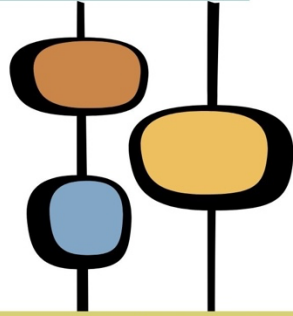


Vivian Conan

# A LESSON



From My 3rd Grade Self

## **A LESSON FROM MY THIRD-GRADE SELF** **On Writing from the Heart, A Craft Essay** **by Vivian Conan**

I was fifty-two when I chanced upon the bright marigold flyer taped to a streetlight in my Manhattan neighborhood. The Writer's Voice at the West Side YMCA, it said. One of the courses listed: The Personal Essay. I had never heard that term, but it sounded like just what I'd been looking for.

From the time I learned to print, I'd wanted to be a writer, even though on a parallel track, I believed all the books that were ever going to be written had already been written. I got this impression from the pictures on a card game called Authors that I played with my brother. With old-fashioned hairstyles and names like Sir Walter Scott, authors were, most assuredly, all dead.

In third grade, I learned cursive, the grownup way of writing, and took up my pen. "Once there was a girl named Carol," I wrote. "She lived in a wooden house. One day her house caught fire. After the fire, she could

not find her mother.” The tension builds, there’s a resolution, and at the end of 579 words, “they all lived happily [ever] after.” I was on my way.

I don’t know at what point I realized books were still being written, but when I did, I despaired. How would I ever write anything that long?

At twenty-six, I became a librarian. My dream of becoming a writer went into hibernation.

But then, there was the marigold flyer.

For the past two years, I had been trying to write an article about my mental health struggles. After decades of unsuccessful therapy, I learned, at 46, that I had what was then called multiple personality disorder, or MPD. Because the diagnosis was often sensationalized in the media, I kept it under wraps. The more successful I was at hiding it, the more invisible and isolated I felt. I wanted to destigmatize MPD by showing that people like those in my support group were not freaks but ordinary people who had experienced childhood trauma and were trying our best to make it through each day—work, maintain friendships, shop for food, sleep. I had been rewriting the same few pages for months, unsure how to proceed.

I registered for the course.

Three weeks into the ten-week session, I got up the courage to bring in my draft. Comments were along the lines of “Fascinating, but too generic. We want to know about *your* experience.”

I never considered that my own life would be of interest. I had envisioned an article something like those in *The New York Times Magazine*, a level-headed overview of the clinical literature, sprinkled with just enough examples from my own experience to illustrate a point. I felt I needed the clinical theory for credibility. Yet in class, I’d listened to feedback on other students’ work and found there was a

core of people I usually agreed with—the same people who felt my article wasn't personal enough.

In my next draft, I put in more of myself but retained the theory.

"This is better," the class said, "but we want even more of you."

From the discussion that followed, I began to understand that there was a difference between an article, which I probably couldn't get published because I didn't have a platform—I was not a nationally known clinician or researcher—and an essay, which could come entirely from my own experience.

When the term ended, I reenrolled, and with each successive draft, I upped the me-content and removed some theory. The piece was becoming more personal than I was comfortable with. For the class, however, it was improving. "You should consider writing a memoir," the teacher said.

The essay that appeared (under a pseudonym) in *New York* magazine on August 4, 1997, five years after I conceived it, was about 85% personal. By then I was in a class at the JCC of Manhattan called Advanced Nonfiction, working on a memoir, and with the help of the instructor, had acquired an agent. The essay led to an auction. Within a week I had a book contract. That was exciting, but scary. My completed manuscript was due in 14 months, less time than it had taken to shepherd one essay through its life cycle.

It took me six weeks to produce the first draft of a chapter. Workshopping and rewriting added another two. At first, this didn't worry me. Shielded by tunnel vision, I was happy with the quality of the individual chapters.

No longer hesitant to reveal my insides, I wrote about how as a child, I created a fantasy world I called the Atmosphere, where kindly Atmosphere people gave me what I couldn't get from my family. (My

third-grade self had written about something similar, except it was a mother the girl had lost and a policeman who found her mother.) I wrote about how, as I grew older, the Atmosphere people became more real to me than real people, and about therapists who were flummoxed. Comments from the class showed me that though my story may have been extreme, it was also universal. Everyone related to my need to be seen and understood.

I continued putting my insides, unprotected and uncensored, into each chapter, until, all of a sudden, my deadline loomed. With something like whiplash, I snapped out of tunnel vision to assess the whole. Less than a third. My childhood dread rushed back: how would I ever write something as long as a book?

I submitted what I had, along with an outline of the missing chapters. The publisher granted me a six-month extension, then another six, then cancelled my contract. I returned the advance.

Far from being upset, I was relieved. My memoir would be finished whenever it was finished. Only then would I try to sell it.

If I had known it would take another twenty years, I probably would have quit. But I didn't know, so I continued writing in the morning, going to work in the afternoon, revising in the evening, and re-upping for the workshop. Very slowly, chapters were accumulating. By the time I wrote "The End," I was seventy-five.

It would be another three years before my book was published. By then I was comfortable going public with a very personal story: *Losing the Atmosphere, A Memoir: A Baffling Disorder, a Search for Help, and the Therapist Who Understood*. The only clinical explanation is in the afterword, written by my therapist.

In hindsight, I can see that I needed all that time. I was a work in progress, evolving not only as a writer, but as a person. Early on, I hadn't felt entitled to comment on other students' pieces or make

conversation as we walked out after class. Gradually, from listening to feedback on my chapters, I discovered I was a person worth discovering. I grew more confident, began to contribute to the discussion, and became part of a writing community. All the while I was still in therapy, healing at the same time that I was writing about healing. If I had finished the book earlier, it would not have had the same ending.

When I think back to my very young self, I want to hug her and say, *Yes, little girl, you can be a writer*. Then I realize she didn't need encouragement. She just sharpened her pencil and wrote what was in her heart. So instead, I thank her for showing me how to write what was in mine. Both our stories are about hungering for a mother, but I took 450 pages to say it, and she took 579 words.



A librarian and native New Yorker, Vivian Conan grew up in a large Greek-Jewish clan in Brooklyn, did a stint in the Bronx, and now lives in Manhattan. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *New York* magazine, *Lilith*, *Narratively*, *Next Avenue*, *Dorothy Parker's Ashes*, and *Ducts*. Her memoir is *Losing the Atmosphere*. Learn more at [VivianConan.com](http://VivianConan.com)