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In Memoir, Finding the Bigger Story of Your Life

By Daphne Larkin



Daphne Larkin and Chuck O'Rear with the famous photograph he took that brought their love story full circle.

In writing a memoir, a true story about your life, sometimes we can discover that our simple, straight-forward story is much bigger than we originally thought. Back to the drawing board! However, this can take time, and a lot of it. But when our story finally comes together, we have something special.

This is the story of how I found the bigger story in what became one of my most treasured true stories. If you are ruminating over how to approach writing your story, you may find my journey instructive.

I worked on a story off and on for several years because I kept discovering there was more and more to tell. The way I went about writing it was sometimes clumsy and counterproductive – once I went down the rabbit hole for a couple of months – but when I finally captured the real story behind the story, I had something more complex, much more nuanced, and far more interesting.

So, the story I first wrote was about my husband taking what became the most recognizable photo in history – the Microsoft default screen saver called “Bliss.” The story began in the mid-1990s when Chuck O’Rear and I first met. When he wasn’t in some far-flung country photographing for National Geographic Magazine, he would drive 58 miles from his home in California wine country to see me in Marin County, a San Francisco bedroom community.

One winter day in 1998 when he was driving to my house, a gorgeous scene caught his eye. Chuck pulled to the side of the road, quickly snapped a few photos of a rolling green hill set off by billowy white clouds in a brilliant blue sky, and continued on his way to my house. He then sent the photos to his agent.

On the eve of our wedding in 2001, Microsoft called to buy Chuck’s photo of that lovely hill covered in winter’s green carpet. For the next 13 years, from 2001 to 2014, if you owned a computer with the Microsoft Windows XP program, when you turned it on, Chuck’s photo graced your screen. Today, that iconic photo, which has been seen by billions of people, is referred to as the Microsoft “wallpaper.”

After a while, I began to view Chuck’s story from my point of view, and suddenly it was my story, too. To do this, I needed to step back. When I did that, the love story between two people emerged. The love story that led to Chuck driving past that rolling green hill for six years, that led to the “Bliss” photograph, that led to our happy marriage.

Okay, love story done, right? Nope! In time, I reframed and rewrote the story again, this time adding the big thing that had drawn Chuck and me inextricably together besides our shared journalism careers. We were parents of severely disabled children (my son died at 10 of a congenital heart defect and his son is an adult paraplegic).

This took the story to another level, a richer, more nuanced one which was more closely aligned with the compassion and love we had for one another. Now, my story finally had a title: “Love Arrives on the Wings of Adversity.”

Searching for the bigger story within a memoir is well worth the effort because when you finally arrive at that place, you will know it. And when you do that, my friend, you will have a story that will stand the test of time.

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