

This Writing Life Now Is What I've Lived For

An Introduction

It's summer in Southern California, and I'm teaching a nine-week course, *Writing the Memoir*. Fifteen beginners have assembled, among them Chi, Patrick, Ana, Paul, and Kay; one's a nurse, another's a retired designer of women's clothing, another's with the city. They hail from towns like Ashtabula, Ohio, and Lubbock, Texas, from cities like Brooklyn and Los Angeles. They tend to be older than younger, more curious than careful. The first thing I say, which I've learned from my own memoir writing, is that you must forget about writing an autobiography. After four or five decades, you'll spend another ten years trying to get a whole birth-to-date life on paper. Even if you succeed, it's a good bet that no one, other than your family, will read the eight hundred-page opus. Besides, once Mom or Dad or little brother reads it, they'll want changes, which you probably won't like. What's more, if you attempt to write the whole story, you must paddle back up every tributary of your developmental stream, exploring less the clouded

depth of your experiences and more the surface shimmer of years, roles, griefs, and dreams.

You must, I tell them, see the past as dividable. List and reflect on your life's thematic centers. Search for a temporal phase or an emotional thread. Love affair, profession or abiding interest, a single geographic or psychological journey, a lost political belief. Which one has greater weight than the others? To write memoir is to be selective; to write one's autobiography is to be indiscriminate. Another point: the theme or story may be centered in the recent or the long-ago past. (People, like great novels, have themes, though a person's theme can change.) Time and memory may or may not have made the story less raw. Still, you need to emphasize that which captivates you in the present. Don't worry about remembering events: they have already shaped themselves in your mind and emotion, though you should be on guard for how *you* reshape them as you write today.

The class turns to discussion. One man grew up gay in Pocatello, Idaho, and asks, Can that be my story? One woman is the recent recipient of a heart transplant at sixty-two. Is it too soon to write about it? Some question while others listen intently. I sense ease, their comfort growing; they've come to the right place. Already cohesion is building, a like-mindedness. One commonality is that memoir's currency has brought them in. They've read *The Kiss* and *Angela's Ashes*, *The Liars' Club* and *The Color of Water*. They've treasured the honesty in these authors, felt their compulsion to get down the child-parent drama. They're aware of nobodies whose memoirs have rocketed them to stardom, been celebrated and exploited in the media. New Age mariners, group members aren't afraid to confess; they welcome collective process. Many recognize that their writing will happen only as it's spurred by the group. They sense also that I will lead them. They seem to trust the memoir form to guide them because it is open to all—not exactly a literature of the people, but, certainly, of any individual.

The second week, I repeat ideas about theme. You must comb through a dozen or more themes in your life, each unique, each book-length. Choice requires a stick-to-itiveness, one that resists the memoirist's natural urge to love being lost in the forest of the self. If you can't see the focus yet, take a single event, a relationship, even an image, and explore it for a week or two. In this way, we continue with exercises, readings, discussion. I suggest they write an exploratory eight pages; raw is better than refined. Around week four their first attempts arrive. One isolates a mother's dying farewell, another conjures her trip to Cuba in the 1970s. Each piece is read aloud by the author and critiqued by the class. What are we looking for? I call it the "heat." Where—page, paragraph, or sentence—is the writing alive with a felt intimacy? Where does your attention rivet, your skin go galvanic? Where do you hear the writer affected by what she reads? Where do complaint and nostalgia weasel in, where does the narrator become defensive? One night a woman who has been asking me for more exacting guidelines, which she thinks I've got clasped in my hand and will not share, utters a sudden truth.

"God, this is hard," she says.

"Good," I reply. There's chagrined laughter. *Good*. Your toes should feel the precipice. What's so hard about memoir? I ask. Samples of frustration. Trying to find which part of my life is the best part to unlimber right now. Trying to see that other parts, just as vital, may not pertain to the part I've chosen. Trying to understand why my life has had so many beginnings. Trying to identify which of my past selves still confound me. Trying to discover why I remember things differently than what others remember, either about me or about shared experience—and why I remember things differently today than I did five years ago.

Fifteen are now twelve, and these hardy ones press on. Soon, they want to examine the controversies of memoir. Primed by nattering editors and critics, the group worries that memoir is

tainted and untrustworthy. It's become a lurid, gut-spewing enterprise, whose reputation is suspect because its ubiquity is thought to subsume its artistry. Anybody is an author. The form is regularly slighted as exhibitionistic, confessional, whiny. They've read the headlines in the oft-dismissive *New York Times*: "Woe Is Me. Rewards and Perils of Memoir" or "We All Have a Life. Must We All Write About It?" The group feels sullied by the East Coast elites. They feel seduced and spurned by the publishers, carnival bosses who want acts of murder, sex, and abuse, preferably all three—and little else. In despair, one says, "Who's ever going to want to read about my two years in Costa Rica in the Peace Corps, thirty-five years ago? No one was murdered. No was raped."

As we go, I get something unexpected. The class is pursuing *me*. They want me to enlarge on the memoirs I've read and studied, the writers I've worked with as an editor, the life-writing I've done, the ways my pieces have affected those I've written about, and the ways my life has changed because I've written about my major relations: father, mother, children. What is washing over them, they insist, must have already washed over—and enlightened—me.

WHAT I KNOW comes from teaching, reviewing, and writing memoir for the last two decades. My pursuit, bolstered by the current cultural push, is born of character: I am fascinated by the art and science of memory, personal literary criticism, and the different forms of autobiography, biography, and memoir. A few years ago my story "California, Here I Come" was published in the *San Diego Reader*, where, as a contributing writer, I specialize in narrative nonfiction. The piece told of how I decided in 1982 that by moving my family (my wife and our young twin sons) to California, I could save our crumbling marriage, an emotional lie which had entrapped us. Not only did the promise of sun-kissed California hasten the marriage's collapse, but the breakup unleashed

something unexpected. I had always hated the inauthentic in others, so when I saw how it had taken over my life, I was horrified. I began to see how my self-deceit had buried my once-intact self-identity. That self, which I regarded as artistic and which I had cultivated before the marriage, was long gone, exiled and unconscious. The new person, when told he had to work at a minimum-wage job, put his fist through the wall. That was *me*, whose shame I had to feel concurrently with the failure the divorce brought up before any sense of my core artistic self would return. The tale my long story for the *Reader* tells is about a family's fall as well as my change into a person *less* self-deceitful, what California culture in the 1980s was so good at freeing me to do.

I had torn through the caul; divorce had freed me. Indeed, I had no idea how fully I was locked in a bad marriage, no idea how fully I was the jailer. I don't think it's an overstatement to say that, during the mid-1980s, I got myself through the pain and back to sanity by writing. At first I tried to write the story into a novel. But it felt false, derivative, distant. I longed to discover what I felt (memoir), not invent what I might have felt (fiction). A few years after the breakup, I taught an undergraduate class in modern American literature. I had read James Baldwin's fiction in graduate school when I wrote my thesis about left-wing and minority writers in America. I decided to teach his *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), a novel about a black kid who becomes an adolescent preacher in 1930s Harlem. Intrigued that the novel was based on Baldwin's life, I turned to his essays to learn more. Those autobiographical pieces, particularly the title essay of his 1955 collection, "Notes of a Native Son," were extremely moving. True, Baldwin's invective about racial tension and the power such racism has over those who hate often dominates his thought. But his narrative writing about his family reveals the universal stickiness of our parents' lives: whatever has angered and disillusioned them often rears up as unresolved themes in their children. Whether parents are alive

or dead doesn't matter. Their vulnerabilities and paradoxes live on in us.

Baldwin's father's hatred of white people is so intense that it transforms the teenage Baldwin before he has had his own episodes with racist whites (which come soon enough). The son's path is clear: not to let his father's malice poison him but, instead, as he writes in "Notes of a Native Son," "to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition": liberating himself from the anger which is also necessary to his fight against injustice. Baldwin says that hate begins "in the heart and it now had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair" (84).

Surely, this was an African American sensibility, one historically and community-determined. Baldwin's kith and kin have no doubt benefitted from his personally emancipatory essays and his politically motivated novels. But what came through for me, a white middle-class Midwesterner, was Baldwin's blooded inheritance, infected by his father's bile, that was his and his alone to repair were he to be free.

At once, I felt an emotional parallel in my life. My father had his own store of hatred—it wasn't racial but religious and class-based. Argumentative by nature, he was a seminary student in the Catholic Church and fought with the priests about God's purpose following the mass deaths of the First World War. He quit seminary and the church and went to college. There, he studied fine arts (he was a talented designer) but, because of the Depression, he left his artistic calling for commerce. Next, the Second World War waylaid him with what he described as three years of boredom on a naval supply ship. After the war, he became a salesman and, eventually, a marketing director for a St. Louis paper company. By the 1960s, however, he was miserable, in large part because he had turned his back on his calling. Another factor: my father struggled his entire life with obesity. Throughout his childhood,

my older brother Steve, who was bigger than my father, got the brunt of Dad's wrath. I escaped the onslaught because I was athletic and not fat. In fact, I was shamelessly favored while Steve was cruelly teased. Because I was better and compliant, my father would confide his hatred of work to me, rationalize his despair. His three sons needed feeding, he'd say; Mother's "lifestyle"—a Lincoln Continental, country club fees, carpet cleaning, color TV—needed funding. Feuding with Steve, a fat man's diet, and office politics took their toll. He would have two heart attacks, the second of which, at sixty-one, killed him, a couple months into retirement. That was 1975.

Marriage and a postwar family had set my father on a career track where promotions were keyed to long hours and company servility. The work was soulless, and its tedium was killing him. Plus, because of his complaints, no promotion was forthcoming. When he told me all this, I said he should quit. But he didn't quit. He just ground it out, year after year. Feeling his desperation, I tried to be empathetic. Along with my friends, many of whom had bitter fathers as well, we blamed the business world for our fathers' collapse. We choose paths in the arts or education. Plus, we thought that sensitivity to our fathers' entrapment would keep us from repeating the walling-in of ourselves by career, marriage, and children. Not a chance. Families bring us our fate. My father, like Baldwin's father, had a morbid sense that the American male had no choice but to be enslaved. This feeling that both men shared—though the suffering from racial discrimination was no doubt much greater—lodged in my mind as it had in Baldwin's. Eventually, as a young father, I became overweight and depressed, hated the jobs I had to do to earn a living. My own misery grew and, at times, I lashed out at my wife and at friends. And yet I was fortunate. The hell realm my father had been sentenced to lasted, for me, only a few years. As painful as that summer I got divorced and became homeless was, my father's wound was finally laid bare.

The moment I woke up to the father-son pattern, it covered and weakened.

Later, after my older brother Steve died in 1989—a heart-attack victim at forty-two, he had inherited our family’s heart disease—I began writing about, that is, remembering and refeeling and grieving, the strain between my father, my older brother, and me. Soon I was including my mother, a younger brother, sons, an ex-wife, lovers. How did these diverse people relate emotionally and psychologically to me and to each other? How did this affect my sense of self? Sorting all this out became my occupation.

I discovered that I had come to defend the doltish low-wage work I did as necessary, much as my father had. I had taken little responsibility for nurturing my artistic talent, cursing others instead. It was easy to justify my failure to pursue my artistic dream by identifying with my father. As I wrote about my phases, I read memoir, those fearless authors like Frank Conroy and Geoffrey Wolff who had endured some version of what my family had endured. These writers revealed the monolithic nature of our prisons, be they social, intellectual, familial. I learned that anyone who could narrate his condition and its development within his family could be freed from that condition. The way out of the cell—and the means to stay out—came for me through writing memoir. The tales I read about real families and the tales I told about mine took me beyond self-discovery. Memoir writing and writing about memoir enacted in my life a purpose for my life. Fifteen years into this process, I have found that memoir has led me to two of my deepest sensibilities: the psychology of adult development and the art of critical discovery.

The trouble is, these sensibilities, as potent as they are, are also buried the deepest. To stay connected, I must try to be honest about myself and those, like my father, I write about—above all, try to be honest about the slipperiness of telling the truth. I say *try* because honesty is never simple. And telling the truth, to ourselves

and to others, guarantees emotional anguish. In fact, trying to be honest about the difficulty of unearthing what's painful may be the truest thing one can do. I'm not alone in feeling this way. Hundreds of thousands of people, not just writers, rely on devotional and therapeutic practices by which they can inquire into the truth of their lives. Memoir is one practice, and it has ascended for this generation because the form is so useful in getting at the truth. To be useful, of course, aggravates postmodern thinking. But I have found that memoir's pragmatism is its genius, limiting neither the possibility of the form nor the expression of the author.

AT THE GROUP'S last class, several read their latest excerpts, critique one another with an authority that's also tempered by regret. One woman declares, "How will I ever know why you left your husband?" Suddenly it's 9:30. I offer praise, thanks, wish them luck. Into the night we go, each to our locked cars. I leave last, intending to move on, where, I'm not sure, though I'm unconcerned.

Outside the door, eight are huddling, buzzing quietly.

"Good night—" I say.

"Wait!" says one, who startles me.

"We don't want this to end," says another. "Is there any way we can keep meeting? We just got started." She's a bit upset. "You can't abandon us."

Another woman asks whether I would consider continuing. "We'll pay you to lead us," she says. "We'll meet at one of our homes." Ollie, our seventy-three-year-old matriarch, volunteers her living room. "You won't have to do any preparation. Just facilitate."

How curious. And yet it shouldn't be, given the power of the group and the form, which I discover are lashed together. As to their request, I'm grateful: I don't want to lose them either. But I'm also uncertain, fearing a dependency. And yet their élan is irrepressible. What I don't want to lose—I see this now—is their

memoir-in-the-making, what they are undergoing and I get to witness. I want to stay close to them as adults, in whom writing memoir is a living entity, the mature transformations of an unfinished person and an unfinished life. And though it takes time, those self-transformations, as the writer works through them, will complete themselves as stories. These people I am getting to know as memoirists I will know as memoirs. How can I let go of *that*?

WEEKS LATER, a group of eight begins meeting twice a month. One reads, the rest comment. I speak last, hoping to help each writer balance, where possible, self-exploration and her self-selected theme. One guideline I return to is that whatever we've witnessed, we've also participated in. And the act of writing memoir allows us to continue participating in what we've witnessed. Writing memoir means that we combine what happened with how the exploration of what happened continues to affect us. After forty-six years, Julie is writing a memoir. Part of her turbulent past has flooded in, and, she thinks, her life now is one of remembering. Her focus on a long-gone phase has her believing that the past is the seat of her emotion, more so than the present. The past drama, however, is not the only drama. The present drama of recollection is equally alive, equally *in* and *of* the story. Julie is finding that as she remembers she is being emotionally altered by what she remembers. She is discovering things she never knew she knew. And it is this startling alteration of herself—to be drawn in deeper, to be surprised by what she didn't know or half-remembered, to be enthralled about her choices and her fate more than she had ever been—that galvanizes her writing. What Julie is learning is that as a memoirist This Writing Life Now is what she has lived for.