Friendship, Fiction, and Memoir:
Trust and Betrayal in Writing from One's Own Life

by Claudia Mills

I once attended a writing conference for aspiring authors of books for children, at which one speaker enraged the audience by making the pronouncement that, in his view, parents were disqualified to be authors of children's fiction. His reason: parents have to protect themselves from the reality of their children's pain and so wouldn't be able to write about childhood traumas with sufficient awareness and honesty. To this the audience, largely composed of mothers, shot back that parents are especially qualified to write for children, for precisely the opposite reason: they live with children in a relationship of great intimacy and so know children in a way that non-parents

do not.

But, assuming, as I am inclined to do (as myself a writer of books for children who is also a parent), that the parents are correct here, or at least correct in asserting that they have a distinctive avenue of access to children on which they can draw to enrich the writing of their books, what ethical problems, if any, arise? If children do indeed provide their author-parents with "material," is this material the parents are entitled to use? If the children grow up themselves to be authors some day, will they be able to draw on their own childhoods -- and their relationships with parents and siblings -- to craft their own novels, or memoirs? (Flannery O'Connor is quoted as saying that no author need ever be at a loss for subject matter to write about: "All you need is a childhood.") Can friends write about friends, while still remaining friends and being true to the expectations and obligations of friendship?

In this essay I want to highlight -- and then partially seek to dissolve, or resolve -- the particular tensions that arise between the obligations of friendship (or family relationships) and the necessity for an author (of either fiction or memoirs) to draw on her own life -- that is to say, her own relationships with friends and family -- in her work. I have wrestled with these dilemmas in my own career as the author of children's fiction, where all my books are based either on

memories of my own childhood (and so on my relationship with my parents, sister, and childhood friends) or on the ongoing experiences of my two school-age sons. I'm always having to agonize over how much of these memories and experiences to reveal in my fiction, and how to do this in a way that honors my obligations to my loved ones.

Let me begin by posing the two sources of tension most sharply.

Commitments of Friends

To be a friend is to stand in a certain kind of relationship to another person, one which is essentially non-instrumental, in which, as Aristotle tells us, we seek the good of the other for his own sake, and not for our own. In Books 8 and 9 of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle contrasts the true friendship with the mere utility friendship, in which I pursue a relationship with you for what I can gain from that relationship for me. As Michael Stocker writes, in his critique of the instrumentalism of modern ethical theories, "it is essential to the very concept of love that one care for the beloved, that one be prepared to act for the sake of the beloved. More strongly, one must care for the beloved and act for that person's sake as a final goal; the beloved, or the beloved's welfare or interest,

must be a final goal of one's concern and action" (69).

But this is not to say that one can never seek any benefits for oneself from a friendship or love relationship. Of course one can. Why, after all, would I choose to be a friend, or to get married, or to have children, if I wasn't going to gain in some way from doing so? (Though I have one childhood friend who was told by her mother that she only married her husband, my friend's future father, because she felt sorry for him!) Why would I choose to spend my precious time and invest my limited energies in this way?

Some of the benefits I gain from intimate relationships are what Thomas Donaldson has called "value-intrinsic" to that relationship, values that are "logically unobtainable without the existence of the [relationship] itself"; benefits are "value-extrinsic" to "the extent to which [the ends in question] could be achieved by other means" (36). Recasting his point for our purposes, we can say that it is at the very least permissible to be seeking from a relationship goods that are value-intrinsic to the relationship, goods which simply cannot be acquired in any other way: that is, the goods of participating in the relationship itself.

It is more problematic when we seek from a relationship goods that are value-extrinsic to it: money, prestige, family connections -- and material to write about. But it is not

clearly impermissible to seek or gain additional benefits for oneself. As the quip goes, "It's just as easy to love a rich man as a poor man." One thinks of Elizabeth Bennet realizing that there are certain desirable benefits to letting herself be wooed and won by the wealthy and socially well-established Mr. Darcy. Here one needs to be careful: the external benefits cannot be what drives the relationship; the relationship must be driven by the internal ("value-intrinsic") benefits and always contain the central element of a desire to benefit the beloved for the beloved's own sake.

But in the case of writers who write about friends and family members, the external benefit of being provided with material to write about is never (I would think) what drives the relationship. Writers do not seek out difficult, stormy, heart-wrenching relationships so that we can write about them. We find ourselves in them and write our way out of their pain and perplexity. Journalists may occasionally undertake relationships for instrumental, career-related reasons, as Joe McGinniss cultivated a friendship with convicted murderer Jeffrey MacDonald so that he could write about him, a relationship explored in Janet Malcolm's fascinating two-part New Yorker article, "The Journalist and the Murderer." Writers, by and large, do not. So the issue becomes deriving some professional benefit for oneself after the fact of entering into

the relationship for other reasons, on other grounds. Nor do writers tend to be mere bystanders in their own lives, watching them unfold with pen in hand, as journalists have been known to do -- allowing disasters to proceed before their very eyes just so that they could write about it afterward, or take a Pulitzer-Prize winning photo of the carnage. I have never heard of a real-life author deliberately disregarding the welfare of a loved one, just to generate something to write about later. (A fictional exception here is Christina Schwarz's heroine of All Is Vanity, who encourages her closest friend to destroy her family in order to gather material for her novel-in-process, The Rise and Fall of Lexie Langtree Smith.) It doesn't seem to me that there is any problem simply with my deriving some external benefit from my intimate relationships for myself, so long as that benefit is not the dominant goal of the intimate relationship, and so long as I continue to value the loved one appropriately.

So now the issue is whether one can indeed value one's loved ones appropriately while also drawing on their lives as material for one's work. We have come to what is clearly the central issue when writers write about their loved ones: the public betrayal of trust.

Friendship and family relationships create a protected space in which I can "let my hair down" and "be myself," making

myself vulnerable to another without fear of exposure to third parties. Even crusty old Kant wrote of friendship, "But if one finds a man of good disposition and understanding to whom he can open his heart with complete confidence . . . then he can give vent to his thoughts. Then he is not completely alone with his thoughts, as if in prison, but enjoys a freedom which he misses in the mass of men, among whom he must keep himself to himself" (138). Friends tell each other secrets without feeling any need to secure a pledge of confidentiality, for this is understood as a given, within the context of the friendship itself. The classic case of adolescent betrayal is when a supposed friend blabs embarrassing revelations about oneself to the entire seventh grade. Families, in particular, are often locations of deeply buried secrets, sometimes passed on for generations; every family, one suspects, has a "skeleton in its closet" somewhere, not to be exposed to prying, public view. Those marrying into families gradually earn the right to be co-custodians of these family secrets. Such secrets are not to be blurted to outsiders, and especially not to be publicized in print, for financial gain. This clearly seems to pose a problem for writers drawing on family stories in their novels or memoirs.

Commitments of Writers

To be a writer is to be committed to telling the truth, sometimes the literal truth (for writers of nonfiction), sometimes a "deeper" truth which is more than mere factual accuracy, but a kind of fidelity to what is. Writers can write only the truths that they know, which are often the truths drawn from their own friendships and family relationships. Now, the degree to which a writer draws from his own life varies: some write memoirs, or fiction only thinly disguised from their own life experiences; others may write about distant galaxies or Joan of Arc. But even those who write about far-flung places and long-ago times most likely draw on their own life experience as a means of understanding the human heart. Writers are famous for scouting for material wherever life places them. We write about our parents, our children, our colleagues, our friends. To eschew the richest of all veins of material -- ourselves -- would be tantamount to making writing altogether impossible. Moreover, writers often confront the most harrowing of life experiences with what sounds like a cynical question, "How can I use this in a book?"

Now, one might say that it's fine to write about one's friends and family members so long as one writes only the positive things, tells only the good parts. Even this may be problematic: what I think of as sweet and funny, you may think of as horribly embarrassing, or nonetheless as private. But, in

any case, writers cannot write only the good parts. Memoir writer Cathy Crimmins includes in her list of "10 Commandments for Writing a Memoir": "That shalt not honor thy mother" and "Thou shalt wreak revenge" (Lamb and Rold, 5). In her wonderful manual on writing, <u>If You Want to Write</u>, Brenda Ueland cautions writers against self-censoring their less kind thoughts about family members: After thinking, "My goodness, how could I ever have such a mean thought about Auntie Mae!" the writer puts down, "She was just a dear, old lady with a roguish twinkle in her eyes." No, Ueland tells us: "Not from the true self and so no good" (91). We can't write sanitized, syrupy versions of our own lives. We have to write about problems, conflict, the dark night of the soul; we have to focus more on the bad than on the good. Tolstoi opens <u>Anna Karenina</u> with the famous observation, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Jacqueline Jackson, in her guide on writing for young readers, advises, "Badness makes very good reading, I guess because we can empathize so well" (127), adding, "I find it hard to remember the good stories. . . while the bad ones are still fresh in my memory" (128). If we don't write about the hurtful, harmful, dark, dangerous things, we won't write anything anybody will want to read. And we won't get published, either. This is the complementary source of the tension in a writer's life: we can't use our most interesting family stories

as material, but we can't give them up, either.

Thus, to be a friend is to stand to another in a relationship of trust, for the sake of one's friend; to be a writer is to stand ready to violate that trust, for the sake of one's story.

Resolving the Tension

Can this tension be resolved? I want to begin by setting aside the special set of issues involved in revealing family secrets for publication, and for profit, and write toward those issues in what follows. There is a gradual continuum from telling one's stories, to writing one's stories, to publishing one's stories, with the distinctions along the continuum made increasingly blurry through the advent of the Internet (who among us has not had a private e-mail to a friend broadcast far more widely, either deliberately or, too often, inadvertently?)[1] I want to begin by asking the more general question: In what contexts, if any, are we (prima facie) justified in sharing the stories of our most intimate associates with others?

Some moral rigorists may answer "None!" An (implicit) promise is (nonetheless) a promise; trust is trust. I do not. I simply couldn't live without sharing stories of my husband and children with my women friends, and they couldn't live without

sharing stories of their husbands and children with me. At the very least, I couldn't continue as a participant in those relationships without occasionally talking about those relationships with others. I know the husbands and children often feel uncomfortable about this, but most of us feel we couldn't survive marriage or parenthood, survive life itself, if we couldn't share our problems with others. Life is hard. Marriage is hard. Parenting is hard. Even friendship can sometimes be hard. For me, talking about my intimate relationships, especially the deepest and most enduring ones, is a condition of my being in those relationships at all. It wouldn't make sense to tell me, "Don't talk about the relationship at all to others outside the relationship." If I couldn't talk about my relationships I simply couldn't have them. I believe that the conversations I have with female friends about my family members benefit me greatly, but they also benefit my family members, however much they might object to these conversations, because they give me the strength and wisdom and compassion to continue on as wife and mother, and to be a better wife and mother than I would be otherwise. I learn from the conversations, gaining in perspective, reawakening my sense of humor, deriving ideas for possible solutions to various problems. I benefit greatly, and my loved ones benefit as well.

Now, so far I haven't said anything to establish a benefit

to my loved ones from my talking about them for intended publication. That is a more daunting task. To move in that direction, we have to look at the benefits I gain not only from talking to others about my family problems, but in hearing what others have to say about <u>their</u> family problems, in reciprocal rather than one-sided conversations. For perhaps even more than I benefit from talking to friends about my loved ones, I benefit from hearing them talk about their loved ones -- and how hard it can sometimes be to go on loving them. Whenever another wife admits a quarrel she has had with her husband, or another mother admits some secret disappointment she has in her children, I am strengthened, enormously relieved, blessed by the sense that I am not so utterly alone. I feel more ready both to accept my life as it is, as part of the human condition from which I am hardly exempt, and to take practical, proven steps to change it, drawing on the wisdom of others before me who have already invented the wheel.

Moving to the next step in the widening circle of conversation here: Do I feel betrayed if the friends with whom I have spoken talk about me to other friends, and perhaps, pass on some of what I have told them to others? My answer is that it depends on how this is done. If a "friend" were simply to want to discredit and embarrass me before others, or to share a snide giggle at my expense, of course I would object. But if the

friend simply needs to share with another the burden of a disturbing confidence that I've placed on her, to help her process what I've confided in her, I accept this as part of what she needs to do to continue to be my friend. And maybe my friend wants to make some other friend also feel not so utterly alone, by letting her know the parallel difficulties others are facing: "I have this other friend? And she's going through some of the same things, too." I admit that it is preferable if the friend passes on my stories without including my name, giving me the protections of anonymity; but sometimes identity-revealing elements may be an important part of the story. And sometimes the other friend may have reason to care about me, too, and to want to know something of what I am struggling with. I've always subscribed to the unorthodox belief that a pledge of confidentiality (in other than a professional context) entails an implicit exception, to tell just <u>one</u> other person, who in turn is pledged to confidentiality, but permitted to tell just one other person. Thus, the circle of exposure continues to widen.

I have said that this is a good thing because of our need both to tell stories and to hear stories told. But I think the gradual and growing light of exposure can also be a good thing because secrecy itself can be corrosive and damaging. "Good" secrets can be fun -- the savoring of the news of a friend's

pregnancy before this is yet public knowledge, the planning of a surprise birthday party -- but "bad" secrets as often as not hurt those who are charged with keeping them. I grew up in a family full of secrets -- probably all of us did -- and keeping those secrets was one of the hardest parts of my childhood. I would venture the generalization that almost every "bad" secret involves a shame. And most of the secrets I was ashamed about, charged with never revealing, shouldn't have been viewed as shameful at all. One of my children's books, The Secret Life of Bethany Barrett, deals with a girl who feels she has to keep secret from her mother the truth about who she is, the truth that she isn't the perfect child she thinks her mother needs to believe that she is; the book also deals with the mother's ongoing denial of Bethany's younger brother's learning disabilities. Oh, the relief, when those secrets can be faced and told! Kathleen Redfield Jamieson writes in her memoir, Touched by Fire, about her lifelong journey through manic-depression: "I have no idea what the long-term effects of discussing such issues so openly will be on my personal and professional life, but, whatever the consequences, they are bound to be better than continuing to be silent. I am tired of hiding, tired of misspent and knotted energies, tired of the hypocrisy, and tired of acting as though I have something to hide" (7). Thus, the secrecy protected by a certain view of

familial privacy can be a crushing weight imposed on family members, so that the speaking of the truth, even the public proclamation of the truth, can be experienced as an act of liberation, and ultimately of love.

If there can be a great relief to me when finally I tell my secret, is there a great relief to me when finally <u>you</u> tell my secret? Or is there only a great sense of betrayal? Perhaps, both. It can be a great benefit to me not to have to carry a secret any longer, not to have to hide and cower in the closet. And here it is important to note that there are also costs to others when one person hides in the closet, contributing to a public culture in which that secret is a source of shame. As Richard Mohr has argued, gays who hide their homosexuality from public view, to avoid social condemnation of who they are, cooperate with the forces that maintain that condemnation; closeted gays help to maintain social norms that assault their own individual dignity. Thus Mohr, controversially, endorses "outing" of gays. A parallel conversation has taken place on newspapers' policies of not revealing the names of rape victims, because it is perceived as so shameful, not to be a rapist, but to have been raped. By protecting one person's secret, we contribute to a climate of false shame surrounding that secret. The greater the climate of shame surrounding a secret, the more costly its revelation is to the subject of the secret. But the

more some individuals are willing to -- or forced to -- bear those costs, the less those costs become for future others.

Of course, some things -- not homosexuality, not being the victim of a sexual assault -- really are shameful. What if it's a secret of this sort that I want to protect -- my past as a pedophile, my criminal record, my consumption of Internet child pornography? Where shameful secrets pose dangers to others, it's arguable that these secrets should be revealed -- though even as I say this, I have to admit that I feel sick when past offenders are labeled for life and denied any opportunity, ever, at public redemption. Still, I'm inclined here to state the exposure quandary in this way. Either the secret is truly shameful or not. If it is, perhaps the secret should be exposed, for the protection of others. If it's not, perhaps its exposure can help reduce the unwarranted shame attached to secrets of this kind. I recognize that in real life the alternatives are seldom so starkly posed. Different stories are shameful to different persons in different contexts -- perhaps as a result of one's different social position. It has been pointed out to me that individuals in a socially oppressed group may have good reason to fear the dissemination of certain stories about themselves to those in the socially dominant group, who may use these stories to reinforce their own prejudices and stereotypes.[2] And yet, I'm still drawn to the

view that in the end the truth helps to make us free. A recent young-adult novel, Chill Wind, by Janet McDonald, an African-American author who grew up in the Brooklyn projects, depicts a teen-aged black welfare mother who has no intention whatsoever of working or taking any real responsibility for her life. Does the novel reinforce racial stereotypes? In my view, no, because its heroine has so much sass and in-your-face attitude and humor and warmth that instead it shows me the real person behind the stereotype, in a way that a pious treatment of a "perfect" black character would not, and could not, do.

Still, the consequences of one's exposure of another's non-shameful secret can in some cases be devastating. Alice Wexler, in her essay for this volume, calls attention to the crushing material consequences individuals may face in terms of loss of livelihood and loss of health or life insurance when stigmatizing genetic or medical information about individuals is revealed. These are serious repercussions from disclosure that cannot be dismissed lightly, nor would I want to dismiss them. I am arguing only that the sharing of revelatory stories is at least sometimes prima facie justified; I leave open the possibility that in certain contexts, for certain individuals, the costs of sharing may simply be too great.

At this point we've moved beyond the benefits of disclosure of one's stories to only a few select friends, toward the

benefits of a wider, public disclosure. We're also closing in on the benefits of the published sharing of stories. Returning to my need to hear others' stories, I have benefitted greatly not only from one-on-one confidences shared with friends, but from reading others' stories, both in fiction and in memoir. The same relief I get of feeling not so utterly alone in the universe comes to me from literature as well as from life, and sometimes more forcefully or poignantly from literature, if the writer is more skilled and articulate than my lunchtime friends might be, more able to distill the core of his or her experience, or that of the characters he or she has created. Some of us don't have a rich and varied circle of friends to share our stories with, and our only access to the experience of others will come through the media -- literature, film, television.

The sharing of published stories generally means the sharing of stories for financial profit. Should this additional element, of the storyteller's financial gain, make a difference to our conclusions here? I would say: no. We have already accepted the legitimacy of seeking some extrinsic benefits from friendship. I think we also accept the legitimacy of trying to make a living through the use of one's talents and gifts. If I'm benefitting the world through the sharing of my published stories, it's appropriate that I be recompensed for doing so.

It takes an enormous amount of developed ability and sustained effort to write a readable and publishable memoir or novel; it is natural that writers write as a profession, for which they expect to be paid. Thus, the last piece of the puzzle falls into place.

I'm ready now to lay out my formal argument for why it is at least sometimes permissible for me to share the stories of my friends and family members, not only to other intimates in confidential confession, but even in print, for profit. I will then consider several objections to this argument and some qualifications and caveats regarding it.

I need to <u>tell</u> stories about my intimate relationships; I derive great benefit from this. Those in my intimate relationships benefit, too, because I couldn't continue in the relationships otherwise, and telling the stories helps me perform my role in these relationships better. I need to <u>hear</u> others' stories; I derive great benefit from this. Those in my intimate relationships benefit from this, too, for the same reason. Furthermore, in the same way, I benefit, and they benefit, from my hearing the published stories of others. (And presumably my intimates are also primary benefitting consumers of these stories themselves.) Now, all of this benefit is possible only at the cost of somebody's stories getting told. I have suggested above that there are some benefits even to those

whose secrets are shared -- the lifting of the crushing burden of "shameful" secrecy -- but there are also undeniable costs as well. Still, if these costs are not incurred by somebody, the great benefits I've listed could not be generated.

While this argument as stated has a utilitarian flavor, in its reckoning of costs and benefits, I find myself drawn to a quasi-Kantian approach here (although Kant would be rolling over in his grave at my thoughts about the permissibility of breaking promises of confidentiality: "The strictest friendship requires an understanding and trusted friend who considers himself bound not to share without express permission a secret entrusted to him with anyone else" [139]). I cannot will a world in which nobody shares intimate stories. And so, if I'm going to act only on that maxim which I could will to be a universal law, I cannot exempt my own stories from being shared by others. "Yes, share stories, but not mine" isn't a fit item of legislation in the kingdom of ends. If I am unable to forgo the crucial benefits to be reaped from others' stories, I must make myself vulnerable to the sharing of my own.

Objections and Replies

Now, our goal must be to achieve the great benefits of the sharing of stories while minimizing the costs to those whose stories are shared. But before I turn to some thoughts about

how to approach this, I want to consider several sweeping objections to the argument itself.

First, my argument turns on the importance of being able to share stories and to tell secrets. The objection could be raised that we live right now in a culture of too much story-sharing, too little secret-keeping, shaped by the talk-show and Internet culture of baring our souls, "letting it all hang out," in front of thirty million viewers/voyeurs. My argument implies that we have too much false shame; the counter-argument charges that we have too little true shame. Complete strangers blurt out their intimate secrets to each other on the subway, and to the whole world on Oprah, or on their own tell-all websites. Far from a dearth of stories, we have a cultural surfeit. The issues raised here concern shame and modesty, coarseness and crassness, self-absorption and narcissism. Indeed, the rise of memoir as a literary genre has sometimes been linked with a growing culture of narcissism: "And now for some more about me...."

My response here is twofold. First, even in the United States of America in the early years of the new millennium, I myself still experience an almost bottomless hunger for story, and for connection with others through story. I still can't stop talking with friends and can't stop reading books by strangers. Moreover, I still feel crushed and burdened by the

effort of trying to hide my own imperfections from others. As a mother, I fall into the arms of any other mother struggling with issues similar to my own, eager to share our tales and draw strength from them. Social critics may mock the proliferation of support groups for every ailment under the sun -- but I still need and crave support. I repeat my earlier point: life is hard, relationships are hard. I continue to welcome all the help I can get.

Second, we need to draw distinctions among stories. Part of the objection I raised above is not to the sharing of stories per se, but to the glib, shallow, sound-bite way in which they are shared, and to the overly sexual content on which they are focused. The true sharing of stories takes some time for both telling and listening. The beauty of sharing stories from friends, or stories through literature, is that we get a chance to know, or at least try to know, at least catch a glimpse of, the "whole person" whose story it is. To read, for example, Jane Hamilton's novel A Map of the World, is to see how unspeakable disaster can come to a mother very much like me from a moment of carelessness of the kind of which I am completely capable. To see a talk-show segment on "mothers who accidentally killed other mothers' children!" would just be sensational -- what would be lost is the individual person behind the shocking story line. And a friend pointed out to me

that when stories are shared through literature, one still has the sense of a secret confided from one individual to another, from writer alone at her computer to reader alone in her bed. Even the sharing of stories through film takes place in a darkened theater, with the intimacy that darkness provides. But the sharing of stories on television is the willy-nilly broadcasting of stories to anyone who can casually pick up the remote control and click on the tube.[3]

Moreover, while I have a hunger for story generally, my own prudish, modest self doesn't have a hunger for stories about other people's sexual proclivities and performances. These are not stories I share with my friends over lunch, whatever other deep personal stories we share. I've always hated biographies that tell us too much graphic detail about, e.g., Abraham Lincoln's sex life. I don't want to know! Despite our undeniable public interest in sex, evidenced by the content of most prime-time TV shows, I would say that stories about sex itself are inherently uninteresting. What Richard Mohr calls our sexual "fumblings" are, in the end, all largely the same (16).

Thus, my reply to the first objection raised to my argument is that it impugns not the sharing of stories generally, but the sharing of certain kinds of stories in a certain glib and shallow way. The need for sharing deep, meaningful stories

emerges unscathed.

A second general objection to my argument is that, because I have grounded it in a deep human need to tell stories, I have provided at best an excuse for the sharing of stories, not a justification for doing so.[4] We are excused for telling stories, because we can't help ourselves; as Aristotle would say, in drawing his own similar distinction between excuse and justification: "In some cases there is no praise, but there is pardon, whenever someone does a wrong action because of conditions of a sort that overstrain human nature, and that no one would endure" (31). On this view, it's wrong to betray others' confidences and share their stories, but we (sometimes) forgive those who do so, because, according to my argument, it would have been too hard for them, given human nature, to have refrained.

I disagree. I don't think the telling of stories is something that we should generally try our best to avoid doing or regret having done. I think a world where we didn't share stories would be poorer world -- a morally poorer one. If saints are those who could somehow keep the stories of their loved ones bottled up within their own hearts -- that is, if saints can even have loved ones in any sense the rest of us can understand -- then, with Susan Wolf, I am glad that I, and my friends, fall short of saintliness. So I think I've offered,

not merely an excuse for the sharing of stories, but a prima facie justification for doing so -- where by "prima facie" justification, I mean that the practice is justified "on its face," though not necessarily justified all things considered.

The third, and final, objection I want to raise to my account is, if successful, the most damaging. It is that I have drastically dismissed or discounted the importance each of us places in having control over our own stories. Control over information about ourselves is central to the right to privacy, and the human dignity that right protects. I offered above the quasi-Kantian argument that I couldn't will a world in which stories were not shared. But could I really will a world in which everyone's stories would be completely up for grabs, in which there was no sense in which my story was respected as mine, in which it was simply seized for the telling by whoever felt like telling it? It seems that a maxim of utterly careless and heedless storytelling, if universalized as law, would completely self-destruct, for no one would be willing to tell stories in a world such as that. And without this initial telling of stories, there would be no common stock of stories to retell.[5]

I find myself moved by this objection. This is how I would reply. I do believe that even in such a world, people would tell their stories, simply because, as I argued above, we can't

help ourselves: telling stories is a condition of our continuing to live, or at least interact socially with others, at all. And I don't think my argument has tried to establish even a prima facie justification for the sharing of all stories, at any time, to anyone. I reject storytelling that violates professional codes of confidentiality, storytelling motivated by malice (with exceptions to which I'll return below), storytelling that fails to exhibit appropriate care and respect for the stories told (as in the talk-show broadcasting of stories, discussed above). Storytelling must be done with sensitivity and concern both for the stories themselves and even more for the persons, for the human beings, whose stories these are.

Minimizing the Costs

How, then, can we share stories in a way that exhibits appropriate care and respect for persons, and for the stories of their lives? How can we reap the great benefits of story-sharing while minimizing the costs to those whose stories are told?

First we need to know what kind of "costs" we're talking about here. If the cost is simply the sheer fact of having one's story told, however it is told, and whether or not one ever knows that it was told or incurs any adverse effects from having it told, that cost is inescapable, on my argument. My

argument, if it is successful, gives us grounds for being willing to accept this kind of cost: the sharing of stories does require that stories be shared. So we need to look at other kinds of costs: the lack of respect or sensitivity or kindness revealed in certain modes or contexts of storytelling, the pain the person may experience from embarrassment at the revelation, the pain she may experience from discovering what the storyteller really thinks about her, loss of reputation or standing in another's eyes.

The best but hardest way to reduce these costs is simply to be a great writer, with a wise, compassionate view of your characters in all their enormous complexity. Brenda Ueland praises the great Russian authors for their "honesty, earnestness, and extraordinarily clear vision" (124):

> Now every word they write in a mysterious way is autobiographical and true and yet when they write about repulsive people, whom no doubt they knew well, there is nothing caddish or reprehensible about it, as there is when other writers describe living people in their books. Why is that? Is it because Tolstoi and Chekhov and Dostoyevsky and Gorky were so serious, so impassioned, so truthful about everything and would never let themselves show off or jeer or exaggerate? If you are serious in describing bad

> people and not mean or derisive or superior . . . even the bad people will be grateful. I would never resent being described by Chekhov, no matter how repellent the picture. I would try to be better. If Sinclair Lewis did it, or D. H. Lawrence or H. L. Mencken I would sue for libel, -- a million dollars (130-31).

If we can write about our loved ones, or even our hated ones, while doing full justice to their unique and distinctive and suffering and joyful personhood, they, like Ueland, may view their portrait as a gift.[6]

Another, less daunting way to reduce the costs to those whom we write about is to protect their identity in various ways: to share a person's story, but withhold the person's name, changing revelatory (but irrelevant) details whenever possible. This points us toward sharing stories through fiction, rather than through nonfiction. This has been my own choice in my own writing about my friends and family members. I write fiction, changing the names, making up most of the events that take place, so that only the emotional core remains.

In my Gus and Grandpa books, focusing on the relationship between a little boy and his grandfather, the grandfather is almost entirely like my boys' real-life Grandpa, my father-in-

law -- who recognizes himself so much in the books that he actually grew a mustache to match the illustrator's portrayal of Grandpa more closely! The portrait of Grandpa is a very idealized and positive one, so that I had little to fear in drawing so liberally on Grandpa's real-life character and mannerisms -- which isn't to say that I didn't tremble when I gave the first book to him. ("People pay money for this?" he asked, incredulously.) Gus himself is less idealized, however, and here I made the crucial change of collapsing both my boys into the one character of Gus, who in different books struggles with some of the same issues that have faced my boys: being the last kid in the neighborhood to ride a two-wheel bike without training wheels, getting confused on the basketball court, hating your piano lessons. Our real-life perfect neighbor boy makes an appearance in the books as Gus's nemesis, perfect neighbor boy Ryan Mason -- with his name changed and his identity additionally shielded by the fact that the illustrator, in an effort to promote diversity, has drawn Ryan as African-American. Much of what actually happens in the books is completely fabricated -- e.g, our real-life 92-year-old Grandpa was not the one who taught our boys how to ride a bike, nor would he ever, in a million years, attend their noisy, chaotic basketball games.

The Gus and Grandpa books are sweet and basically

unthreatening to my boys, so I've disguised our lives the least here. In my books that deal with issues closer to the painful realities of our lives, I disguise my characters more liberally. 7 x 9 = Trouble! deals with a third grade boy struggling with learning the times tables -- as my older son struggled. In the book, Wilson has a gifted younger brother, Kipper, who shines at math -- as my younger son shines. But just about every scene in the book is a product of imagination, including a subplot about a classroom hamster, and I obtained my younger son's permission to use, in dialogue, two actual lines which he once uttered. My book You're a Brave Man, Julius Zimmerman deals with the relationship between a mother and son; the mother is disappointed in her son for not being more of an academic success and for preferring television to reading. I am close enough to the mother in the book to have felt quite threatened when my writing group critiqued the first scene in which she appears: "This mother is a witch! She's so mean to poor Julius!" But, again, as every single scene and line in the entire book is the product of imagination (Julius's summer French class, his summer babysitting job, all of it), I felt at a safe distance from my own family situation in writing it.

I don't think I could publish a memoir about my family, either my childhood family, or my family now. For me, it would be too much of a betrayal; it would cross the line I have drawn

for myself. Maybe this is because I've established a career as a writer of children's fiction, and so I'm able to achieve my own story-sharing goals in this way. (And so many mothers of boys have come up to me at conferences to tell me they see themselves in Julius's "witchy" but nonetheless loving mother.) I'm mentioning my family here only safe in the knowledge that this essay isn't likely to be widely read (!), and so my boys are unlikely to hear me say any of this about them. And I've taken pains not to say anything <u>too</u> terrible, as well.

So, fiction is a choice for story-sharing that provides more protection for those whose stories are told. That said, the strength of memoir is precisely its claim of literal truth. If what I am seeking, as a reader, is real stories of other real people who share my struggles in a way that illuminates my world, there is no substitute for reality. Memoir provides the crucial possibility of witness: "This happened to me."[7] Moreover, memoir is arguably more direct and honest as a choice here than fiction, which can involve deliberate distortions of someone's life presented as thinly disguised fictionalization, and which lacks memoir's accountability, its public declaration that it offers at least an attempt at the truth.[8] Thus, on my balance sheet, against the greater protection to loved ones provided by fiction is opposed the witness and accountability gained from the presentation of literal, actual truth -- or, at

least, literal, actual truth as distilled by the subjective, fallible, over-invested human being writing it. Here I'll say only that the writing of memoirs is the riskier choice -- with greater potential benefits from the story-sharing, but greater potential harm to loved ones, as well. By saying this, am I retreating from my central argument that purports to justify the widespread sharing of real stories?[9] I don't think so. I think I'm offering a compromise that recognizes that while the sharing of stories has great value, it also has painful costs, which a responsible moral agent will seek, if possible, to minimize. Fictionalization is one possible way of accomplishing this.

Given the kind of costs I'm focusing on -- the harms suffered by the living person in having his stories told, rather than the sheer fact of having those stories told -- it is somewhat less morally problematic to write a memoir after the death of the key persons whose stories are told in it. The dead feel no pain (although novels like Alice Sebold's The Lovely Bones do make me worry that the dead may be somehow present still, to witness how we, the survivors, process our grief). Now, while the dead can no longer experience conscious pain, it still seems important to respect at least some of the interests they expressed when they were still living. Joel Feinberg, exploring the puzzle of posthumous interests, writes, "we can think of some of a person's interests as surviving his death,

just as some of the debts and claims of his estate do... The final tally book on a person's life is not closed until some time after his death" (83). Thus, we carry out the terms of the deceased's last will and testament and try to fulfill his stated wishes for burial -- even though he would never know if we failed him here. Likewise, it seems important to protect someone's posthumous interest in protecting her reputation and legacy: "the desire to maintain a good reputation . . . can be the basis of interests that survive their owner's death, in a manner of speaking, and can be promoted or harmed by events subsequent to that death. Fulfillment and thwarting of interest, after all, may be possible, even when it is too late for satisfaction or disappointment" (Feinberg 86). That others will read what we write, and judge our loved ones accordingly, gives us some reason at the least to write carefully, constantly weighing the need to tell what we are telling against the costs, in some sense, to the loved one, even post mortem, of having it told.

My own choices to write about my friends and family as I do have been formed by the fact that I do love them dearly and want to protect them as I proceed in the storytelling which is my passion, and my livelihood. How would my deliberations change if in fact I didn't love them, or loved them only in some qualified way, with love equally mixed with anger or hurt of my

own? I don't think bad people deserve the protections that good people do. I once read a quote that thrilled me, that the task of the historian was to hold up evil deeds "for the reprobation of posterity." That is certainly part of the fitting punishment for evil-doers, that their evil deeds are no longer hidden -- but instead documented, dissected, despised. In my sharing of stories with friends, one of my delights is to tell the truth about bad people. Bad people deserve to be known for who and what they are.

And yet . . . I am not perfect, either, and perhaps my moral condemnation of others is too hasty and short-sighted, warped by my tendency to magnify my own grievances and minimize my own moral failings. It is all too easy to write about the mote in another's eye while simply failing to see, let alone announce to the world, the log in my own eye. All women had awful ex-boyfriends; they think they had awful ex-girlfriends. We all had difficult, problematic parents; they think they had difficult, problematic children. The rush to judgment here can be too quick and easy. Our ex-lovers and parents are probably not the monsters we imagine them to be; for the most part, they are flawed, sad human beings, who did the best they could in difficult circumstances. All parents, in particular, need to be viewed through the lens of pity. When I read noted children's author Beverly Cleary's autobiography, <u>A Girl from Yamhill</u>, I

was struck by her lack of any forgiveness at all for a mother who seemed not all that much worse than the run of mothers, not all that much worse than I am myself. Overly harsh judgment of others tends only to make those who judge seem unattractively self-righteous.

For these reasons, there are special dangers in kiss-and-tell memoirs, for all lovers scorned are unreliable witnesses to the true character of those who have scorned them. Moreover, sex is special. I noted above that sex is an area of life in which all stories are so strange and bizarre, and yet so utterly familiar, that we don't really benefit from the telling of them. As Richard Mohr writes, in defense of privacy regarding specific sexual behavior (as opposed to general sexual orientation): "The success of sex in our unedited lives presupposes the creation of sanctuary, a presumption that what one is doing is not being watched and subjected to judgment -- even or especially through the indirect agency of one's partner himself" (16). And the dangers in "Mommie Dearest" memoirs are signaled by the fact that the genre even now has its own, disparaging name. This is not to say that we shouldn't write about our parents -- as I said earlier, the best stories most of us have to tell are the stories of our childhoods. But we probably shouldn't tell these until time has given us some perspective and healing distance and some ability to forgive.[10]

Conclusion

I have argued for the importance of the sharing of stories in our lives, first for the need for friends to share stories with one another, and then for the need for all of us to have access to a wider circle of stories, in the great storehouse of world literature. For stories to be heard, stories must be told. I have tried to give a prima facie, qualified, justification for the telling of at least some of those stories. While one may choose to minimize the cost of story-sharing through fictionalization of the stories shared, there remains a distinctive and irreplaceable value in the sharing of "real" stories, with their inescapably flawed but nonetheless valiant attempt at witness. The truth does make us free. At least that is what I have argued here.

Notes

1. The role of the Internet in blurring the distinctions among telling, writing, and publishing was brought to my attention by Craig Howes.

2. I owe this objection to Alison Jaggar.

3. Catherine Altman shared this insight with me.

4. I am grateful to David Boonin for this point.

5. This alternative Kantian maxim was suggested to me by Jackie Colby.

6. I develop this point more extensively in my essay, "Appropriating Others' Stories."

7. This objection to the choice of fiction over memoir was made persuasively to me by Art Frank.

8. This is one of the issues raised by Diane Middlebrook in her analysis of Sylvia and Ted, the fictionalization of the lives of

Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, in this volume.

9. Thanks to Ray Hedin for pressing me on this point.

10. The essays by John Barbour and Richard Freadman, in this volume, both address the kind of forgiveness and compassion that one should strive toward in writing about one's family members.

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Notes on Contributors

Claudia Mills is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where she writes and teaches on ethical theory and applied ethics. She is also the author of over thirty children's books, including <u>7 x 9 = Trouble!</u> (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002) and <u>Alex Ryan, Stop That!</u> (Farrar, Stras and Giroux, 2003).