on – one that entirely sidestepped Palestinian claims to the land – to be challenged by the first Intifada that broke out in 1987. Yet we were also a generation buoyed by the images of potential peace signified by the Oslo Accords and the American-brokered compromises of Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin and PLO leader Yassir Arafat. That promise was shattered in the years that followed, with the Second Intifada's highly effective terrorism and the extremism of the elected Israeli political leadership and many in the electorate. Still, I was one among many in my generation of American Jews who held and hold a vision of a Jewish and democratic Israel alongside a Palestinian state.

I moved to Israel cognizant of conflict, and once I had arrived, it felt as if I had arrived almost *because* of conflict. Intensely conscious of my historical moment, I hoped I could participate in what I saw and see as Israel's central challenge: to move from understanding itself as a Jewish state that has no choice but to manage a large, hostile Palestinian population within its borders and militarily occupied beyond its internationally recognised borders – to a Jewish and multicultural state that fully recognises its Palestinian minority (20% of its population) as people with their own ties to the land and their own history, with a claim to autonomy that can no longer be denied, that requires its own independent political authority.

It was not that I imagined I would play any determining role in these large geopolitical processes beyond voting and regular grassroots activism. But being a scholar gave me possibilities. Just as I had chipped away at the problems of inequality in American classrooms, by way of my teaching content and methodology, I knew that the Israeli university was also a space in which I could work toward the ends of bringing into visibility things that students were not yet seeing in their own society, in history, in language; I could help them see different possibilities for their own future work and service; new dimensions of citizenship, and perhaps dimensions of Jewishness or other religious commitments, for some of them.

These aims were possible because it was inside Israeli universities generally, and specifically in the one I had been hired to teach at, that Jews and Palestinians encountered each other for the first time in most of their lives in conditions conducive to building knowledge and relationships. Rather than fighting or only imagining each other, they sat in shared spaces to advance hopeful possibilities; to become better, fuller, more capable versions of themselves. Showing up was an expression, a literalization of a belief, in the powers of mind and spirit, and I took that extremely seriously as a potential.

In other words, I moved and brought my family to the heart of a super-painful conflict, one which I knew was violent, because I believed that teaching was all-important in such a conflict.

I am only now beginning to believe that we may die sooner because of it.

Life writing is exhausting because it is resistance

I've run out of steam for this essay. It's an exhausting journey back in time. And writing takes energy.

In the first four months of the war, I wrote an extraordinary amount. Almost all of it for readers. I would sit down and get up 4000 words later. I felt an extreme need to capture things before I lost them entirely. I felt the need to grab the surreal and force it onto the page. A kind of sublimated violence for someone whose personal life is non-violent, a way of *refusing* to be told that this is the new normal: death everywhere I turn – in Gaza, and closer to me, in our military cemeteries, and in the three flags now planted outside my friends' home a few blocks away to honour their son Ben's lost life. (Ben! Ben!) *No*, also, to the internal political debacle I continue to protest, on to my third pair of sandals, all my cardboard signs now considerably worse for the wear. *No* to the corrupt leadership, to the women's voices sidelined, to the racism, to the argument that peace is no option in this region.

But *no*, also, to the hatred turned on Jews and Israel from around the world, at my alma mater, at universities where I have loved teaching and belonging.

No to the decrease in Palestinian students enrolled in our department for this year's intensely shortened program, another cost of terror and war.

And *no* to the intense hope/lessness when thinking of my friends' child, Hersh, whose birth I remember, whose adamant attachment to his unusual name I remember, who regularly sat with his dad next to my husband and my son in synagogue. Hersh, imprisoned in a sunless tunnel city under Gaza, with only half his left arm.

There is not a moment in which I am not praying, whatever else I am doing.

The surreal must remain surreal. And in order to do so, it needs documenting.

My writing is also a missive to those not here who want to know more. I'm reminded of Phillipe Lejeune (2009) saying that diary is not a product but a 'behavior, a way of life' (262). I'm not writing a diary, exactly. Yes, it's date-stamped, and yes, I'm writing *in medias res*, but I am not enough of an audience. I'm writing for readers. For connection. To not be alone.

Writing to you makes me: hope in relation

Here is a strange fact with which I will end. In a way, it is a trivial, maybe narcissistic fact against the backdrop of war, but because I am writing an essay for people who think a lot about Life Writing, I will pause to examine it with you.

I have written four books but, perhaps as someone who grew up treasuring literature and idolising great writers, I have shied away from calling myself a 'writer.' Now, though, I feel as if I know I am a writer. Nothing has proven it to me more clearly than the urgency of my current need to write, and to write for readers. Also, my wish to help others write.

Without life writing, I am not sure how I would have held onto my sanity or any wellness. First, writing has allowed me to deduce my own trauma. It is nothing compared to many, many sufferers. But still, it is something. I have accepted this truth – which then allows me to get some support – because bodily symptoms of ill health subside when I write and only when I write: not when I tend the little, vivid gardens on my window

sills and not when I exercise and not when I feed my kids. Sometimes when I listen to music, but it feels painful to listen to music. So mainly, when I write.

My drive to write is so strong that I realise at some point in late December, when I'm feeling sick nearly daily, that I don't need my laptop or a notebook and pen. I can write even on my phone. I compose mainly through the microphone. I submit my essays to literary and cultural sites that I know will review rapidly in these time-, hour-, minute-sensitive days of war. Sometimes, I just copy and paste to my Facebook page. Because I am writing for readers. That is a central piece of the relief writing offers me.

Also, I edit. Because I am a writer. It's just the fact: I can't write and not revise. I want it tighter, I want it more coherent, more powerful, less finding-its-way-to-the-point, more guided from the outset to its destination. I edit and the world feels safer. Perhaps because editing has such a strong internal logic, especially when you have been doing it intensively for three decades.

I am reminded of Primo Levi. I think of his writings very often these days and am not sure how I feel about his omnipresence in my mind. But there he is. Whether I want to make historical comparisons or not, Levi's is simply the voice that keeps returning. I think of his chapter on the chemical examination he took at Auschwitz, an exam that he knows might save his life because it will win him less strenuous labour. But he can't hold in his mind the reality of his university textbook as he stands in mismatched, clunky wooden clogs, barely shoes at all, in a laboratory in Auschwitz.

Yet. Yet. When the 'exam' begins, the knowledge comes back to Levi, and more than that, it is not just the amassed knowledge of his field of expertise. The 'fever of examinations, *my* fever of *my* examinations,' is what returns to him (Levi 1958[1996], 102). It becomes the very proof – his only proof – of selfhood. '*My* fever of *my* examinations.' The familiar feeling of an experience that has personalised itself through repetition and now testifies both to selfhood and to dignity, in spite of the current degradation.

My circumstances are not Levi's. This goes without saying. But I do not feel at all like myself these days. I do not feel unified with myself. I look at myself from the outside. The sense of the surreal dominates over the sense of the real.

But when I dictate to my phone and then, while I stand cooking, stirring the Mediterranean tomatoes; as I continue to shape my sentences and organise my thoughts with commas, periods, question marks, paragraph breaks; when I cut and add, and question myself, it is *my fever of my examinations*. I am me. I am this writer. And this writing gives me everything.

Writing brings me hope. There will come a day when we will return to the classroom capable of true study. When my teacher-self will re-emerge fully, no longer afraid to reach deep into my reserves and teach from there, not from the shallows I draw from right now. When the tension and the fear will subside.

I am writing my way along the path to that day. Writing as communication, writing with an audience in mind, writing with history as company. Pausing to read others, many others, voices living and dead, dead and living.

Notes

1. I am grateful to the Israel Science Foundation for its support of my research in the field of life writing. I am grateful to my students, especially those who have allowed me to share their

words here, and I dedicate this essay to them.

I am indebted to and deeply appreciative of Maja Korac and Cindy Hurst's recent exploration of the effects of enforced one-dimensional ethnic/national identity during the Yugoslav wars of secession and the particular challenges to self-definition, paradoxically, for embedded academic researchers: 'Academia creates an abstraction of reality that fails to capture the embodied knowledge about war of those who have experienced it. As a consequence, academic work often creates essentialist categories that inadvertently contribute to reproducing the "othering" that so many wars are based on' (2023, 20). Korac and Hurst propose instead an 'embodied, experientially grounded, non-binary understanding of conflict and war-related victimization' (2023, 4).

2. See Korac and Hurst: The rigidity with which outsiders judge categorically and impose identities becomes 'disturbingly similar to what people who aim to create essentialized ethno-national states do' (2023, 19). The narrative requirements of their storytelling contribute to labelling people as villains, victims, or heroes. But such categories leave no place – for example – for Serbian anti-war protesters or for men who refuse to fight an ethno-national war that is not theirs' (2023, 19).
3. See Korac and Hurst: 'The simplistic representations of victims and perpetrators, of minorities and the privileged, prevent us from seeing the relational construction of power structures and the fact that not all individuals with particular identity markers hold the same power and take the same position' (2023, 19). Korac: 'Feeling that I could not say that I had also been victimized by the political developments that I or people like me could not stop. And there were literally hundreds of thousands of people like me in Serbia who were made invisible … . Also, always desperately trying to make a point that not all people there are monsters' (2023, 12).
4. All public news facts mentioned in this essay are confirmable in *The New York Times*.
5. October 7 fell on the Jewish holiday, Simchat Torah. My former husband walked to my apartment in spite of the sirens because as observant Jews, we do not use the phone or travel by car on holy days. At mid-day, we did not yet have any grasp of the scale of emergency we were in, one that would have canceled such structures because human lives were in the balance.
6. At the time of the writing of this essay, Hersh was alive in Gaza. Early in the morning of Sept. 1, his family was informed that Hersh and five other Israelis had been executed at close range in Rafah, in a tunnel 20 metres underground, after surviving approximately 330 days since Oct. 7. The IDF recovered their bodies. We attended his funeral with thousands of others in Jerusalem on Sept. 2, 2024. His parents continue to campaign for the release of the 100 remaining hostages, living and dead.
7. Feminist scholarship has effectively challenged the notion of a '"detached and 'objective" academic position,' and as Emma Maguire and Marina Deller note, moving 'outside of this paradigm has unique implications for scholars of life narrative, trauma and grief' (2024, 9). I suggest that life writing scholars have a role to play in witnessing trauma and grief both within and outside the academy. Maguire and Deller propose that experiences of trauma and grief 'make us able to perceive *subtleties* that may not be observable through a more detached or otherwise-informed lens' (2024, 15, emphasis mine). When we research topics 'close to home,' our work can result in 'invaluable personal transformation through knowledge-acquisition, that is then bled out into our communities through interpersonal interactions' (2024, 15). We do not continue as the same researchers we were. Nor the same teachers or citizens.
8. This essay reflects the way that even when we consciously author testimony to *create* a historical archive, an 'affective archive' can co-exist alongside it, in less formal texts such as emails, text messages and diary entries, that may appear in later published texts, shedding light on the conditions of the original archive production; see Smith and Watson who theorise 'published or performed autobiographical texts that are in conversation with their personal sources. Our interest is … in how these self-narrators innovatively engage and reinterpret the evidence of their earlier lives in new narratives woven

from their ongoing experience' (Smith and Watson 2021, 21). Archives may then generate an archive of their own construction, in a terraced relation to the historical moment being memorialised.

9. I have written about this course in my essay, 'Traceable Beginnings' (2021), and am currently involved in surveying students as to its longer-term effects. I cannot address in this essay the range of complicated experiences attested to by Palestinian and Jewish former students. I will say only that I am aware that in a course that involves minority and majority students, the risk is that minority students will pay higher emotional and academic costs in studying challenging material in the integrated setting. Yet it is also clear to me that the course offerings are at times profoundly disturbing and painful to Jewish students as well, whose self-understandings and identity narratives are suddenly cast into question. Challenges emerge from every possible direction and there are no perfect resolutions. One either decides to take the risks and to keep reflecting on the lived reality of the particular students and the findings in the specific classroom at hand, soliciting feedback in order to improve – or one gives up the project of such encounters.
10. Paul John Eakin makes the critical point that 'autobiographers and their readers tend to take for granted that "autobiography is devoted to the recovery of the past,"' yet 'autobiographical memory and autobiographical narrative are oriented to the future' (2008, 155–56): 'Our desires and goals have embedded in them plots of "scenarios" for possible futures that motivate our recovery of the past. My hunch is that most of the time we don't quite see what this future might be, and that it is precisely by revisiting the past that the potential future comes into focus for us in the present' (2008, 158).

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