

Hawk Born of Nothing: Recognizing Truth

Wendy L. Schreiber

Writer's comment: Reality, not the intellectual world, lives in this paper. Janet required journal writing as a precursor to the papers we had due in this class. As I wrote, she asked me if I would like to continue to write more autobiographical material, so that I could better deal with my pain. I wrote a 30-page paper, of which this is but a snippet, revealing that through the trials of my life I can survive. University writing has frequently been survival in a world of intellectualization. This paper is not that.

-Wendy Schreiber

Instructor's comment: I begin every course I teach by having students write freely, trying to explore the silences they have lived under, to identify the inner critics that have held them in check, and to find the authentic voices behind these tyrannical "shoulds." They then write papers to articulate the history of the voices they have discovered.

Wendy struggled for a short while, unused to allowing her "poet" voice, the voice of her true self, to come out in her prose; at that point I gave her a copy of Adrienne Rich's essay, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," hoping that Rich would offer Wendy the same permission she had offered me—the permission to seek "the darkness of the core." Soon, Wendy found herself unable to stop and wrote on—with a brave devotion to truth—to produce a powerfully honest thirty-page manuscript, a statement of her "discovery of the woman beneath the anger and pain." Her work reminded me of what I already knew—that language is a powerful tool for transformation if we are willing to set it free.

-Janet Papale, Lecturer, English Department

Honesty in women has not been considered important. . . . And we have been rewarded for lying. . . . Lying is done with words, and also with silence. . . . The liar fears the void. . . . The dark core. It is beyond personality; beyond who loves us or hates us. . . . Yet if we can risk it, the something born of that nothing is the beginning of our truth." —Adrienne Rich in "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying" in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*

This is something between you and me. I won't be able to do this twice. In the past, I have managed to speak around it, or write poems about it, forming words like turkey vultures circling aimlessly, waiting for the hawks to clear away from the kill. I used to be a turkey vulture skimming on the fringes of hawks' range in what Adrienne Rich calls secrets, lies and

silence. I am becoming a raptor. Early on, I learned the knotting circles of lies, and the hiding of feelings, and the silence that covers all of that. Even in talkativeness, there is a wall of silence covering the frame of being that forms me. Here is a brick at your eye's level opening the wall. Hold it carefully, please. I may want it back.

In first grade, once, I confused the white quartz rocks with the white painted house as I barreled down the driveway on my bicycle and hit the house. I remember my father's disgusted face: "What the hell were you doing? Jesus, you hit the damned house! Watch where you are going. Did you wreck the bike?" So embarrassed for doing such a dumb thing, I cried for days remembering what a klutz I was, ashamed to have upset my father, and knowing I deserved my father's tirade. I figured I would be more careful next time, and I said to myself, "That's OK."

The first grade introduced me to Mrs. Fuller, a battle-axe known for her rulered finger beatings. I learned to loathe her classes since she embarrassed me, calling me lazy and dense, furious at my ignorance. I wanted to read so badly; I had a book about a kitten and a hose that I wanted to read to myself, and that made me dream of a story to the pictures, but I wanted the truth. Mrs. Fuller put me in the slow reading group of kids, saying that if I was going to be lazy, that's what I deserved. My mother and Mrs. Fuller had so many "conferences" that I was embarrassed, and the other kids teased me incessantly. I thought Mrs. Fuller might be right, and my parents and their admonishments were deserved. I kept telling myself, "That's OK."

Finally, the yearly physical, when we were lined up in the gym and made to go through eye and ear exams, the much dreaded week, when we got immunized for horrible things that we had never heard of before, showed that I had a vision problem. Mrs. Fuller seemed jubilant. My mother took me to the eye doctor and I remember trying to point my hands in the direction of the "E" and finally, selecting blue eyeglass frames because blue was my favorite color, and color was the only thing I could tell for sure through my blurry, eyedrop-filled eyes.

After I got my glasses, I was put in a chair by the door so that all of the other first graders could see me in my new glasses, and I was humiliated as Mrs. Fuller's pet project one more time. Then, she announced that I would be joining the advanced reader group. I was so happy I would finally be able to read the kitten book! But then I realized that I would have to catch up with the other kids in the group. My mother, as she helped me catch up in the class, out of guilt, continually said to me, "You know that we just didn't know, honey, but now that we know what was wrong, everything will be all right." I was still hurting, but I said, "That's OK."

I had discovered nicknames and name-calling from my father, who called me "Thunderfoot" because I was always tripping over furniture. When I was teased at school for wearing my beloved glasses, the glasses that had opened books to me, I found that I could not tell my mother. She gave me the glib line to use against the other children—one they already knew—"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names ['Four Eyes'] will never hurt me."

I said that to defend myself, but that was a lie. Indians believe that naming something gives you power over it; others' names for me gave them power over me and took my power away. My knowledge of words did nothing to protect me. My mother tried to console me with names she had been called, but she showed me that she did not understand well, and I told myself, "That's OK."

I was a tall girl. When I was in the fourth grade, I started into puberty, well ahead of everyone else my own age. I was mortified that my body, which for years had done nothing but stretch in languid inches in nights of growing pains, suddenly had given me breasts and pubic hair before every other girl. I despised the difference that I demonstrated, and so did every other girl in my school. The boys were merely confused and angrily ignorant because they saw different sex education films than we had seen. Both boys and girls took great pleasure in snapping my bra. My mother said I should be thankful that I was developing and that I would probably be "stacked," unlike her. I felt angry and frustrated because I had been chosen by fate to be different from everybody else and my mother condoned that, as if she were living her unfulfilled hopes for her own body through me. I thought maybe later I might feel differently, so I buried my grief and rage in my pillow alone at night, and in the pages of a diary I still keep. I woke up red-eyed telling myself, "That's OK."

I got good grades in junior high school, won spelling bees, read more books than did any other kid as a matter of pride, and began to formulate a person. This person would become the brain that my parents wanted from me, would become the book worm I liked, but that person would not be me; I would feel separate from her somehow. I began to feel separate from other kids more, as my teachers and parents named me "gifted."

I began to flit to feelings and ways of being that were not mine. I read books profusely to know what I should feel because I no longer was sure what I did feel because I was asked at a young age to accept the unacceptable and bury my feelings and pretend to feel differently. I read children's books about teasing other kids, hoping to know how I could escape the constant teasing. At night before I went to sleep, I practiced clever retorts to say to the teasers that bit so deftly. I always stumbled over them no matter how much I practiced, and was teased for that, too. I read *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*, hoping to understand my new and weirdly behaving body. I thought that I might be able to manage it somehow, if Margaret could.

I read Agatha Christie mysteries; if Hercule Poirot could solve things in such a deft manner, then I might find solutions, too. I liked the twists and turns of each novel, and I liked trying to figure out "whodunnit." In my life, as parts of me became powerless or were killed off, I had no grasp of the murderer. I now see the murderer in my mirror each day. I crept away to what Rich calls the "dark core." I could not turn to my parents—my mother was insecure, and my father, a commercial pilot, was not home much—nor to my books or my God, so I turned within, dying.

An addict, I kept reading, and when one of my dearest friends, Alfie, our family cat died,

I wrote my first poem. I dreamt he came back to me, and I wrote and read for magic. I wanted magic, lots and lots of magic, and power—control—over my life, so I read fantasies and science fiction. Opening books felt like opening possibilities in a totally different dimension of myself. Writing felt like the most honest and safe place for my self to exist and feel things.

In writing, I began to discover that I did not have to hide and pretend, and I began to discover after the year-long diary assignment given by Mrs. Dratfield, my fifth grade teacher, that I did not have to couch my words for what she might see and report to my mother anymore. I could say whatever I wanted. What freedom! I had never had a place where I felt as if I could be, do or have anyone or anything I wanted. I could be rageful and scream about the silences, lies and secrets that I kept inside. I could talk to the “dark core” and tap the otherness I had hoped I would find in church, but never did. I could talk about my mother’s weird unreasonable demands, and carefully did so, hiding diary notes in my wirebound notebooks from school, never telling anyone that I did that. My silence about my writing guaranteed that I could keep that dark core of truth protected inside. No one could critique or grade that, and my diaries, poems, and stories were mine.

I forget sometimes that I am not that helpless little girl who got teased for wearing glasses by kids in school, who got teased by my father, who nicknamed me “Thunderfoot.” I do not remember growing up loving myself, or ever feeling as if I was a complete, attractive and decent person. I learned to be numb, to not feel. At an early age, my responsibility was to take care of things for my mother, while my father flew airplanes for his job because I was “daddy’s big girl,” and my mother needed help. In many ways this was the beginning of my mother and my switching places. When she was sick, I took care of her. When she was mad, I let her rage at me. Whenever there were problems in the family, I took the blame because I was the oldest and, therefore, responsible. I accepted the unacceptable to make everything OK. All I ever wanted was for everything and everyone to be OK.

Now, I feel my life through the stretching wingspan of a hawk soaring in the warmth of sunlight above pain, above despair. I feel those bad moments, sometimes, but I find that I can fly, and they disappear beneath my bird’s eye view.

Words have so much power to hurt and harm, but they have also helped me to heal. By taking the language and putting my own voice to it, I have found my own power to overcome the pain that accompanies a well-trained avoidance of the truth. Lies, secrets and silence haunt me like ghosts, and as they show themselves to me, as I see my child-self behind them, I name the ghosts, so that I have power, and open myself to allowing that power to become a part of me.

I want to give words to other children. I want to teach, breaking cycles of pain, giving to my students my newly-found skill of speaking the truth, revealing the secrets to the welcoming rays of light, and breaking the silence with the reverberating and echoing calls of a hawk who has learned to soar on both the downdrafts and the updrafts, bouncing off the landscape below.