

**Adrian Matt Zytkoskee**

**The Power of Self-Disclosure**

*The* first time I consciously witnessed the power of self-disclosure as a teaching tool was twenty-five years ago at a candlelit Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in rural Kentucky. I was 22-years old and had tried (nearly successfully) to take my own life following years of struggle with depression, anxiety, and all the behaviors that tend to accompany untreated suffering of this nature. As a result of the attempt, my parents checked me into an in-patient recovery program, part of which involved transporting clients to a range of community-based recovery meetings. This was a completely new experience for me; I'd never had any type of mental health intervention. A different era. As I listened to this group of strangers share their "experience, strength, and hope," I was blown away. It didn't seem to matter whether they were men or women, straight or gay, ex-gang members or white-collar professionals. I was hearing my own story. Perhaps what resonated the most was that nobody was giving advice, at least not directly. Other than expressions of gratitude for those who spoke and subsequent shares on the same general topic, there was no commentary. The stories spoke for themselves. And, they said a hell of a lot. I'd grown up—like most of us—being told what to do, what not to do, when I was being naughty, and when I was being nice. Their shared experiences provided a very different kind of guidance. Vulnerable. Non-directive. Non-judgmental. Respectful. As a result, I did more than listen. I heard.

Since that time, I have told and received stories of the same nature. Whether working as a group-home counselor, ESL teacher, grief group facilitator, medical school educator, or even a university English teacher (I've worn many hats in my life-time!), I have connected with and provided in-direct guidance for others through the art of self-disclosure (most often through story). Within English classrooms, there is precedent for this practice. As I note in my doctoral research (Zytkoskee, 2020), there is a wealth of scholarship supporting the value of self-disclosure as a way to "help dismantle boundaries" (Banks 25), inspire writers to "connect and share" their own experiences (Chrisman 183), "establish [oneself] as an approachable and non-intimidating presence" (Tobin 203), and illustrate a shared vulnerability (Deletiner 316). Put simply, sharing our experiences mindfully (always considering whether they will be in a student's best interest and safe for the teller professionally) has the power to contextualize and humanize learning. To disrupt imposter syndrome. To pave the way for authentic communication.

When teaching life writing, I give the classic advice of "show don't tell." Accordingly, I am now going to follow my own guidance and shift into a few short, personal reflections I've shared with students and clients. In doing so, it is my hope to illustrate the power of self-disclosure. Perhaps you will hear a bit of your own story in mine.

**"The Wishing Game"**

When I was 11, I spent an immense amount of time and mental energy wishing that I had a BB gun—I just knew joy would come packaged with the Daisy rifle. After I wrote a persuasive essay to my parents explaining why I "needed" one, they finally acquiesced (no wonder I became a writer!). A month later, there was a BB-sized hole in the front of our television and my gun was in a pawn shop. Turned out that it wasn't the key to my happiness.

A handful of years later, there was a girl I pined over. My daydreams involved montages of us laughing and kissing in grassy parks as others looked on with envy at our love. Unlike the majority of my imagined romances that would never come to fruition, this one actually happened. And, when it did, I suddenly found myself captive to tedious monologues about people I didn't like and activities I found boring. My new goal for happiness became an exit strategy.

After two years at a small, conservative college where I constantly daydreamed of shifting to a more liberal and exciting environment, I transferred to UC Santa Cruz—the quintessential alternative university. What I discovered there was loneliness and the onset of severe depression and anxiety. It was a great school but not the key to my serenity.

In my early twenties, my late wife and I used to take walks through the neighborhoods of Monterey, CA and wish that we owned a house instead of renting a tiny apartment. We imagined all that we could do with a larger space and how much better life would be. Twenty-years later, I own a home and some of the advantages we contemplated turned out to be true. Yet, in thinking back to Monterey, we were rich with youth and free time and fiery romance. And the unhappiness we felt over wishing things were different turned out to be a waste of energy and the limited time we had together. We had what we needed at that moment, and then some.

My point is that I've often set up goals as destinations for when “the good life will really start.” Whether finishing school, getting married, having a child, landing a good job, buying a house, or (after I became a widower) finding love again, there has been a pattern of striving toward future events and achievements as the golden ticket to happiness. Don't get me wrong, the accomplishments I just named were all worthy and meaningful pursuits! However, with each of these milestones came new responsibilities, new complications, new needs, new wants, and new future goals meant to deliver that elusive sense of being okay.

What I've learned is that when I can get out of the wishing game, I recognize that life is in session. Now. That contentment is a daily practice and not a fixed destination. A friend of mine says, “The problem with the idea of the golden years is that you never know you're in them until after they're past. So why not assume you're in 'em right now!?” Why not indeed. I want to keep dreaming up a beautiful future but only as a guide for my present journey through these golden years.

So, here's my plan. The next time I catch myself wishing for more or that things were different, I'm going to pause and change the message to: “I wish that I could see the incredible beauty and blessings in my life right now.” Fortunately, this is one wish I can immediately grant.

### **“Channeling Love”**

There is something magical I do from time to time I think of as “channeling love.” It's never planned and, the truth is, I don't talk about it with others. It's special. Private. And, I've feared it would be misunderstood. However, the other day it dawned on me that others living with the loss of a loved one might really appreciate the practice and that I should share despite the risk. Who knows, perhaps others already do this and the value of this reflection lies simply in naming a shared experience—in knowing that we are not alone.

For me, channeling love usually happens during an emotional parenting moment. This might be a difficult circumstance like when my son asked me when he can cross into the spirit world so he can visit his mommy. Or when my seven-year-old daughter came home from school crying because someone made fun of the show and tell she'd been so excited to share. It can also

happen in joyous moments such as when the kids are bubbling over with enthusiasm over a lost tooth or we are having a giant “cuddle fest” on a lazy Saturday morning.

Whatever the specific circumstances, I channel love when my heart aches over the fact that my late wife is unable to be present for her little ones, to bear witness to the miracle that is their existence. Though I often grieve this loss for the children’s sake, in the instance of channeling love my grief is usually for all that she won’t get to experience as a mother. She wanted so badly to raise them. To teach them. To cherish them. But she couldn’t. And while being the one left behind has been unbelievably hard for me in many ways, I get to be present for the kids, to experience their laughter and tears and soft breathing as they fall asleep in my arms.

So, here is what I do when I feel waves of grief for her absence in their lives: I close my eyes, take a few deep breaths, and bring up memories of my late wife as a mother. I imagine her stroking her extended tummy and the soft conversations she had with each of our children as they grew inside her. I hear the beautiful sound of her off-tune singing as she lulled them into sleep as infants. I see the stacks of parenting books scattered on the bedside table and the art bins loaded with supplies for every imaginable craft. But, more than anything, I bring up images of her warm hands feeding them, changing them, embracing them, caressing them. I momentarily capture the thread of her love, a love that was so fierce and bright that it radiated a wild, cosmic heat. I allow myself to be enveloped in this current. To be one with her as a mother. I invite her to fill my heart and soul. I internally whisper, “Be with me. Hold our little ones.” And then I perform this action: I pull one (or both) of my children into an embrace and allow the beautiful energy I just gathered to flow into them. And for a brief moment in time, it’s her holding them.

In the end, whether this practice is simply evoking loving memories or actually connecting with a loved one on the other side of the veil is unimportant. Either way, it’s channeling love.

### **“Moment of Surrender”**

When I come to, my wrists and legs are Velcroed to a hospital bed in Spain. Tubes run out of various parts of my body and it takes me a minute to remember. To remember who I am. To remember what I’d done. I squeeze my eyes shut. But the tears come anyway. Unbidden. A trickle at first and then a flood. The ever-present watcher inside my mind—the analytical presence—notes that I haven’t cried in ... what, a year? Two years? Five? I’m 23 years-old and deeply depressed. And clinically anxious. Untreated traumas and mental illness have haunted me like hungry ghosts for too long. Long enough. Long enough to have regularly adopted “no glasses days,” days in which I chose blurry vision over having to make eye contact with people. Long enough to have swallowed 100 Xanax and half a bottle of whiskey. Long enough to have ended up in a coma for 7-days and only survived by what even medical professionals called, “an act of divine intervention.”

The tears continue to flow and my body shakes with racking sobs. Not angry. Not frightened. But deep deep grief. And profound relief. It’s over. No more band-aids on festering wounds. No more pretend smiles to college professors and parents. No more bravely “‘going’ it alone.” The gig is over. The curtain raised. Hiding and making due is no longer an option. In this moment of clarity, of consciousness, of truth, I surrender. I need help. I won’t live like that anymore. Can’t. It doesn’t feel like defeat either. Far from it. It feels like a second chance, like redemption. It feels spiritual. The dam has broken. The road in front of me is anything but easy.

But it's honest and lined with helpful souls who want to be part of my healing process. Community. Stories. Discipline. Love.

A buddy of mine awakens confused and bleeding in a dark tight space, vomit covering his body. It turns out to be his own closet, and he's 18-hours late picking up his son from school. He loses the limited custody he already had. He drastically changes his life after that. Starts attending recovery meetings. Confesses his history and is met, not with advice, but similar stories from others. He finds compassion for himself. Not condoning his actions but understanding that he's not alone in this tough journey. In his pain. He reaches for help. Writes his story. Tells his story. Lets other people in. Moment of surrender.

Eddy, a man I meet in a steam room at my gym tells me about a car accident he'd been in. An accident he'd caused due to simple distraction fiddling with the stereo. The other passenger, a friend since childhood, died leaving behind two small children and a wife he'd loved. Eddy was spared to live in what he described as damnation, a life filled with chronic pain and unable to walk without a cane. A life haunted by guilt and sickness of every kind. He tells me, "I spent three years angry and isolating myself. I spent three years imagining ways to kill myself. Until one afternoon my family came home, and I realized I'd missed my daughter's high school graduation. No one had reminded me ... because, well, I wasn't someone anyone wanted to be around. I knew right then that I was pissing my life away. That it was unfair to the people who loved me. I had to change. I had to lean into the pain and find solid ground no matter how that looked." Moment of surrender.

A woman I meet at a writing workshop in Colorado tells me that, following the death of her husband, she cried herself to sleep every night for close to fifteen years. One night she held her late husband's handgun to the side of her head off and on for close to an hour. She tells me, "My finger would start to apply a tiny bit of pressure. I don't know how close it came but it had to have been millimeters between life and death." Finally, sobbing, she dialed her son instead of pulling the trigger and he's there within an hour. Relieved as hell. Both of them. Moment of surrender.

My beautiful friend Emily, after 10-years of battling cancer, declines another round of chemo. People in her life are upset. Accuse her of selfishness. We stay up late talking on her porch and she tells me, "I'm not giving up Matt. I'm accepting. I want to enjoy what time I have left." And she does precisely that to the best of her ability—inviting friends over despite her weakness, drinking expensive bottles of wine, spending as much time with her children as possible, and even forgiving her ex-husband who had basically robbed her. Two weeks later, she dies with her hand in mine and surrounded by those who love her. Radiant until the end despite the pain and all-around suffering. Moment of surrender.

I think about the world and the undeniable trauma taking place. I think about the countless people and corporations and institutions and governments who are presently operating in a mindset very similar to my "no glasses days." I think of the denial of suffering and the proliferation of band-aid cures. And I wonder what a "moment of surrender" might look like at a community level. At a state level. At a national level. At a global level. Not a moment of defeat. But an acknowledgement that the way we've been living isn't working. That we need help. That we need change. That, surrounded by fires both literal and metaphorical, we need reuniting with the rhythms of our soul more than ever.

### **“Step Aside”**

One night in Dubai, a buddy and I were walking back to his car after an event in the heart of the city. The sidewalk was under construction and, as a result, had a fence on both sides creating a kind of long square tunnel between two blocks. Though he'd spent a great deal of his life traveling abroad, my buddy was from New York and had not lost that grit for which New Yorkers are known. He and I were walking side by side, filling the width of the space, when a large man approached from the other direction. The guy looked like a cliché bad guy from an action movie—cigarette dangling, gold chains, even a track suit. I shifted behind my buddy to allow passage for the stranger. But the guy didn't shift to the open lane; he just kept walking straight toward us. I was about to shift lanes again but my buddy stayed the course, so I followed suit.

Neither of the two big men stopped until the last minute, which left them face to face about a foot apart. Neither spoke. They just stood there staring at each other. Literally at an impasse. It seemed like an eternity to me, and I was gearing up for potential violence when the stranger muttered something in a language I didn't recognize and stepped to the other side of the sidewalk and walked past. Although my buddy then began to rant about the stupidity of people, there was a slight smile on his face. He believed he'd won that battle of wills.

For some reason, I woke up today thinking about this little incident and asking myself questions: Had my friend truly “won” the confrontation? What had been risked in the effort? What had the two men put out into the energy field? And, what in my life is metaphorically mirroring this situation? When do I need to stand my ground? When do I need to shift around an obstacle rather than hang onto the need for victory of will? I don't have the answers but it seems like I was meant to think about the questions.

### **“My Insides vs. Your Outsides”**

A few days a week, I rush home from dropping the kids off at school so I can attend an online morning meditation group. This morning I cut it close and, as I scrambled to find my computer, I stepped on a Lego—which sent me stumbling into the coffee table. Furious, I glared around the living room at the layer of clutter. It was as if the ceiling had snowed stuffed animals, children's books, single socks, cat toys, and tiny mounds of dog hair. An affront to my rarely satisfied craving for order.

After taking a deep breath, I logged into the meeting and was greeted with a group of smiling faces and the facilitator gently guiding the group into a reflection on acceptance of the discomfort of uncertainty. I was just beginning to let go of the hectic energy and irritation I'd been feeling, when I noticed one of the other participant's living room. Framed with high-beam ceilings, long leather couches, a crackling fire, and picture windows looking out onto an alpine setting, it looked larger than my entire house. Rather than focusing on the meditation practice, my mind wandered to thoughts of how nice it would be to spend my days working in that living room instead of my own. I didn't resent the guy, but I certainly felt jealous of his set-up. I was just starting to imagine how incredible his alpine deck must be in the summertime when the man, who had been sitting quite still, shifted position. The odd digital blurring that occurs with artificial backgrounds was suddenly apparent.

And, now that I truly looked at the image, I realized that everything was “too perfect.” Where was the mug on the coffee table or the pair of slippers beside the fire? Where was the dog wandering past? I'd been so absorbed in comparing my rambunctious, child and pet-filled home

to this man's meticulous mansion that I hadn't realized I'd been comparing my world to an illusion. Suddenly the stray sock and furry llama wedged beside me on the couch felt less like clutter and more like signs of life.

### **“Extras”**

I've developed an odd habit lately—though, who knows, maybe you do it too. I watch the extras in shows and movies. As in, the actor whose entire role is to be background (usually saying nothing), or the person who is in the main shot but who rarely has any lines or notable actions. Basically, human filler.

Just to give an example, I was watching Star Trek Next Generation the other night and found myself focusing on this middle-aged, non-memorable StarFleet officer standing between Diana Troy and her mother on an elevator. Because the female main characters in this scene are telepaths, they're engaged in a silent argument but are not holding back on body gestures and glares. The poor guy in the middle is also silent and clearly uncomfortable with the odd situation in which he's found himself in the middle. What I like most about him is that his role is to simply glance back and forth between the two ladies with a look of bewilderment and then, as the door opens and the ladies step off the lift, he just lifts his eyebrows in a “who knows what the hell that was” gesture. I'd never seen him before or since. The eyebrow lifter.

I'm fascinated by people like this because ... well, I'm not supposed to be. They're not meant to be noticed. They're props for the real stars and action. Paintings on the wall. Yet, I remind myself that they are living, breathing, beings whose entire universe is made up of their own life and consciousness and desires. This leads me to wonder about their careers. Was their ambition to act and this was a micro step in that direction? Did they go on to do something bigger ... perhaps a film with an actual line? Or, maybe they ended up writing screen plays or being a lead gaffer (whatever that person does). More likely, they work for an insurance firm or teach 2nd grade or, heaven forbid, try to make money writing blogs. I do bet that whenever that Star Trek episode comes on, the eyebrow lifter's friends all cheer and hoot and make mocking comments. For them, he's not an extra. He's the guy having a beer with them on the couch.

I try to pay attention to the extras in my life too: the guy who brought me food to our palapa in Mexico, a guy whose dad turned out to have been in a 1940s big band and played with Bing Crosby once. The kid bagging groceries at Safeway who recommended an Xbox game for my son. The woman in the post office who was on her way to see the Eagles with her daughter that weekend. A special needs child in the park who watched me play guitar for a solid twenty-minutes and moved her head in a way that made me feel like I was good. The woman from the credit card company who waved my late fee and said there was a thunderstorm outside in Kansas. The neighbor one block over who makes nitrous ice-cream out of a little blue truck. And the list could go on. I'm more friendly at times than others, but generally speaking, I try to look at these “extras.” To really see them. To be curious about their lives. To not just demand their silent services or bide time until it's my turn to talk. I try to remind myself that I'm also an extra for most people I meet. Maybe I need a signature move like the eyebrow guy.

### **“Invisible”**

I cross the lawn and approach our next-door neighbors to introduce myself to a group of three guys drinking beers on the front porch. My wife Danae and I had just relocated to the area for me to begin graduate school, and I'm excited to meet some people in our community. “Hi,” I

say, "I'm Matt, your new neighbor." There's a slight pause before one of the guys responds, "Well, welcome to the block Matt. I'm Chris. This is my house and these guys are my mooches. Wanna beer?"

I accept and am soon ensconced on a deck chair with a cold Coors in hand. We go through the usual introductory chit chat, and I find out that Chris is a cabinet maker and his two friends are also involved in construction trades. Tony, a middle-aged man to my left, points to the youngest member of the group and says, "Well, Andy's not actually in construction. He just slaps paint on once we're done doing the real work." Andy frowns, but the ribbing is good natured and the energy pleasant. I tell the guys I'm there to study to become a teacher but don't mention I'm entering a graduate program in English. Academia is looked upon with suspicion and scorn by some, and I choose not to apply this label to myself. Instead, I mention that I used to do indoor/outdoor painting for a living, and soon I'm bullshitting with Andy and telling him about the time I accidentally dumped five-gallons of paint off a roof onto an Italian restaurant's awning.

At one point, Chris's four-year old boy comes out and sits on his lap while we talk. Chris is tender with the child, ruffling his hair, and allowing him to interject exciting details about the snake he and his mom found on a walk that morning. Before I excuse myself from the group, I ask Chris if I can borrow a stud finder. "You bet," he says, "follow me." His garage is a masterpiece of neatly organized, high-end tools, and I whistle in appreciation. Chuckling, he says, "I tell the wife they're all for work, but there might be a toy or two in here. Let me know if you need anything else."

I ask, "But won't that make me one of the mooches?"

He smiles and says, "You bet. But I'm used to it."

That night, pictures securely hung thanks to the stud finder, I tell my wife about the encounter. "I doubt we'll be best friends with them, but they were extremely nice. Maybe we should have them over for a BBQ or something ... I like the idea of knowing our neighbors." She approves of the plan, and we continue unpacking and settling into our new home.

The following Saturday, I'm getting ready to mow the lawn, when I notice that Chris and his buddies are back on the porch, and I decide to invite them over for burgers later. However, before I can walk over to offer, I see a Hispanic man cross the street and approach Chris in much the same manner I had a week earlier. The man says, "Hi, I'm Manny from across the street. I've seen you around but haven't actually introduced myself yet." I glance at Manny's house, notice a meticulously maintained flower garden, and wonder how long he'd already been in the neighborhood. Chris, after an uncomfortably long silence, says flatly, "Okay."

Realizing that this is the only response he is going to get, Manny continues, "I wanted to ask if you have an extension cord I can borrow? Mine is about three feet short of reaching the back fence, and I need to run some tools for a gate we're building ... I'd run to the store to get one, but I've got a friend helping me and want to get it done before he has to leave."

Chris slowly shakes his head and says, "Nope. Don't have one."

This is, of course, bullshit, and after another uncomfortable silence, Manny says, "Okay. Sorry to have disturbed you." Chris's only response is a slight nod, after which Manny turns and walks back to his own house. Suddenly realizing that I might be noticeably eavesdropping should they look toward the shrub dividing our lawns, I begin to wheel my lawnmower toward the far side of the house. Before I'm out of earshot, however, I hear Tony say, "Damn Chris, that

was a little cold.” In an icy tone, Chris replies, “It’s bad enough I have to deal with them at work all day long—I sure as shit aint gonna lend them my personal tools on the weekend.”

Thirty minutes later, with the grass cut, my pale skin already turning pink with a sunburn, I’m wheeling the lawn mower back to the shed when I hear Chris call out, “Hey Matt, you want a beer?”

I don’t. And, there are a million excuses I could make for turning the offer down. Instead, I chime back, “Sure,” and, a minute later, I’m back on the porch with the group of guys. As I drink my beer and go through what now feels like perfunctory banter, I find myself wanting to shrink out of sight lest Manny see me and associate me with the group. I wonder why I had accepted the offer. When my drink is done, I turn down a second and politely excuse myself, the original idea of inviting them to a BBQ long dismissed.

That evening, I tell Danae about the conversation between Chris and Manny and what Chris had said immediately after. Her face flushing with anger, she offers a few choice words about the group of guys before storming off to make a batch of brownies to take over to Manny and his family.

As pots and pans clatter in the kitchen, and I sit alone in the living room, I think about the fact that I hadn’t told Danae I’d hung out with the guys after Chris’s exchange with Manny. Instead, my choice remains invisible. For fifteen years. Until now.

**Postscript:** As a way to edit, I read this little collection of reflections to my parents (nothing catches typos better than reading aloud). They were a great audience because of the fact that they’d witnessed first-hand a great deal of the “experience, strength, and hope” I disclose within the stories. What’s interesting is that, after I’d finished reading, they offered a range of interpretations on the primary purposes of the different stories. It occurred to me that this is also a beauty of self-disclosure—it can allow for the listener to find their own meaning without having it hammered into their head. It also occurred to me that when I began writing each of the stories, I didn’t necessarily know what I needed to say until I’d written it. Put simply, when used with purpose and care, self-disclosure has the power to be transformative for all involved in the communicative act.

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