

Mining Your Memories

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To me, the greatest pleasure of writing is not what it's about, but the inner music that words make. -- Truman Capote

Memoirs are woven from memories, but many memoirists wonder if they have enough memories, or if their memories are “correct.” Families share memories around the table and pore over family photo albums, reminiscing and remembering. But for memoirists, memories are the tools we use to create our stories, we need to build our writing upon our memories. Sometimes, we may wonder if we have enough memories to write memoir. We need to evoke and mine our memories, and get creative with ways to help our memories become clearer.

There are many ways to capture your memories. Memories exist as wisps of perfume, snippets of images, stories that haunt our dreams, fragments of our lives waiting for us to breathe full life into them so they can unfold on the screen of story.

Streams of memory arise when we hear a song or when smells and sounds remind us of certain moments. Perhaps when you visit your home town and or landscape that has meaning and history for you, you find yourself remembering more details. To help me remember, I would visit the town where I grew up, amazed at the flow of memory as I made my way down the familiar red dirt roads into the town. I tried in my journal to capture the rush of images and memories that appeared to be hidden somewhere in the cells of my body once I placed myself in a familiar environment—liquid movies of spring with the burst of daffodils and the big winds of the summer storm, the swaying wheat just before it was cut, the bite of winter cold.

One way to encourage your memories is to place your fingers over the keyboard. Begin with a piece of story, an image, a sensual experience and listen to your body/mind as it begins to grapple with the story you want to tell. Allow it to flow through you, to take its own form.

Begin with a scene—put yourself in a time and a place, creating a setting where you can ground your senses as a “character.”

Dreams can help us get into our stories and memories. Write down your dreams, and then reflect on what they mean, how they are connected to your memories.

Dive into the tough memories, the stories that scare you, the stories you really don't want to write. Here the gold is found, the moments in your life that you need to understand, the things you are embarrassed about, the decisions that you regret. What are the life lessons that haunt you, the ones that come back to you on soft feet in the middle of the night? These contain some of the important points of your life, times that tug at your heart and soul.

Writing a memoir invites us to explore stories to discover their meaning, the stories of our true selves, not only the superficial moments. Memoir writing is about capturing the essence of an experience by being true to ourselves, including all aspects of who we are. We are not writing to justify our lives. In fact, the most interesting stories are not about being helpless or victims, but what we have done to cope with tragedy and happiness, dark and light, guilt and generosity—the whole continuum of human experience.

Tips for Capturing Significant Memories

1. Write down memories on envelopes at the market, in the car—parked of course, or taking a walk. If you don't write it down, it disappears. Once a week gather those scraps into your notebook, or you will lose them!
2. Keep a small **tape recorder or iPod** nearby to record your thoughts.
3. Get out **photo albums** and select photos that have meaning to you. Use the photo as a trigger to write about what was important for you in the photo. Write about what you were feeling. Write about what happened before and after the photo was take.
4. Describe the photo in detail, and muse about the meaning of the photo and what is hidden that the viewer can't see.
5. Talk with **friends**, and write down what you remember together.
6. **Family events** can be triggers for your memoir file. Write things down or put them on tape.
7. If you have a computer, surf the web for memoir writing sites, memory preservation sites. Look up your home town on Google Earth. Take a trip down memory lane in your high school yearbook, or your wedding album.
8. Write for 5 minutes, a short vignette.
9. Next time, write for 10 minutes.

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10. Basic rule: do not throw away your early efforts. The inner critic can be far too critical and tempt you to hit the delete button. Don't do it! Make a file called "saved early drafts."

11. Allow **dreams, favorite memories and unforgettable moments** to be your writing material. Allow the writing to flow through you without stopping for 20 minutes. Learn how to keep yourself writing. Remember, writing leads to more writing.

12. Write short vignettes that you can quilt together later.

13. Take workshops and read books on writing to learn your craft.

14. Remember, you have your own story. Don't let the point of view of family members interfere with writing YOUR story.

15. Childhood can be a treasure of all kind of memories, both good and bad. Allow yourself to be in the body and in the sensory experience of the child and take dictation. Notice the unique voice, details, and language.

There are only two ways to live your life. One is as if nothing is a miracle, and the other is as if everything is a miracle. - Albert Einstein