



You Deserve a Memoir!

As you undertake lifewriting, you could face a major challenge that may be as unexpected as it is potentially harmful to your success at writing. This challenge can even be more daunting to you than scheduling, discipline, or writing itself. And if you do not deal with it effectively, you will not be able to succeed at your task.

What's the challenge? It's as fundamental as it gets: *accepting that you deserve a memoir.*

Why Are You Uncomfortable?

First of all, let's define our terms. *Autobiography* is the history of one's entire life. *Biography* is about the life of another person. A *memoir* is the story of a particular part of one's life—e.g., my Vietnam memoir. I believe that all of us have a part of our lives—a *memoir*—that is of interest to other people.

By now, you've read many autobiographies, biographies, and memoirs. They were, perhaps, always about famous men and women who moved about on a world stage. Not people like you.

And yet, some part of you complains, "Why can't I write about myself, what made me me?" even while another part screams "Don't be foolish! You?"

Let's look at where this struggle began...

English was often taught by teachers who were not themselves writers. While they knew about literary appreciation, about literature being the repository of great thoughts, many actually knew very little about how to write and about how important the process of writing is in nurturing the way we think about ourselves.

In addition, many teachers believed in "inspiration" and in the idea that only certain people were worth reading—usually famous and powerful people who were long dead. These historical figures had played influential political or military roles and wrote of their important part in world affairs. To be fair to teachers who could not depart from this limiting model of what memoirs are, it must be said they themselves had been taught and trained by teachers who were not writers either.

History is certainly heavily influenced by powerful individuals, but it is also shaped by ordinary people who respond to the demands of their times. Think of Rosa Parks whose feet were tired one day! Think of the common people of India who decided it was time for the British to leave!

How were you a part of your times? Perhaps you went to college when not many in your ethnic group did. What was that like? Or, you were a foot soldier in World War II and experienced the liberation of Europe from another perspective than the generals'. Perhaps you were active in the civil rights movement and would like to tell about your part in the struggle. Perhaps you were part of the turbulent sixties, even if sociologists said people of your class, age, or ethnicity weren't.

The process of writing about your experiences will help you understand your life. It will help you appreciate what was special about it and to honor and celebrate your life.

You deserve an memoir—whether you are famous or not!

Try the Following

Here are ideas that will help you to think of yourself as being worthy of a memoir.

✓ **Think of writing your lifestories!** Lifestories and memoirs are, of course, essentially the same thing: both are stories about you and the people who surrounded you. (The sometimes-intimidating term *autobiography*, in fact, comes from three Greek words that mean self [*auto*], life [*bios*], and writing [*graphein*], and that is what you are now undertaking: *self life writing*.)

Using the term *lifestories*, for all that it has the same meaning as *memoir*, may make the concept more accessible. The term *lifestories* is not weighted down with a long tradition of the famous and the notable as is the term memoir (and certainly autobiography).

By emphasizing the *process* of storytelling, the term *lifestories* conjures evenings of sharing stories with friends. It suggests the possibility of collecting these stories, after a while, to tell the full account of one's life. It just may open you up to the benefits and the pleasures of the writing process itself.

Use the word *lifestory* and see if makes a difference!

✓ **Lifestories, written one by one—just as they are told one by one, add up to—you guessed it—a memoir.** Seeing your memoir as a series of stories makes the task of writing the stories of a lifetime tolerable and ultimately enjoyable.

Were I to ask a beginning Turning Memories Into Memoirs® workshop participant, "Can you produce a 200-page memoir for me?" most would blanch and then protest, "I can't possibly write that much!"

When I ask workshop participants if they can write a three-, four-, five- or even seven-page story, however, most will answer, "Sure I can do that." Over the weeks, I ask

them to write five or twenty such stories. Ten three-page stories add up to 30 pages while ten ten-page stories add up encouragingly to 100 pages. Even better, 20 ten-page stories make a 200 page lifestory manuscript! Sounds like an memoir to me!

A Later Task

Organizing your lifestories and possibly shaping them into a book is a task to be undertaken later—after you have written your stories.

Some writers decide to connect their stories with transitions and seed their texts with references to other stories so that the whole manuscript will read like a continuous piece—like a fabric sewn together so cleverly that the seams don't show.

Others are satisfied with a manuscript that reads more like an anthology of separate stories—juxtaposed, yet one story independent of any other, using only emotional and thematic links.

These decisions about how to link text together come later in the writing process, however. Your first task is to be perfectly clear about one thing: your life is worth writing about!

Answers to the questions in the exercises that follow may not be immediately apparent. You may need to repeat this exercise several times as you write in order to zero in on which answers are most true. Suggestion: photocopy this handout to make several versions.

Be as thorough as possible in your responses. Don't be limited by the space provided—use additional paper if you need to.

Keep this handout in a three-ring binder so you can review or amend the details you list as you work on your writing project.

1. What negative feelings do I have about placing myself at the center of a lifestory collection?

Do free-form writing here. Don't censor yourself. Just let the ideas flow.

2. How did I learn what I think/feel about writing?

Create a MemoryList of the people and events that shaped how you think of writing and of yourself as worthy of being written about. Use extra paper if necessary.

■ person(s) _____

■ his/her functions(s) _____

■ what setting did this happen in _____

■ what was happening then _____

■ my feelings at the time about this _____

■ how I feel today _____

■ what this meant for my writing _____

■ what I wish I felt about writing instead _____

Now put all the above information into a paragraph that describes your writing history.

3. In what way might thinking of your writing as lifestories instead of autobiography make the task easier for you?

4. How do you wish to link your stories together?
