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Five Reasons to Write Your Memoir

By Daphne Larkin



Daphne Larkin (left) talks to Kirsten Mickelwait (right) about Mickelwait's memoir "The Ghost Marriage" during Larkin's summer memoir writing class at Blue Ridge Community College. (Courtesy photo)

Do you have a story to tell about something that happened to you or your family that's nagging at you, tapping on your shoulder, whispering in your ear? Has writing that story become a burning obsession? If so, step out of your comfort zone! Be brave! Change your life by writing about it!

Here are five reasons you must write your story.

- (1) Your time is running out. You're only on the planet for the blink of an eye. Get on with it!
- (2) Your inspiration comes and goes...forever. If you wait too long to write your story, the fire will die.
- (3) You are more alive. As you explore your life through writing, you become more conscious of yourself, your world and the people in it. It's a rich process that will change your life.
- (4) You record your story. You write to share and to be remembered, whether your story is joyous or difficult.

(5) You embrace an honorable genre. When you write memoir, whether you're writing about coping with adversity, grieving over a loved one's death, or shooting the rapids on the Colorado River, you share your unique experience with others, which is different from their own.

Given these reasons to write your memoir, why have you hesitated? Is it because you think you don't know how to start? If so, consider this: my memoir writing classes at the Blue Ridge Community College are filled with new writers who, as they begin to write, move from "I don't know how to do this" to "I can do it!" So much for "I don't know how."

Another reason you may be reluctant to write about your life is you're afraid of hurting someone or making them angry. "You own everything that happened to you," the memoirist and novelist Anne Lamott wrote in her best-selling book "Bird by Bird – Some Instructions on Writing and Life." She said: "If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better."

Mary Karr didn't hold back when she wrote about growing up in a dysfunctional Texas family. In "The Liar's Club," she recalls the time her sister asked their mother about a bullet hole in their kitchen wall. "Isn't that where you shot at Daddy?" her sister asks. "No, that's where I shot at Larry," her mother responds. "Over there is where I shot at your Daddy." Karr gleefully concludes: "When fortune hands you such characters, why bother to make stuff up?"

Around the time my summer memoir writing class was claiming ownership of their stories, Kirsten Mickelwait came to talk about her memoir, "The Ghost Marriage." After her deceased ex-husband left her with \$1.5 million in debt, Mickelwait received communications from him in the afterlife which led her on a path to forgiveness and the discovery that her worst enemy had become her greatest teacher.

"I didn't have much of a voice in my marriage but in writing about it, I found mine and it was healing," Mickelwait said.

Sometimes we're reluctant to write because we have a difficult story. Yet something magical happens when we begin. I have witnessed this among my students as they tackle writing about traumatic events. At first, they struggle, but after they dig in and begin writing they soon find that telling their truth is not only liberating, but empowering, too.

So, memoirists-to-be, you can write your story on your own, with the support of a writing group, or in a writing class that can help you hone your writing skills and, as importantly, one in which trust is established so writers can write freely, without judgement, no matter how traumatic, difficult or different their story is.

An award-winning book author, columnist and magazine writer, Daphne Larkin teaches memoir writing classes at the Blue Ridge Community College on the Brevard campus. Her next class is from Sept. 28 to Nov. 16, on Wednesdays, from 10 a.m. to noon. To register, go to www.blueridge.edu and visit the continuing education program's special interest classes. For questions about the class, email Daphne Larkin at Daphne@daphnelarkin.com.