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The Heart of Memoir: Your Emotional Journey

By Daphne Larkin



Margaret Brown (left) and Daphne Larkin discuss writing the emotional journey in memoir.

The memoir writing class at the Transylvania County Library was going well. The students had chosen gripping subjects – a beloved boy who turned to crime, a friendship leading to marriage, a passenger ferry threatening to sink. But the stories were drowning in events, one right after another. How to breathe life into the emotional heart of these dramas before rigor mortis set in? CPR was urgently needed.

In memoir, the events and the emotions they evoke go together like Romeo and Juliet, Batman and Robin, Bonnie and Clyde. Without that essential pairing, you've got a canvas without a painter, a dance without a dancer, a song without a singer.

By its nature, the memoir genre – a true story told in first person – is confessional.

According to Hollywood script doctor John Truby in his book “The Anatomy of Story: 22 Steps to Becoming a Master Storyteller,” every time you write about an important event in memoir, you need to spend at least that much time describing how you felt about it.

Memoirist Vivian Gornick goes even further. She says the emotional experience of the narrator IS the story, not the laundry list of events that happened to her. What the writer makes of those events and what she's learned from them is what matters she writes in her book, “The Situation and The Story: The Art of Personal Narrative.” The rest is just the burger without the beef.

MEMOIR WRITERS LISTEN UP!

Readers want your emotional journey. They want the Big Whopper, not the beefless burger. Anne Lamott nails this concept down in “Bird by Bird,” her classic book on writing. “You must place real emotion in the center of your work,” she says. “Write straight into the emotional center of things. Write toward vulnerability. Don't worry about appearing sentimental. Worry about being unavailable.”

The sure-fire way to know if your writing toward emotional availability is to ask yourself if you've passed, “the feeling test.” Did you transport the reader to the moment you felt so deeply when you were grieving for the boy who turned to crime, when you were elated to find love, when you were scared your ferry boat would sink?

Like most new writers, my memoir writing class had not given the reader the Big Whopper. So, I asked them to go back and write emotional scenes into their copy. And guess what happened when they read their revised stories to the class? Everyone cried, well at least everyone teared up. Why? Because the writers aced “the feeling test.” They got inside their experience, they mined their emotions, they fearlessly told their truths. And their stories bolted to life.

The magical bonus of diving to the bottom of the ocean to access your emotional experiences is that you reap a benefit beyond just writing a compelling story. According to the social psychologist and researcher James Pennebaker, you can have a marked increase in your physical and mental health as well. In experiments Pennebaker conducted during the 1980s he found that when people wrote about emotionally charged experiences, over time they began to understand their feelings, gained a new perspective on difficult situations and enjoyed improved health.

NAMING EMOTIONS

To access your emotions, you must get out of your head and into your heart and gut. The best way I know how to do it is to grab a pen and paper and find a quiet space where there will be no interruptions. Sit in a comfy chair, close your eyes, breathe normally. Bring up a charged

memory you want to write about. Let it wrap around you. Fully live through it again. Now open your eyes and start writing down whatever comes to mind. Allow your thoughts to shoot pell-mell, like lightening, from your “wild mind” as Natalie Goldberg calls the unconscious mind in her book “Wild Mind: Living the Writer’s Life.”

You’ve probably experienced a variety of emotions, some of which may be so subtle, they’re difficult to pinpoint. If you want a little help, check out the American Psychological Association’s “Emotion Words Checklist.” In four single-spaced pages, it lists emotions that range from possessed to justified to jubilant.

DESCRIBING EMOTIONS

Now that you’ve relived and named your emotions, how do you describe them? I doubt you’d write “I smiled” or “I cried” because that doesn’t convey much. You must show how you felt. Consider your non-verbal clues. Did your body tremble? If you spoke, what was the tone of your voice? Did your throat tighten? Did your face turn red? Did you throw a plate? How did others react?

BUILD AN EMOTIONAL ARC

Writers talk a lot about a story’s narrative arc, its skeleton – the beginning, middle (climax) and end. But we rarely discuss the emotional arc – the story’s heart and soul. To build a relationship with the reader, you must take her on your internal emotional journey. Being willing to plumb your emotional experience and write about it takes courage because it requires vulnerability. For sociologist and author Brene Brown, “Being vulnerable is the ultimate bad ass,” and we have to agree.

Now is the time for memoir writers to heed the words in “Letters to a Young Poet” by Rainer Maria Rilke: “The work of the eyes is done. Go now and do the heart-work on the images imprisoned within you.”

Daphne Larkin is an award-winning book author, columnist and magazine writer. On May 29, her memoir writing class at the Transylvania County Library will read their work to the public from 6 to 7:15 PM in the Library’s Rogow Room. Larkin’s fall memoir writing class at the Library will be held from September 25 to November 13, on Thursdays from 3 to 5 PM. For more information, contact Daphne Larkin at daphne@daphnelarkin.com.
