

F09 - Getting Personal: Writing
Essays From The Heart
Friday, 2:00 pm - 3:30 pm



850 words

Taking Everything Personally: Why I Write Essays

By Bob Brody

Some years ago, I took long walks on the beach in Long Island with my daughter Caroline, then still only a little girl. We would climb onto the breakers and step gingerly across jagged rocks as surf splashed all around us. I would clutch her hand to prevent her from slipping into the ocean. But one day, because years had passed and she was suddenly old enough, she let go. She sought to establish her independence.

Naturally, I wrote an essay about the episode (it ran in *The Washington Post*). I say “naturally” because I’ve long written personal essays. I started with my high school and college newspapers and kept going at my first real job, with a weekly community newspaper in Manhattan. One thrilling day, shortly after I turned 26, my firsthand account of getting stabbed in my East Village apartment appeared on *The New York Times*’s Op-Ed Page.

Early on in my career, while freelancing full-time for 10 years, I turned out only a few essays. I needed to earn a paycheck, and that meant being practical, and practical meant pursuing assignments under contract. Essays are almost invariably done on spec, and so are anything but practical as business models go. Then, after I took a full-time job, in public relations, I focused all the more on making a living.

Over the last 12 years, though, I committed myself anew to the personal essay. Maybe it’s because I found myself officially old enough to have a past, and also more inclined than ever to reflect on my life, and might even have figured I finally have something to say and now may even know how to say it.

Doing personal essays is hardly easy, of course. First, I have to decide what to write. My key criterion: it should be singular, a song I alone can sing. I list my ideas, letting each one gestate, then deliberate to determine priority. I choose the one gnawing most persistently at my ankle.

Then my job is to craft an essay that excels. That’s a given. Enough said

about that – except that the process tends to involve burrowing around in my intestines, the better to sniff out a universal truth or two.

Only then do I encounter the anxieties of the marketplace. I submit my piece to an editor who never asked to see it in the first place, much less expected or necessarily desired it. I keep track of what I've submitted where and the reaction, if any.

Sometimes 10 publications will say “no,” or offer only radio silence, before I happen across one that says “yes.” Or pieces will miss the cut everywhere, doomed to languish unpublished for years, possibly for all time – even the ones I once presumed to regard among my best. Sometimes I feel discouraged, sure my most recent piece will be my last.

Even so, my luck has held out, at least according to my math. I've completed about 150 personal essays since revving up again in 2004, with some 135 seeing print. Most have to do with my family – everyone from my wife and two children to my mother, my father and my grandparents. Such offerings are generally tributes, though occasionally laced with sorrow and regret. Other pieces are issue-oriented op-eds or attempts at humor. Because the genre has infinite flexibility, I enjoy creative carte blanche.

So it is, then, that I've shared essays about how my mother, profoundly deaf since infancy, has struggled with her disability; about how my wife has turned out to be a better wife and mother than I could ever have imagined; and about how my mother-in-law raised her daughter alone, then devoted herself to helping us bring up our two children, living a quietly heroic life.

Less seriously, I've done pieces about how I one day suddenly discovered myself to be among the oldest employees, a tribal elder, at my office; and about how I daringly decided to move our family from Queens to the environs of the World Wide Web.

Chances are, I'll never be E.B. White. My pieces might fetch me an average of two hundred bucks, so at this rate I'll never get to be Warren Buffet, either. And I have yet to crack *The New Yorker*.

But you'll hear no whimpering from me. My essays have appeared everywhere from *Newsweek* and *Smithsonian* to *McSweeney's*, *Reader's Digest* and *The Wall Street Journal*. And on those occasions when it all clicks – when I've addressed the right topic, adopted the right style, found the right editor – the rewards approach the sublime. I get my say, in front of maybe a million

readers, about a matter close to my heart. I might also unearth a reality or two about my identity and what my life has meant.

If I'm really lucky, I might even inspire a response from one of those readers, as happened with the piece on Caroline letting go of my hand. Yes, a reader told me, *I never realized it before, but that's how it was for me and my daughter, too. That's it exactly.*

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Bob Brody is a public-relations executive and essayist. He is the author of the upcoming memoir, "Playing Catch With Strangers: A Family Guy (Reluctantly) Comes Of Age."