My Life as a Museum – a springboard for memoir
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We all have a story to tell and very often the things that surround us - the telephone bills, the drawer full of photographs, the stained carpet, the books on our shelves, forgotten stamp collections, old cutlery, our aunt’s moth-eaten teddy bear, your neighbour’s dog leash, a book collection, old recipes – the things we take for granted, are the very seeds of writing and curating your life stories using the stuff/things/artifacts that surround you. Whether you are a pat-rack or a neat-freak My Life as a Museum will equip you with a safe space in which to begin writing these stories, and weekly prompts to encourage you to continue writing on your own between classes.

Participants are encouraged to read They Left Us Everything by Plum Johnson before the beginning of the course.

In addition, The Hare with Amber Eyes By Edmund de Waal is another good read.

Remember when you write to consider the following:

a) Tell the story: how you got it, where you got it, why you got it, when you got it
b) Tell or even better, SHOW the object’s importance in your life perhaps with a particular anecdote
c) What would you like done with this object?
d) IF YOU CAN, PHOTOGRAPH ANYTHING YOU WRITE ABOUT.
e) Please choose a piece that is no longer than 500 words to share with the group. If you have written something longer, choose an excerpt.
f) WRITE ON LOOSE LEAF PAPER
g) NUMBER ALL YOUR PAGES
h) KEEP A RUNNING LIST OF EVERYTHING YOU WRITE – GIVE EACH PIECE A TITLE
i) HONOR YOUR WRITING. KEEP EVERYTHING
j) FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS COURSE, BEGIN READING LIKE A WRITER.

In her study, Afshar measured attachment using six kinds of value an object might bring someone: sentimental, service, social status, social interaction, sales price, and self-concept. (Julie Beck)

Week One: Cleaning out the Cupboards – an introduction to curating life stories

Imagine your life in artifacts – the objects you cherished and used, the clues you left behind for other to discover, the marks you made upon the earth. Footprints, fingerprints, all this evidence of you. If years later, someone were to discover these artifacts, they could begin to assemble an exhibit of who you were, what you loved, how you lived. But what would they choose to display? When writing my memoir, THE GIRL FACTORY, I often imagined myself in this role...
of curator – the caretaker of the art and artifacts of my life. Just as the curator chooses pieces for a museum collection, the memoirist selects which memories and events to show the reader. My memoir is mostly narrated by my childhood self, and I strived to figure out how eight-year-old me would address her audience. What would she show the reader to paint a portrait of her life

KAREN DIETRICH

Reading and Writing

1. Read [http://www.theminimalists.com/288/](http://www.theminimalists.com/288/) Everything I Own by Joshua Field Milburn. Now list all the things you own. After you have made your list, write a quick response to this activity.


3. Choose one of the “things” from #2 and write the story: where you got it, how (under what circumstances), with whom do you associate this “thing”, when did you get it, and finally why you are attached to it.


5. Watch [https://www.ted.com/talks/becci_manson_re.touching_lives_through_photos](https://www.ted.com/talks/becci_manson_re.touching_lives_through_photos) Becci Manson: (Re)touching lives through photos. Choose a photograph that is in your home and tell its story.


FOR NEXT CLASS BRING THREE PHOTOGRAPHS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO WRITE ABOUT – ONE THAT FALLS UNDER THE HEADING “SETTING” AND THE OTHER THAN FALLS UNDER THE HEADING “PEOPLE”

Week Two: Sorting through the Photographs

Sharing stories of people who matter.
Recreating stories of places that matter.

Readings

1. [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/05/08/fort-mcmurray-fire-packing-pictures_n_9863494.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/05/08/fort-mcmurray-fire-packing-pictures_n_9863494.html) Albertans pack some hilarious stuff – Huffington Post – the house is burning down, what do you grab?
   Now, choose one of your all-time favourite books and write the story of how you came to this book – try and weave in the story without making it all about summary – this piece of writing and the book will be a gift for someone, and you want to pay tribute to a book, that has remained a cornerstone in your life.

3. Watch and listen to Stacey Kramer’s parable [The best gift I ever survived](https://www.ted.com/talks/stacey_kramer_the_best_gift_i_ever_survived). Now watch West Jet’s Christmas ad. [http://omeleto.com/229874/](http://omeleto.com/229874/) Think about “gifts” and ones that you have been given that brought your insight into your own life and life around you. Write the story.


5. Choose 6 things from your kitchen that matter. **Write about one of them. Bring the other 5 to our next class.**

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**Week Three: Sorting through the Kitchen**


4. [http://www.thelostkichen.org/](http://www.thelostkichen.org/) What is the recipe your loved ones need to have? Tell its story and include the recipe.

5. Choose 10 objects that have a story. Now read Kate Brandeis’s piece from Ottawa At Home [http://www.ottawaathome.ca/living_article.php?articleID=90](http://www.ottawaathome.ca/living_article.php?articleID=90) **Write the story for 1 of these objects and bring 5 of these objects to next class.**

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**Week Four: The books, the letters, the furniture, the chachka**
1. Read The Birthday Gift by Diane Gorman (attached to this outline). Write the story of a piece of furniture that matters.


3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfozE5b22og read/listen/watch to The Keeping Quilt https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AVxr_vz0XE write about something that belonged to an ancestor then write a story about the importance of this item, its history and place in the family.

4. Choose something specific of yours that you think is of no value to anyone else and write its story. Now decide who should have it and write them a letter telling them why.

5. What is your relationship with music and how has it impacted your life? What piece of music/song in particular.

Week Five: Unpacking the past


Collect all the writing you have done in the course and feel free to include other writing. Spread it out on a large table paying attention to topics and themes. Begin organizing your writing in piles that will become chapters. Name each chapter. Once completed, write an introduction to the collection in which you talk about what the reader should expect to read and then write a conclusion in which you talk about future goals. Now, make a table of contents and a title page. Give all of your work a home.

Choose one piece of writing that you would like to work on, revise, polish, present and submit to an online journal and/or give to a family member. Follow these directions – please provide one copy for each participant. Double space and number your pages.

1. Read through your draft once. Now, read it OUT LOUD. The best way to catch grammatical errors, inconsistencies, awkward wording is by reading your work out loud.
2. Have somebody else read your piece.
3. Have you provided some kind of “hook” in your introduction? Does something happen or do you prepare the reader for something?
4. Does one paragraph logically connect to the next?
5. In your closing, have you tried to bring your piece full circle? Perhaps there is something else you have done to “complete” your piece without leaving the reader hanging in an awkward way.

Specifically:

Go through your paper and underline all your verbs twice.

1. Have you used the most powerful/effective verb?
   Eg: Instead of *she ran furiously through the door*
   **She charged through the door**
   
   *She whispered* instead of *she spoke quietly*

2. Are actions and reactions in chronological order?

   She drank her coffee after she poured in a shot of Kahlua
   She poured in a shot of Kahlua and drank her coffee

3. Are you overusing “seem”?

   She seemed happy when she opened her gift.
   
   She wrapped her arms around her father and squeezed him after she opened her gift.
   
   The boat seemed to be sinking.
   
   The boat was sinking.

4. Are you over-using passive verbs? Name who did what.

   Not: The bananas were left on the counter.
   
   But: Jonathon left the bananas on the counter.

5. Crying, Sobbing, Tears and Other Cliches

   Where you can, have you showed the action instead of relying on clichés?
   
   She held onto his knees sobbing “please help me!”
   
   She sank down, clutched his knees and whispered, “please help me”.

6. Decided to…Have characters do things rather than decide to do things

   Not: She decided to go for a swim before sunset
   
   But: She went for a swim before sunset

7. Dialogue
Edit dialogue to the barest of essentials and avoid the overuse of names (remember, this is not being read out, it is being read internally)

Indent dialogue

8. IT

Be careful and name things when you can

9. THINGS – Replace “thing” with a specific word.
10. Check for inconsistencies.

Once you have polished your piece, collect all of your writing, and give it a home. Number your pages. Write an introduction to this collection and a final reflection which includes a list of writing goals.

Week Six: The Stories that really count – or, Archiving My Life or, My Life as a Museum.

What follows are the loyal friends of all writers.

Goldberg, Natalie. Old friend from far away
Goldberg, Natalie. Writing down the bones
Goldberg, Natalie. Wildmind
Heffron, Jack. The Writer’s Idea Book
Johnston, Anthony (ed). Naming the World (and other exercises for the creative writer)
King, Stephen. On Writing
Lamott, Anne. Bird by bird
Roach Smith, Marion. The Memoir Project
Roorbach, Bill. Writing Life Stories
Truss, Lynne. Easts, Shoots & Leaves (the zero tolerance approach to punctuation)
Ueland, Brenda. If you want to write
Zinsser, William. Writing about your life
Zinsser, William. On Writing Well

A Quick Brainstorm of some of my favourite memoirs
Ashton-Warner, Sylvia. Teacher

“And the design of my work is that creativity in this time of life when character can be influenced forever is the solution to the problem of war”. (p.88)

Beah, Ishmael. A long way gone.

When I was a child, my grandmother told me that the sky speaks to those who look and listen to it. She said, ”In the sky there are always answers and explanations for everything: every pain, every suffering, joy, and confusion.” That night I wanted the sky to talk to me. (p.16)

Crozier, Ruth. Small Beneath the Sky

“Who but my mother held those small pieces of my childhood? Where would they go when she was gone?”

Ephron, Nora. I Feel Bad About my Neck

“Here are some questions I am constantly noodling over: Do you splurge or do you hoard? Do you live every day as if it's your last, or do you save your money on the chance you'll live twenty more years? Is life too short, or is it going to be too long? Do you work as hard as you can, or do you slow down to smell the roses? And where do carbohydrates fit into all this? Are we really all going to spend our last years avoiding bread, especially now that bread in American is so unbelievable delicious? And what about chocolate?”

Gallman, Kuki. I Dreamed of Africa

The friends took the ropes, and slowly, inch by inch, lowered the coffin with my baby inside into the deep brown earth, where it landed with a soft and final thud. A murmer ran through the crowd, a baby cried. The music grew splendid and exalting, absorbing sounds of weeping, sounds of birds, leaving only the mute rising tide of anguish. (p.217)

Gibb, Camilla. This is Happy

“We come to know ourselves through stories. We listen to the stories of others, we inherit the stories of those who came before, and we make sense of our own experiences by constructing a narrative that holds them, and holds us, together. Stories are how we make sense of our lives.” (p. XI)

Hemingway, Ernest. A Moveable Feast

“When spring came, even the false spring, there were no problems except where to be happiest. The only thing that could spoil a day was people and if you could keep from making engagements, each day had no limits. People were always the limiters of happiness except for the very few that were as good as spring itself.”

Huggan, Isabel. Belonging

“But I did not want to be good. I wanted to be a writer.”
Johnson, Plum. *They Left Us Everything*

“Mum loved to name her houses.”

McCourt, Frank. *Angela’s Ashes*

“When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.”

Patchett, Ann *Truth and Beauty*

I was starting to wonder if I was ready to be a writer, not someone who won prizes, got published and was given the time and space to work, but someone who wrote as a course of life. Maybe writing wouldn’t have any rewards. Maybe the salvation I would gain through work would only be emotional and intellectual. Wouldn't that be enough, to be a waitress who found an hour or two hidden in every day to write?"

Reich, Ruth. *Tender at the Bone*

“She was a great cook, but she cooked more for herself than for other people, not because she was hungry but because she was comforted by the rituals of the kitchen.”

Sedaris, David. *Let’s explore diabetes with owls*

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*

“Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.”

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.”

Zinsser, William (editor) *Inventing the Truth; The Art and Craft of Memoir*

“I was looking for a way to narrate a life story of a woman that would pay due respect to her attachments to men and to family but would be about something else entirely. I wanted to convey my sense of my education, of my liberation through access to education, and of the variety of steps by which I arrived at taking charge of my own life. Philosophically, you only have to perform one free act to be a free person”. Jill Ker Conway on her memoir The Road from Coorain
“There’s enough misery. What readers want is experience. There’s nothing new in my book. It’s an old fashioned book – all the old elements are there. Well, if we didn’t have a sense of humour in those days we were dead”. Frank McCourt on his memoir *Angela’s Ashes*

“I recommend that to memoir writers: Make a nice dinner for everybody – something that makes you feel you’ve done good for someone. Fortunately, most people do want to be written about. They want their lives to be known and remembered. They may be wary when you describe your project to them, especially if you look like some kind of loose cannon. But once it’s done they’re usually happy.” Ian Frazier *Looking for My Family*

**PARTICIPANT PUBLICATIONS**

**Glebe Report**

White Oak Surprise by Kit Flynn in the Glebe Report  


**The Globe and Mail**

The Birthday Gift by Diane Gorman from The Globe and Mail  

The Door I Can’t Open by Kit Flynn in Facts and Arguments, Globe and Mail  

A World of Breakfast Beckons by Carol Sutherland Brown in Facts and Arguments in the Globe and Mail  

The Black Hole Over My Shoulder by Nancy Wehlau in Facts and Arguments, Globe and Mail  

Setting the Holiday Table by Patricia Williams in the Globe and Mail, First Person  

Welcomed by War Survivors in Vietnam and Cambodia by Patricia Williams in the Globe and Mail, Dispatches  

**STORY-QUILT.COM ON LINE JOURNAL**

Brandied Cherries by Barbara Robertson  http://www.story-quilt.com/brandied-cherries/

Moving On by Erica Sher  http://www.story-quilt.com/moving-on/


Tommy by Margaret Pimm  http://www.story-quilt.com/tommy-3/


Christmas on the Island by Pamela Parkin  http://www.story-quilt.com/christmas-on-the-island/

The Birthday Gift by Diane Gorman from The Globe and Mail  

There she sat proudly in the window in all her powder blue magnificence, pale pink flowers embroidered across her bosom, frills daintily falling from her skirt, demurely covering her slender, but solid legs. I had to have her.

It was a dull, cold November afternoon—and my birthday. A 20-year marriage had crashed to an end just three months before. *His* life seemed to be perfect—younger woman, new car, no responsibility. *Mine* was none of that. I did not foresee the end coming. I was, typically, the last to know about the affair. But why did I not have the foresight to see that my birthday fell on “his weekend” with the children? Did I not care enough about myself to ask for my children to be with me on my birthday? My broken heart felt wrenched beyond what it could bear.

To fill my emptiness, I laced on my running shoes and ran, letting the cold, November air clear my mind and fill my lungs. My heart, however, was another story, huge and empty-- until I saw her.

A new furniture store had moved into the location of a former restaurant. It had not been there the week before and I’m sure was only there for a few months. I had not had a thought of furniture, but when I saw her sitting there in the showroom window, she pulled me in. Before I knew it, my credit card was out of my pocket, into my damp palm, and I was committed to her!
I’d never done anything so impetuous in my life. Oh, the liberation! There was no one I needed to consult; no one to question her colour or style or practicality. I loved my new couch and she was coming home to me!

Over the years she sat proudly in our family room and in our family’s heart. She held me and my four little girls close. She absorbed our tears. Her springs rejoiced when we did. Her arms held us as we slept. She proudly wore the stains of our lives. As we changed and grew, she remained solid. Her fabric lost its youthful vitality, and she became all the more charming.

On Friday nights, after a long, hard week of work and school, the five of us cuddled on the couch to watch movies. It was the one night of the week we ate on the couch. As my little girls grew and their tastes evolved, over the years our weekly take-out routine progressed from McDonald’s to smoked meat, to Chinese. To indulge ourselves even more, we always made a Friday-night stop at the Bulk Barn, each clutching our own little, carefully chosen, bag of treats. Many pounds of rosebuds and gummy worms were devoured on that couch. And she withstood it all.

As the heartache mended, the girls left home, off to school, to new lives and new adventures. And a new love entered my heart. He was not the pink flowers-on-a-country-blue-frilly-upholstery type. He was more the leather, adult lifestyle guy. Knowing the importance of blending two lives, I also knew I was ready to let my beautiful couch go. She had liberated me, been my birthday gift to myself in one of my darkest moments; she had comforted my family and created so many memories. She too needed a new purpose.
And so my precious couch was carried lovingly to the garage, where a young, newly separated mom adored her. “It has such good bones, solid construction. I know exactly how I will re-upholster it…” And I knew my birthday gift would become someone else’s gift, capable of supporting another family through their own difficult time. Besides, our new leather recliners in warm taupe suited our empty nester, ageing lifestyle.

A little lacquered box holds some of my life’s treasures: hand-made Mother’s Day cards; my mother’s bible; my father’s first bank book. And nestled safely in that box is a well-worn receipt, a bit wrinkled from the chill of that day some twenty years ago when I ran home with it clutched joyfully in my hand. I did not keep the receipt to be reminded of the price, or to make a claim against the warranty. I kept it to hang on to that moment when life offered me a gift and I had the courage and spontaneity to embrace it.