

Do No Harm: A Literacy Narrative

written by Guest Contributor | June 1, 2017



“How fitting!” said the woman at the mall, her rosy cheeks flaring up.

“How fitting!” said the man in the grocery store, waiting in line in front of us to purchase his produce.

“How fitting!” said my pre-school and first and second and third and fourth and fifth grade teachers, as I entered the classroom on the first day of school.

“How fitting,” they would say, “that your name is Gabby!” This was often followed by an aside to my mom: “She really does talk a lot!”

I talked to anyone and everyone who would listen to me as a young child.

“My name is Gabby. I’m in the first grade. I’m seven. What’s your name? How is your day?”

I really could carry a conversation. The people around me created a positive feedback loop: the more I spoke, the more they fed my perceived charisma, and the more I would speak. I was an extrovert, I was eloquent, I made space for myself in a room even as a small person. I valued open, honest communication.

My mom, a former preschool teacher, ran a daycare out of our house until I was about six. She read to all of us, a group of about ten kids, every day at our home. She began reading to me as an infant. By the age of three, I recognized words at their sight, and I was reading myself by the age of four. My mom was, and always has been, an excellent communicator. The joy of reading was a gift she gave to me. It was another way for me to interact with people around me, even if those people were storybook characters. I often found myself imagining I was tagging along for their adventures, wishing I could help them along the way. The more I read, the more my vocabulary expanded, and the more I loved to converse with other people—especially

adults, who, as mentioned, thought it was the darndest thing.

I won awards all throughout elementary school for reading the most words in my grade. In the third grade, before the awards ceremony, I bought one of the pairs of fake glasses—to aesthetically embody the bookworm I was—that were popular in every local Claire's at the time. They were a matte, metallic pink. They perfectly coordinated with my pink polo shirt and khaki pants. I pulled my hair back slick into a big, bushy ponytail. I believe I was missing a tooth at the time. I vividly remember the pride I took in this look—the glasses making me look so much smarter—as I accepted that year's award.

I don't know what happened when my ability to communicate shifted. I don't know exactly when it happened. I couldn't tell you if it was the stress of handling my parents' divorce like the young adult I was perceived as, or how boys my age began to look at me when all of the sudden I had boobs at the age of 11, or if it was my first major rejection from a boy on the fifth-grade playground. I'm not sure to what degree the culmination of these events evolved into something I wouldn't learn the word for until years later: anxiety. I do know that once Anxiety found her home in me, she never left. She unpacked her suitcase, hung her ratty clothes in the closet, painted the walls.

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She came to me in middle school. Middle school for me was—like for many— full of growing pains in a way that I couldn't handle.

Reading wasn't cool any more. Neither was open, honest communication. What was important was your Myspace layout and if you had the latest Hollister trends (I never understood how anyone my age could wear those tight Hollister shirts because I would have major sweat stains about 10 minutes after putting one on).

I became a chameleon. I embraced a persona and communicated with others, verbally and non-verbally, in a way that I thought they wanted me to—which was anything but open and honest. I carefully navigated my parents' newfound inability to communicate that came with divorce by never burdening either of them with my problems. They sent me to like, maybe five or six different therapists anyways (I don't think for my own good, but so a professional could reassure them I was okay. And I was damn good at convincing those professionals that I was okay. Jokes on you, therapy).

I wore the tight Hollister T-shirts anyways, with a Hollister jacket layered over them to hide my pit stains (counter-intuitive, I know). I downplayed my intelligence in front of my middle school friends, which meant limited meaningful conversation. I stopped reading. As I became lost in my own chameleon identity, I found it more and more difficult to talk to people. I was constantly performing so many different personas that I couldn't keep

track of them all in my head. I started eating lunch in the bathroom stall.

I remember one autumn morning walking into class to find two of my friends with hearts carved into their ankles. "We did it with tacks," they said. "It'll form a heart shaped scar. Neat, huh?" Sure, it was. Of course, it was. I stepped into the persona that my friends were used to. This was me. They were all me—all the personas. It was the only way I knew how to communicate with the world around me anymore.

"Really cool. I want one."

In third period, I carved my own into my left ankle. You can still see it, today, if you look hard enough. It didn't hurt so bad. I was proud of how perfect I got the shape. Later that day, it would scab over. When the scab fell off, there was a perfect little heart shaped scar in its place.

I spent the rest of the day showing it off to anyone who would listen.

"Yeah, it hurt but not too much. Yeah, with a tack. Like the kind you use for a bulletin board. Yeah, in class. Neat, huh?"

At home that day, I Neosporin'd and bandaged my heart. I spent the next couple weeks admiring it. No questions were asked.

What happened, weeks later, that made me upset is unimportant. I don't even remember what it was—friend drama or boy drama or the plethora of insecurities that come existing as a middle school girl. The important part is that, in deciding to deal with my sadness, I carved another heart, with another tack, into my other ankle.

This began a vicious cycle for the next seven years of my life where self-harm was above all my main coping mechanism. I didn't know how to talk anyone about what I was feeling—there wasn't room for that in any of my personas. Sadness, anger, and frustration became internalized. They moved into the apartment above Anxiety. She threw them a housewarming party, and they all made great neighbors.

Bullied at school? Argument with friends or family? Overburdened by the weight of my identity? Negative body image? I hurt myself. I traded tacks for knives and curling irons. Ankle skin for wrist skin and wrist skin for thigh skin.

It is not difficult to talk about. It was an integral part of my life.

It *is* incredibly difficult when tasked to explain to someone *why* or *how* you can hurt yourself. All I can say is that, when something would happen, I *knew* that nothing but self-harm would make it feel better. I *felt* when I *had* to self-harm throughout my whole body. Your eyes feel heavy. Your chest feels full of water. You can't focus. You morph into a different person, a different body, a different time. It becomes routine. Anxiety and sadness, or anger, or frustration, were having a bonfire, but I didn't get to have any s'mores.

Hiding it also becomes routine. You form a collection of bracelets. No one asks questions when you wear your Hollister jacket in the middle of summer because you did that before. You wear over-sized, baggy clothes to avoid rubbing at scabs but you pick at them anyways. It is easy. It becomes routine.

Everyone seemed to find out in middle school anyways—except for my parents.

My chameleon identity become tarnished as I became the weird emo girl. The bullying accelerated, and the self-harm trended similarly. My ability to communicate anything other than soundboard responses deteriorated. I was a living shell of my extroverted, preschool self.

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In seventh grade, I e-mailed a teacher about self-harm. I'm not sure what I was expecting when I was called down to the counselor's office later that day. I was livid he had told someone, and I figured I was done. The following months, I saw the counselors every week. My previous years of manipulating therapists paid off; using this persona I had developed, I convinced the counselors it was a short-term phase, that I was getting better, that they didn't have to let me parents know because it would only make things worse. It worked.

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Thanksgiving of my freshman year in high school, I scratched up my arms before falling asleep.

"I had a dream spiders were attacking me, I must have scratched my arms in my sleep."

"Oh!" responded my dad, "How odd!"

My dad is not a naïve man. But he does or did hold absolute trust in me. I would never lie to him, so of course I scratched myself in my sleep while having a dream about spiders attacking me.

My brother called me a liar throughout the day.

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I started cutting my thighs in high school. Sophomore year, I was sitting on my bed with shorts on, a band-aid from a recent endeavor peeking out. My mom passed by, casually asking, "What's that?"

I panicked. I couldn't formulate a soundboard response, like

I brushed against a tree!

I cut myself shaving!

Accidentally dropped the curling iron!

I panicked. Instead, I said, "Nothing! It's nothing."

My mom is a keen woman. She did *not* trust me. She let hours pass by as I avoided leaving my room for fear of a follow up conversation. Before going to bed, I thought I was home free. I followed my usual routine and went to say goodnight to her.

"I want you to tell me what's on your leg."

She was sitting in the dark kitchen, facing our computer, the only light coming from the computer screen. I could not see her face but I knew what it looked like: her lips pursed, her eyes serious, twitching just a bit.

Shit, I thought. I took a deep breath. While I felt inept at communicating, I could still tell if I could weasel myself out of a situation or not. I exhaled.

"Do you really want to do this right now?" I asked.

"Yes." I had never heard this weight in her voice before. There was no persona that knew how to address this version of my mother.

Then, me, bluntly: "I cut myself." I didn't try to mitigate the situation. I knew I couldn't.

I gulped, loudly.

"I've been doing it for years."

My mother did not cry. She was stoic. She told me to go to sleep and that we would discuss it in the morning. I didn't sleep at all that night. Years later, I learned neither did she. She stayed up all night reading Wikipedia articles on self-harm. And crying.

I didn't get out of bed in the morning until a harsh knock forced me to face the new state of my life.

My mom had already filled in my step-dad and my sister on my bad-habit. I will remind you that, until then, I embodied (or tried to) the ideal child to my parents. I had a persona for them through which we could communicate. This was a complete and total shock. Which is why I try not to resent what happened next too much.

"You need to go in the living room and show your step-dad what you've done."

What I've done? What had I done? I embarked on my shame parade. I lifted the Band-Aid, high up on my thigh, for my step-dad, revealing former scars and scabs as well. He was more stoic than my mother. I was grabbed swiftly by the shoulder and led to my sister. When she saw, she fell to the floor in a constant stream of sobs on the cold concrete floor of the hallway. It was almost as if she'd melted right there in her place. Anxiety and sadness and anger and frustration inhabited my heart all at once.

"You have to stop doing this! You have to stop!" She pleaded, gasping for air. Her voice was harsh, raspy, as if she'd been a long-time smoker. I would later learn about how disappointed my sister felt that I didn't come to her to talk about any of my feelings, instead engraving them onto myself.

I cried with her. Next stop was my dad's house. He was less hurt and surprised than my sister, but more so than my mom. He had trusted me. Not anymore.

I was sent to therapy again. Each therapist I saw over the next couple years was shocked when I told them about my shame parade.

"She really shouldn't have done that", they said. There was some kind of "No wonder you're fucked up" subtext in their delivery.

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The feeling, the need to self-harm, didn't subside with therapy. I firmly believe that it's hard to get better from any addiction or change any habit if you don't actually want to, no matter how firmly the other people in your life push you to do this.

I continued to be the master manipulator with my therapists. I convinced them I was okay, and they convinced my mom I was okay, until I got to stop therapy. To clarify, I was definitely not okay and definitely still turning to self-harm as a coping mechanism every time I felt the heavy eyelids and water-filled chest: Anxiety and sadness having a sleepover, Anxiety and anger throwing a party. Life seemed to move forward but something was different. I was no longer able to effectively communicate with my mother, the woman who had gifted me the joy of communication in the first place. There was a breaking foundation between us. Our relationship was drastically different, distant.

It got worse when, my junior year of high school, she found out I was still indulging in self-harm. This time, it was different, because I was also in the height of my eating disorder (another story for another time). I was sent back to therapy. My mother told me we would never have a real relationship over Baggins veggie sandwiches. I packed my belongings in garbage bags and went to visit my dad who welcomed me with open arms. My mother gave me the

joy of communication, but my father showed me what unconditional love is. I broke his trust and he loved me anyways. How truly blessed am I for that.

I was constantly monitored for wounds by my parents following this. I had to stop because I didn't want to keep having to see therapists and nutritionists. So I did. I just stopped. The heavy eyelids and water-filled chest feeling built up, evolved, transformed into a new, hyper conscious, over analytical energy. Anxiety rented the room next door when her small apartment began to feel too cramped after always having friends over. Now my eyelids felt like pins were poking at them and my heart dropped and raced and dropped and raced. Speaking to anyone was difficult. I reverted to soundboard responses, but it was hard for me now to be what everyone wanted of me, because I no longer had any clear idea of what that was. It made the eyelid pins worse.

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I started drawing—I am no artist, so doodling really—to cope. It became my mode of communication with the outside world. I started a blog on the Tumblr platform to share my drawings. I hoped that, by throwing my feelings into the internet void through these images, I could get rid of them. How naïve I was.

My images began to pick up traction. I remember logging in one day to see my following at 1000, with one of my images getting over 100,000 reblogs. I kept posting. I began to receive a plethora of messages. Anxiety had a big family and she was spread out all over the world. People began to message me explaining how they felt the same way, and thanking me for helping them find the words to explain their feelings. I began to build a community through the blog. I realized I was not alone—other people felt the eyelid pins and heart racing too. This was the first time in a long time I felt like I was understood, and so I could openly communicate. The blog, although it has growth as I have grown, continues on today, 8,000+ followers strong.

This was the platform through which I found the word for the eyelid pins and heart racing and inability to communicate—I learned her name. I thought of Anxiety as simply a synonym for nervousness or anticipation, nevertheless a mental illness, before finding out more about it on the internet. I felt less broken being able to find some sort of solace and label for my pain. After communicating with others on a virtual platform, I felt like I was better able to reach out to people in my own life. I talked to my dad about speaking to a doctor about Anxiety before my freshman year of college. I was able to try out different medicines and see what worked for me. The eyelid needles didn't go away, but they got better. My heart felt a little slower, a little steadier, a lot better.

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Everything in my life improved after going on medication. I rebuilt the relationship with my mom, I started eating again, I entered a healthy relationship, I began a stage of personal growth. I relapsed with self-harm a couple times in college, but I couldn't tell you now the last time I did it.

On my twenty-first birthday, I got a tattoo commemorating my progress. It was a promise to myself not to hurt myself or the others around me. A promise to remain open, honest, and real in my communication with the people I love. I feel like I have to live up to it now, and I know I will, I know I can. So it goes.

I feel like, as I encounter new problems with identity and communication today, I am well equipped to deal with them. I know this will involve delving into my past and putting together how and what has affected my ability to communicate to myself and others throughout the years.

How fitting. I'm required to write a literacy narrative at a time in my life where I'm already trying to figure mine out.

The universe works in mysterious ways but everything reveals itself with time.



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If writing defies "common sense," if it seems to go against traditional modes of thought, norms, and histories, the idea of that common sense no longer makes sense, or might make sense if we're allowed to reinvent ourselves. That's what I'm looking at with the literacy narrative. I want to hear yours:

when you first “clicked” with a language, whatever it is; why you questioned the modes of your Englishes; how you wrote “poetry,” but looked at it again and called it “lyric essay.” I want to see your literacy narrative in its scholarly, creative, and hybrid forms. Send your literacy narratives to Sylvia Chan at sylvia@entropymag.org. Stay tuned for more literacy narratives from yours truly and others.