# Afterword. Writing Hope into Being

> The last few years have taught me to suspend my desire for a conclusion, to assume that nothing is static and that renegotiation will be perpetual, to hope primarily that little truths will keep emerging in time.
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> – *Gia Tolentino,* Trick Mirror

In May of 2010, my youngest sister, Cindy, died suddenly of a cerebral aneurysm. One moment she was sitting on the sofa in her niece's apartment with one of my other two sisters as they were getting ready for a Memorial Day picnic, and the next moment she was unconscious and convulsing on the floor. By the next morning she was gone. She was forty-four years old.

To say that we were all shocked—including her husband and three children (ages twelve, sixteen, and nineteen at the time)—is to state the obvious, and perhaps to demonstrate the inadequacy of language to convey the wrenching experience of those moments and their aftermath. Rarely have I felt or witnessed such profound grief and unbearable emotional suffering.

As family and friends gathered over the next few days in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where Cindy and her family (and most of my extended family) lived, my brother-in-law asked me if I would deliver the eulogy at the funeral service. The following morning I took my laptop to a coffee shop, sat down at a small corner table, and, with brilliant sunshine streaming through the shop windows, wrote.

The shop was busy, with a steady stream of people coming and going. Some people were sitting at the small tables haphazardly arranged around the shop, chatting or reading their phones, others came in and left after buying their drinks. There was a constant buzz as I sat there, alone in that crowded space, writing.

The text of the eulogy that I delivered a few days later at Cindy's funeral service is 1389 words long. But I wrote much more than that while I was in the coffee shop. Grief-stricken and still stunned by what had happened, I sobbed quietly at times as I wrote. I also laughed to myself through my tears as the writing took me back to joyful moments I had shared with Cindy or brought forth precious memories of her hearty laugh, the sparkle in her eyes, and her love of silly jokes. Those moments of writing were visceral, physical beyond the movement of my fingers over the laptop keyboard. In those moments, I was overwhelmed by an excruciating sense of loss, and at the same time I felt a powerful joy and a deep sense of gratitude for having had such a loving, wonderful sister. I relived past moments and worried about future ones. I felt guilt as well: for not being at the hospital bedside in her final moments, for missing so many opportunities to spend time with her over the years, for being oblivious to the emotional pain she had endured over many years. Anger, too: that her life could end so suddenly

and seemingly capriciously, leaving her three children without their mother, her husband without his wife of more than two decades, her two sisters without their best friend, my parents without their youngest child. What does one do at such moments? How does one make sense of such monumental loss?

It seems trivial to say that one can write. But I did. My writing in that moment was a coping strategy, the value of which is born out by a mountain of evidence documenting the therapeutic benefits of writing to deal with trauma (as I noted in Chapter 7). But my writing in that moment—my *experience* of writing in that moment—was more than therapeutic, more than a means of coping with trauma. My writing was also a way to *be* in that moment and in the countless other moments, past and future, that were contained in that moment of grief and joy and death and life. The text of the eulogy that I produced in that moment was ultimately irrelevant. It eventually served its purpose at the memorial service a day or two later, and near the end of the time that I sat writing in that coffee shop, a sense of rhetorical exigency took hold as I anticipated delivering the eulogy to my grief-stricken family at that service. But that text was/is finite, finished, fixed in time. And mostly forgotten. Yet the experience of writing in that moment was not timebound, for it encompassed past and future. And it goes on—in *this* moment of writing.

Writing that eulogy was, in obvious ways, an emotional experience, an angry crying out at death, a desperate wish that death could be rejected or reversed, and then a visceral letting go, a submitting to grief, an embrace of past moments of pain and joy, the almost physical remembering, the deep and excruciating pain and joy of love. But it was also ontological, for an *I* was emerging in that act of writing about my sister, whose presence in the writing infused my own being in those moments. Indeed, we were both brought into being in that writing. And the story I was writing about her all-too-short life brought forth truths about her life and my own—about life itself—that went beyond anything that might be contained in the text of the eulogy: truths that informed the way I was making sense of her life and death—and my own—in that moment. How deeply I *lived* in that moment while I was writing that true story of my sister's life and death!

And as I am writing in *this* moment, I am living again in that moment of writing, more than a decade ago, and some truth is emerging in this writing that I am doing in this moment: truth that encompasses and perhaps transforms whatever truths emerged in that moment in 2010. Paul Ricoeur notes that memory is the presence of something absent (*La Mémoire*), and in that regard, the absent moment when I was in that coffee shop in 2010 is present in *this* moment of writing many years later—not because the writing calls forth an existing memory but because in this writing memory itself is brought into being, (re)created for *this* moment, in this act of writing. Cindy, my absent sister, is present in this moment of writing, not merely as a memory, for this act of writing *embodies* the memories of her that are brought into being by the act of writing itself. Her physical absence is transformed into a presence by this act of writing in which I am engaged right now. She *is* as I am writing right now. And while this text I am creating in this

moment—this text that you are reading at some point in my future, that was written sometime in your past—might bring her into being for you and might, too, convey some kind of truth about life and death and loss and love, there is, I think, some other truth that is emerging in this moment of writing, a truth that is contained in *this* moment, perhaps fleeting and momentary, perhaps not, a truth that is distinct from whatever truths might be available to you in this text you are reading right now, no matter how much they might overlap. In *this* moment of writing, in this experience of writing-in-the-moment, I am. I am alive. And at this moment of writing, I am living a truth that is emerging from the writing itself.

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A main premise of this book is that truth, in some form, resides in the *experience* of writing-in-the-moment, and I have been writing this story about my cousin Madeline in order to explore, understand, and enact that premise. If the premise is valid—if truth does indeed reside in this experience of writing this true story, in this experience of writing-in-the-moment; if truth emerges in this act of trying to write a true story—what might that mean? What might it mean for each of us, individually, as we try to write true stories about our lives, about each other's lives? What might it mean for the ways in which we conceptualize and teach writing? And what might it mean for the ongoing struggle over truth as we seek ways to live better together on this earth we share?

The answer to such questions that I have come to through this process of writing, the answer that this writing has led me to in this moment, is something like this: If we conceive of writing as an ontological act and embrace the possibility that truth might reside in the experience of writing-in-the-moment, then writing—not exclusively or even primarily as a matter of textual production but as an experience of ourselves *being* in the moment—can be a powerful tool for living. And writing as a process of truth-seeking can be a means of learning to live better together: more fully, more peacefully, more mindfully, more compassionately, more humbly, more humanely. Indeed, writing Cindy's eulogy in 2010 and writing this true story about Madeline now—writing, too, about my life as a writer and scholar—are all of a piece, part of this same ongoing process of truth-seeking, of confronting the complexities of human life through writing stories about *these* human lives in order to identify truths about these lives and about human life—truths by which we might live better together.

The answer to these questions, then, is that we must write. We must write, mindfully and ethically, as a way to *be* in the moment and to share the truths that emerge from that writing.

As my understanding of writing has transformed over my career, and as the focus of my professional work has shifted from textual production and the communicative power of text to the ontological dimensions of writing and its potential for individual and collective transformation, I have begun to see, all around me, people using the power of writing as a tool for living: my students and colleagues,
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friends and relatives and people I have never met, psychologists and therapists and medical professionals of various specialties. I see countless instances of people engaged in writing to live, of people living in the moment through writing. And in that collective experience of writing-in-the-moment, I also see a powerful form of truth-seeking. And what I am seeing constitutes hope in the face of the despair that threatens us in this post-COVID, post-truth moment in history, when a resurgent fascism—an ideology that requires othering, an ideology founded on hierarchies that are enabled by duality—threatens the possibilities for—indeed, the very idea of—peaceful co-existence and the shared project of truth-seeking.

Freire has described hope as "an ontological need" (*Pedagogy of Hope* 9). I have long embraced that view. And for me, hope is embodied in this act of writing, in this experience of writing in this moment—indeed, in writing itself. The evolution of my understanding of writing and its role in our lives has brought me to this moment of writing, in which hope resides. This writing, then, brings hope into being, *is* an act of hope. And in this moment, it does seem to me that the kind of hope that Freire described encompasses truth—indeed, *requires* the existence of truth, for if the possibility of truth exists, then hope is always alive.

Somehow, I think, writing can be a way to both: hope and truth. The experience of writing-in-the-moment contains both. *Is* both. And I am writing this story not only to identify some truth in Madeline's life—and my own—but also to find hope, to feel it and embrace it, to bring it into being and to nurture it, to share it. And to shoulder, as best I can, the ethical responsibility that writing as genuine truth-seeking places on the writer. I think I have always known that Madeline was, for me, both hope and truth. She lived a certain kind of truth, and she represented hope that we can find that truth and live it in a way that improves the world. To me, she *embodied* hope: hope for a better future. She lived by that hope, by her deep belief in the possibility of a more tolerant, equitable, humane, and peaceful world. And writing a true story about her has given rise to another truth: that I need her story if I am to maintain hope in *this* moment, when I am confronting, like so many other people, misanthropy and despair, when the belief in human progress and goodness that has driven my career as a writer and teacher and scholar is shaken by the rising hatred that I see all around us, the violence, the racism and bigotry, even nihilism, against all of which Madeline fought in her own career. Everywhere I look today I see this hatred and racism and bigotry infecting our political and social and cultural lives, giving rise to violence and conflict, pushing me toward despair.

Madeline's story—her true story—can, I fervently hope, bring hope, bring *us* hope, in this moment, and help us stave off despair and find the resolve to continue the difficult but necessary and never-ending project of trying to live better together. Writing can—it *must*—be a vehicle for this hope, exactly as Freire believed. This experience of writing this story in this moment *must* be a way to bring hope into being in this moment. And the next.

And so I continue to write.