Writing the Stories of My Life: Remembering Through Others

We all have a story to tell. However, knowing where to begin can become so overwhelming that we put off writing the story at all. This is an invitation to re-collect, record and share the stories from your life through the lens of “others”. How have your ancestors and family members played a role in who you are and why you do what you do? How have your professional relationships, your personal relationships and the people you only knew in passing figured in your life story? Please bring your own writing instruments and photographs to a safe environment where you will experiment with writing strategies using prompts, share your writing with others, and begin your collection of life-stories. Two suggested reads are:

My Family and Other Animals by Gerald Durell for a simply delightful read

Truth and Beauty by Ann Patchett

Notes to Review Before Each Class

- This is a memoir based writing class in which we write through the lens of “others” to find and isolate, remember and recollect and finally write the stories that best show who we were, why we did what we did, who we are and are becoming
- Unlike autobiography and biography that are linear in shape, memoir can take the shape of any written form including personal essay, poetry, vignettes
- Regardless, memoir, auto and bio all fall under the umbrella of “narrative inquiry” – research that honors life stories as a way of better understanding why we do what we do
- Rules of the Course: Keep everything and honor your writing/stories, everything gets a title, don’t overthink anything, make the course work for you
- As much as you can develop a ritual of the course – while we meet once a week, our class is the “gravy” - your daily writing is the meat and potatoes (or lentils and potatoes) of the course
- What I can do for you: provide structure and design – ways of thinking about HOW you might go about collecting your stories using writing strategies such as brainstorming to generate ideas, freewriting as a way of generating stories, sharing as a way of moving from writing for ourselves to writing for others
- Writing for Ourselves/Writing for Others – personal, poetic/transactional
- While we are writing for ourselves as soon as we share we tiptoe from one category to the next
- Sometimes our unique stories shed light on a shared experience
- Write about what you KNOW more than what you DID – as Marian Roach says, write about “what you did WITH IT”

Writing:
- While this is not a writing course we all want to be more engaging, imaginative and clever writers so to improve: READ LIKE A WRITER, WRITE OFTEN AND WITH ABANDON, PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR VERBS, PUT IT OUT THERE
- As much as you can, create a daily writing ritual. You have been provided with 5 prompts per week – try and write for 15-20 minutes on each of the prompts.
- Choose one piece of writing that you will share with the class. The piece should be about 600 words in length. If you have written a longer piece, simply choose a section to share.
- I will listen and give feedback and encourage you to be active listeners of writing (not story) ie what do writers DO, how do they SHOW instead of TELL, not what they say

Sharing:
- Let the writing speak for itself
- NO preamble, NO commentary

MAKE THE COURSE WORK FOR YOU!!!

**Week 1: Looking Back: My ancestors**

*I own one pair of Prada shoes. They make my feet hurt... It's not the shoes’ fault; they are exquisitely made. I blame my feet. I've got my mother's feet. *Meryl Streep*


Write about a grandparent you wish you had known better – begin by brainstorming the reasons you wished to have known him/her better.


What are the family stories that get told and retold? Brainstorm the “family lore” in your family stretching back as far as you can go – beginning with how your ancestors got here. Then, choose one story and write it out.


What gifts have your ancestors given you?

4. As much as you know and are able to, write the story of your family going back as far as you can go. Use photographs wherever possible.

5. Who of your ancestors do you wish you could have known? Write his or her story and connect yourself where you can.
Week 2: You can’t choose them: My family

“There's no bitch on earth like a mother frightened for her kids.”
— Stephen King

Read https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/19/why-arent-you-laughing Why aren’t you laughing, Reckoning with addiction by David Sedaris

Read https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/lolas-story/524490/ My Family’s Slave by Alex Tizon

Watch https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXlnrFpCu0c My son was a Columbine shooter. This is my story | Sue Klebold

1. List all the things only you would know about your mother(s) – what she eats, her favourite music, favourite place, favourite thing to do on a Saturday afternoon, favourite clothing, books, movies, her pet peeves – list them all. Now, write about your mother weaving together one or a few of these details.

2. List all the things only you would know about your father(s) – what he eats, his favourite music, favourite place, favourite thing to do on a Saturday afternoon, favourite clothing, books, movies, her pet peeves – list them all. Now, write about your father weaving together one or a few of these details. If you grew up with only one parent write that story.

3. Do the same for the siblings in your family. If you were an only child, write that story.

4. List all the people who “may as well have been your family”. Choose one. Begin with how this person is part of your family and write the story.

5. Who in your family have you avoided writing about? Write about this person beginning with the reason you have avoided writing about him/her/them.

Week 3: Those you can choose: My friends from yesterday and today

“I do not remember our love unfolding, that we got to know one another and in time became friends. I only remember that she came through the door and it was there, huge and permanent and-first.”
— Ann Patchett, Truth and Beauty

“I want to talk to her. I want to have lunch with her. I want her to give me a book she just read and loved. She is my phantom limb, and I just can’t believe I’m here without her.”- on losing her best-friend”
— Nora Ephron, I Feel Bad about My Neck: And Other Thoughts on Being a Woman

1. Brainstorm all the friends you had up until grade 6 – the school friends, the summer friends, the weekend friends, club and sports friends, list them all. Choose one person and write about him/her/them and how they played a role in your life.
2. Brainstorm all the friends you had through high-school – the school friends, the summer friends, the weekend friends, the club friends, sports, list them all. Choose one person and write about him/her/them and how they played a role in your life.
3. Brainstorm all the friends you had in your young adult life (18-25). Where were you then, think of the places and begin to brainstorm. Choose one and write.
4. Brainstorm all the friends you have and have made in your adult life. Choose one and write.
5. Who has passed away? List these names, choose one and write.

**Week 4: The Office: Professional relationships**

1. Brainstorm a list of all the jobs you had up until you were 21. Once you have completed your list, note the names of people who you connect with those jobs. Choose one of those people and tell the story of how he/she/they played a role in your life.
2. Brainstorm a list of all the “jobs” you have had since you were 21. Be open to how you define “jobs”. Once you have completed your list, note the names of the people you connect with those “jobs”. Choose one of those people and tell the story of how he/she/they played a role in your life.
3. Brainstorm a list of the most influential people you have met in a professional capacity. Choose one and write about him/her/them.
4. Were there people in your professional life who were a negative force? Write.
5. Revisit prompts 1 & 2 and write about someone else. Before writing ask yourself this question: “What do I want my reader to know?”

**Week 5: The Road Less Travelled: Ephemeral Encounters**

[https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/aug/07/biography.features](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/aug/07/biography.features) Hijacked by Grief by Suellen Grealy

1. Brainstorm all the neighborhoods you have ever lived in. Begin with your childhood, then move up into your teens, young adult years and adult years. Next, note the people who lived in those neighborhoods – even if you were not “friendly” with them, simply list them.
2. What about other “communities” you have been part of willingly, unwillingly or out of necessity? Spiritual Centers, Health Care Centers, Markets, Support Groups, Choirs, …List these and names of people you associate with these places.

3. Each day write about one person focusing on what you were doing at this point in your life, where you were living, how it was that you came to know this person and the role he/she played in your life.

Week 6: Weaving them In

What are all the clubs/groups/associations/societies/support groups you have belonged to? Book clubs, knitting clubs, guides, scouts, brownies, soccer, tennis, skating, social,…Begin by brainstorming all these clubs beginning with:

1. Childhood
2. Teens
3. Young Adult
4. Adult

Then, note the names that come to you as you list the clubs.

Each day, choose one person and write about that person and the role he/she/they played in your life. When you write, include what you were doing at that point in your life, where you were living and with whom.

Week 7: Polishing

1. 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 at the end of the course outline. Please provide one copy for each participant. Double space and number your pages.

2. Collect all your writing and organize it in a way that makes sense. Write an introduction and conclusion. Give your collection a title.

3. Create a list called “Pieces not yet written” and include this piece in your collection.

Week 8: Polished Potluck

This week we share our polished pieces and receive written feedback. We also present our working portfolios – a collection of our writing to date.

Suggestions for Editing

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.

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
https://issuu.com/glebereport/docs/gr_june_2017_web


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

In My Perfect-for-Italy Skirt I had my Perfect Marilyn Monroe Moment by Patricia Williams in the Globe and Mail, Dispatches
“When God Created Mothers”

When the Good Lord was creating mothers, He was into His sixth day of "overtime" when the angel appeared and said. "You're doing a lot of fiddling around on this one."

And God said, "Have you read the specs on this order?" She has to be completely washable, but not plastic. Have 180 moveable parts...all replaceable. Run on black coffee and leftovers. Have a lap that disappears when she stands up. A kiss that can cure anything from a broken leg to a disappointed love affair. And six pairs of hands."

The angel shook her head slowly and said. "Six pairs of hands.... no way."

It's not the hands that are causing me problems," God remarked, "it's the three pairs of eyes that mothers have to have."

That's on the standard model?" asked the angel. God nodded.

One pair that sees through closed doors when she asks, 'What are you kids doing in there?' when she already knows. Another here in the back of her head that sees what she shouldn't but what she has to know, and of course the ones here in front that can look at a child when he goofs up and say, 'I understand and I love you' without so much as uttering a word."

God," said the angel touching his sleeve gently, "Get some rest tomorrow...."

I can't," said God, "I'm so close to creating something so close to myself. Already I have one who heals herself when she is sick...can feed a family of six on one pound of hamburger...and can get a nine year old to stand under a shower."
The angel circled the model of a mother very slowly. "It's too soft," she sighed.

But tough!" said God excitedly. "You can imagine what this mother can do or endure."

Can it think?"

Not only can it think, but it can reason and compromise," said the Creator.

Finally, the angel bent over and ran her finger across the cheek.

There's a leak," she pronounced. "I told You that You were trying to put too much into this model."

It's not a leak," said the Lord, "It's a tear."

What's it for?"

It's for joy, sadness, disappointment, pain, loneliness, and pride."

You are a genius," said the angel.

Somberly, God said, "I didn't put it there."

— Erma Bombeck, When God Created Mothers