

Writing the Stories of My Life: Remembering My Mother

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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 memories of your mother. How do we capture our mother in a single story and is that even possible? What are the stories we want to remember, share and honor? We will work at isolating the small, rare and authentic stories that most effectively show who she was/is. What made/makes her laugh? What were/are her secret pleasures and how do you know? What was/is outside her bedroom window? Did/Does she sing, read, dance, play cards, govern, teach, draw, design, write, administer, research – what did/does she keep in her top drawer and what was/is her favourite sweater? How might writing about our mothers give us a glimpse into who we are, who we were and who we have become? Please prepare for this course by collecting photographs and “artifacts” (jewelry, scarves, books, spoons, cameras...) that you associate with your mother. 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.

"Parents yearn for their children's respect, and yet my mother deliberately sabotaged my respect and emphasized her failings. She loved me enough to make me love her less. She wanted to make sure that I would not follow in her footsteps." Ruth Reichl

I wasn't micromanaged. Her idea was to let the children-as long as it wasn't dangerous -experiment and make their mistakes. I do remember the cake into which I failed to put the baking powder;-it was very flat. We ate some of it anyway. Nor did she criticize the horrible yellow short coat I sewed when I was in grade nine. She had to bite her tongue quite hard. Her idea, even when we were quite small, was to give us the crayons and the paper and then leave us alone. She was quite smart in that she was also truthful. She said, "I can't draw. You have to draw those pictures because I can't do it. My own mother would not make a very good fictional character unless she died young. She does get into my fiction in some ways-she is some way in Cat's Eye. But everybody's strengths are also their weaknesses. She was a very non-interfering mother who did not interfere in the bad unhappy parts of my life any more than she interfered in the joyous creation of my horrible dramas. She thought that children should develop on their own. Margaret Atwood

Notes to Review Before Each Class

- This is a memoir based writing class in which we write through the lens of ----- 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 who we 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

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

Some unrequired readings

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/05/05/pilgrim-mothers> Pilgrim Mothers: The Ladies Four O’Clock Club by Sarah Payne Stewart

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/19/why-arent-you-laughing> Why Aren’t You Laughing? Reckoning With Addiction by David Sedaris

Watch : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcQA7ukm3VY> Ruth Reichl on Grateful Not To Be My Mother, or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1K1M8MjQyp0>

Watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lthyX-gScbY> Obama’s tribute to his mother

<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/10/books/review/Gottlieb-t.html> Lorri Gottlieb (a review of memoirs about mothers and their responses)

<https://lithub.com/adrienne-rich-it-is-hard-to-write-about-my-own-mother/> Adrienne Rich on why it is hard to write about her mother

Weekly-daily writing prompts

What will you miss about your mother when she dies? What do you miss already? What won't you miss?

Write about a time you did something together – just the two of you.

What is/was home for your mother? How do you know?

What did she consider ugly and beautiful? How do you know?

What did she like to read? What did she like to watch? Listen to? How do you know?

What were her passions? Obsessions? How do you know?

What do you know about her school days? How do you know this?

How was she or wasn't she a teacher? What did and didn't she teach you?

What was the happiest time in her life? The saddest? How do you know?

What were the recipes she loved? It could be a simple glass of milk. How did she first discover it? Serve it? How do you know?

What were her religious/spiritual beliefs? How do you know?

What was the worst thing that happened to her? The best? How do you know?

What was her biggest mistake? How do you know?

What was her secret fantasy? How do you know?

When did you pretend not to care?

What was she grateful for?

Who were her friends, her real friends? How do you know?

Who meant the most to her? How do you know?

When did she suffer? How do you know?

When was she sick? How do you know?

What was outside her bedroom window?

How did she deal with silence? With noise? How do you know?

What were the relentless dreams she had?

Write about your mother's jewelry.

What was always on her mind?

Write about her relationship with animals. Did she ever catch a fish? Walk a dog? Ride a horse? Shoot a duck? Harpoon a whale? How do you know?

When was a time she was utterly enamored?

If there was only one memory of your mother you could hang onto what would it be?

Write a last letter to your mother. Say everything you need to say. This is it. You won't get another chance.

Were/Are there times she needed alcohol, drugs, chocolate?

What did/does she know by heart?

What were or are her aches? First tell about the concrete aches: her back, knee, toe...Now move to the less obvious injuries, heartache

What is or was her anchor, what did she trust and know and could come home to over and over?

What ghost haunted or haunt her? How do you know?

What did you start over again? Why?

Did she or does she travel? What are her favourites? How do you know?

What costumes did she or does she wear? What were/are her favourite clothes?

Where did she always want to go but didn't? How do you know?

Tell me about your mother's hands.

What was the great burden she carried or carries?

What road did she not take?

What was the hardest thing you ever witnessed about your mother?

What was the saddest thing you ever witnessed about your mother?

When do you remember your mother the happiest?

What made your mother angry?

Week One

1. Introduce yourself through your mother (10 mins free-write and share)
2. Write your mother's story (15 mins) Share
3. Memoir and the Self – how do you fit into this writing? The triangle (one option)

4. Brainstorm a list of qualities you associate with your mother. Once you have brainstormed that list, brainstorm each quality answering the question HOW DO YOU KNOW
5. Choose one quality and write the story (10 mins)
6. Choose a second quality and write the story (10 mins)

This week, choose one prompt a day and write for 15 minutes. Bring one piece, no more than 500 words to the next class that you are willing to share.

Week Two

7. What did your mother consider beautiful and ugly. Brainstorm.
8. Beside each word answer the question HOW DO YOU KNOW
9. Choose one and write the story (15mins) Share
10. When was she the happiest? Beside each event/person/word HOW DO YOU KNOW
11. Choose one and write the story (15 mins) Share
12. When did she suffer? HOW DO YOU KNOW
13. Choose one and write the story. Share

This week, choose one prompt a day and write for 15 minutes. Bring one piece, no more than 500 words to the next class that you are willing to share. Also,

Please bring a handful of photos of your mother that you would like to use as writing prompts.

Week Three : Photographs

1. Share and respond to pieces
2. Photograph exercise 1
3. Photograph exercise 2
4. Photograph exercise 3

This week, choose one prompt a day and write for 15 minutes. Bring one piece, no more than 500 words to the next class that you are willing to share. Also, bring some objects to class that belonged to your mother that “speak to you” in some way.

Week Four: Objects

- 1.Object exercise 1
2. Object exercise 2
- 3.Object exercise 3

This week, choose one prompt a day and write for 15 minutes. Bring one piece, no more than 500 words to the next class that you are willing to share.

Week Five

This week: 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.

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

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 couter.

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 murmur 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

The Ottawa Citizen

http://epaper.ottawacitizen.com/@mjc_edwards/csb_e5AwIYjXWz1rTpVcn6-3sb3um-62646Yxj4auckZ4WjB03qq9eg8rUtFst_n4OMF Let’s Shed a Little Light on Coping with Blindness by Pat Mayberry

Glebe Report

White Oak Surprise by Kit Flynn in the Glebe Report
https://issuu.com/glebereport/docs/gr_june_2017_web

Madeline by Tamara Levine in the Glebe Report http://www.glebereport.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/GR-August-2017_web2.pdf

The Globe and Mail

The Birthday Gift by Diane Gorman from The Globe and Mail
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/buying-a-frilly-blue-couch-set-me-on-a-path-of-freedom-after-my-divorce/article31346719/>

The Door I Can't Open by Kit Flynn in Facts and Arguments, Globe and Mail
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/i-want-my-sons-to-remember-their-father-but-its-too-hard-to-go-through-histhings/article36042548/>

A World of Breakfast Beckons by Carol Sutherland Brown in Facts and Arguments in the Globe and Mail <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/no-matter-where-ive-traveled-at-breakfast-there-is-alwayslope/article34971103/>

The Black Hole Over My Shoulder by Nancy Wehlau in Facts and Arguments, Globe and Mail
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/my-massive-purse-is-a-black-hole-swallowing-everything-it-encounters/article30527153/>

Setting the Holiday Table by Patricia Williams in the Globe and Mail, First Person
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/first-person/christmas-didnt-start-until-we-opened-our-special-delivery-from-themaritimes/article37370284/>

Welcomed by War Survivors in Vietnam and Cambodia by Patricia Williams in the Globe and Mail, Dispatches <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/travel/welcomed-by-war-survivors-in-vietnam-and-cambodia/article34758371/>

In My Perfect-for-Italy Skirt I had my Perfect Marilyn Monroe Moment by Patricia Williams in the Globe and Mail, Dispatches <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/travel/activities-and-interests/in-my-perfect-for-italy-skirt-i-had-a-perfect-marilyn-monroe-moment/article31707879/>

Watch My Breath? I'd rather count my way through meditation by Linda Jones
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/first-person/article-watch-my-breath-id-rather-count-my-way-through-meditation/>

Hostess Gift Hell by Sarah Prospero
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/first-person/article-hostess-gift-hell-whats-with-all-the-little-jars-of-relish/#comments>

<http://v1.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/LAC.20180901.OBIREMEMBER/BDAStory/BDA/deaths> by Hendrick Sire

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/>

Getting At It: Love Letters From the Cedar Chest by Maryan O'Hagan <http://www.story-quilt.com/getting-at-it-love-letters-from-the-cedar-chest/>

Salvudor Ambulando: An Ode to my Black Ballet Flats by Carol Sutherland Brown
<http://www.story-quilt.com/solvitur-ambulando-an-ode-to-my-black-ballet-flats/>

Uncle Heini's Underwear by Michaela A. Keyserlingk <http://www.story-quilt.com/uncle-heinis-underwear/>

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

Mustard and First Loves by Art McLean <http://www.story-quilt.com/mustard-and-first-loves/>

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

The Saphire Ring by Edie Fauquier <http://www.story-quilt.com/the-sapphire-ring/>

Fervour Young by Dave McCabe <http://www.story-quilt.com/fervour-young/>

Little Fogo by Dave McCabe <http://www.story-quilt.com/little-fogo-june-2015/>

Dad's Mug by Marlene Luscombe <http://www.story-quilt.com/dads-mug/#comment-492>

The Pairing Knife by Marlene Luscombe <http://www.story-quilt.com/the-paring-knife/>

Nine Countries in 22 Days by Isobel Salole <http://www.story-quilt.com/nine-countries-in-twenty-two-days/>

Christmas Innocence by Edie Fauquier <http://www.story-quilt.com/christmas-innocence/>

The One Who didn't Get Away by Edie Fauquier <http://www.story-quilt.com/the-one-who-didnt-get-away/>

My First Visit to Bloomingdales by Edie Fauquier <http://www.story-quilt.com/my-first-visit-to-bloomingdales/>

Gunslingers and Spies by Rhys Williams <http://www.story-quilt.com/gunslingers-and-spies/>

Will I ever return to Mount Sinai? By Graham Howard <http://www.story-quilt.com/will-i-ever-return-to-mount-sinai/>

The Telephone by Cathy Graham <http://www.story-quilt.com/the-telephone/>

Sidekicks and Sidejobs by Sarah Prospero <http://www.story-quilt.com/sidekicks-and-sidejobs/>

Turquoise, Red, Russet and a Splash of Pink by Donna Singleton

What's Inside by Donna Singleton <http://www.story-quilt.com/artist/donna-singleton/>

Motorbike Memory by David Morris <https://www.story-quilt.com/artist/david-morris/>

Fifty Five Plus Magazine

<https://console.virtualpaper.com/fifty-five-plus-magazine/september-55-ottawa-2019/#44/>
Minutes to Midnight by Peggy Edwards

THE SUNDAY EDITION

Sarah Prospero reads her essay :

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/the-sunday-edition-for-november-24-2019-1.5365364/how-poetry-helped-me-navigate-the-turbulence-of-teen-angst-1.5367031>