Writing One's Story

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UC Berkeley Retirement Center
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WATER WILL HOLD YOU

A SKEPTIC LEARNS TO PRAY

LINDSEY CRITTENDEN

...exquisitely written memoir..."

Publishers Weekly (starred review)

What is memoir, anyway?

- What physical characteristic are you proud to pass on?
- What or whom did you leave behind?
- What are you sorry you never did?
- Where were you on important days in history?
- Of which accomplishments are you the most proud?
- What was taboo in your childhood? Adolescence? Career? Marriage?
- Whom have you met briefly and never forgotten?
- What do you have too much of?
- When did you know you were in trouble?
- When did you know you'd be OK?

mem·oir [|]mem_|wär,-|wôr/ noun

 a historical account or biography written from personal knowledge or special sources.

"in 1924 she published a short memoir of her husband" synonyms:account, history, record, chronicle, narrative, story, portrayal, depiction, sketch, portrait, profile, biography, monograph, autobiography, life story, memories, recollections, reminiscences;

b. an autobiography or a written account of one's memory of certain events or people.

"he published his memoirs in 1955"

Origin: late 15th century (denoting a memorandum or record): from French *mémoire* (masculine), a special use of *mémoire* (feminine) 'memory.'

Introspection/reflection

• "Great memoirists are ruminants. Like the Ruminantia they are named for—like cattle, sheep, giraffes, deer, antelope—memoirists seem to have no choice to behave this way. It's how they're designed, assembled. They take in the stuff of their stories—of their lives—and wait for reflection to begin."

—Joyce Dyer, "Let Me Think About That," *The Writer's Chronicle* (September 2013)

- "A memoir is a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom.... What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened."
 - Wivian Gornick, The Situation and the Story

Exercise, step 1

• Choose one of the items you jotted down earlier. Make more notes about it. What do you remember? What have you already told, or been told, about the event(s)? Write the story succinctly, as you might tell it to a friend.

Exercise, step 2

• Write down your thoughts and feelings about the story. Do you think it's true as told? What was left out? What does it say about the people involved? What does it say about you?

More on wisdom

- A skeptical student once asked Frank McCourt, the Pulitzer Prizewinning author of <u>Angela's Ashes</u> and other memoirs, "You had that miserable childhood, so you have something to write about. What are we gonna write about? All we do is get born, go to school, go on vacation, go to college, fall in love or something, graduate and go into some kind of profession, get married, have the 2.3 kids you're always talking about, send the kids to school, get divorced like 50 percent of the population, get fat, get the first heart attack, retire, die."
- "Jonathan," McCourt replied, "that is the most miserable scenario of American life I've heard in a high school classroom. But you've supplied the ingredients for the great American novel. You've encapsulated the novels of Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald."
- In other words, 99.9 percent of people lead boring lives. But every single one of them is trying to make some sense out of his or her existence, to find some meaning in the world, and therein lies the value and opportunity of memoir.

Where to begin

- Scope
- Form
- Craft
- Purpose
- Audience

Scope

- Memoir vs autobiography
- What story are you telling? Whose?
- Beginning, middle, end

Form (a short list)

• Linear narrative

Episodic

Flashbacks

• "Frame" tale

Using other media – photos, video, graphics

Craft

- Imagery
- Setting
 - Time
 - Weather
 - Place
 - Mood
- Characterization: Action, Appearance, Speech, Thought
- Scene & summary
- Voice / Narrative Distance
 - Who's speaking? From where?
 - The three faces of "I"
 - Narrator looking back/Narrator living the moments as character
- Musing
 - Speculation
 - Rumination
 - "I wonder..."

Imagery prompt: Showing

- What did you feel against your face? Hands? Skin of your arms or legs?
- What were you wearing?
- What could you taste?
- Describe the light using brief adjectives
- What time of day was it?
- What did you smell?
- What could you hear?

Using concrete details, describe the moment without "telling" the feeling.

Purpose

- Why am I writing?
 - For myself
 - For others
 - To understand
 - To answer a question
 - To capture memories/event
 - To leave a legacy
 - Etc

Purpose dictates questions of scope & craft

Audience

- Who will read this?
 - References
 - Explanations
 - Context
 - Tone
 - Vocabulary
 - Examples
 - etc

Other considerations

- Who cares?
- You can't write about THAT ... can you??
- What will my friends/children/grandchildren/ siblings/spouse think?
- Protecting those we love
- Truth telling
- A wider world

In Closing

- This has been an introduction.
- What's next?
 - Classes
 - Writers' groups
 - Blogging
 - Trusted reader
 - Tomorrow's goal
 - Prompts for home use (handouts)
- Set aside 30 minutes to write. Start with a memory, a fragment, a snippet. Don't worry about what it means, or how it ties together with other pieces. Don't worry about what anyone else will think. Write it down.
- Keep doing this, on a regular workable schedule.