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Why Should You Write About Your Life?

By Daphne Larkin

Many of us are led to explore our past by writing about it because it helps us make sense of our lives, learn about ourselves, better understand our feelings, share something meaningful with others and, along the way, improve our writing skills. Memoir writing is also good for your health. Medical studies have found that writing about your life boosts one's mood, improves cognitive fitness and can even be therapeutic. Clearly, the benefits of writing memoir are immense, not to mention that when we undertake such a personal project, we find the process of recording our memories enjoyable.

If my late mother or John Snyder or Aleen Steinberg – all Transylvania County residents – hadn't written their memoirs, their colorful, informative and fascinating past would have been lost forever.

In her sixties, my mother wrote and illustrated a story from my grandmother's childhood diary about her family staking a claim in 1899, in the untouched Ten Thousand Islands off the Southwest Coast of Florida. The adventure began with my great grandparents and their three small children traveling in a covered wagon from central Florida to Naples and then by sloop to Chucoluskee in the Everglades.

Soon, this young pioneer family had built a home on Fakahatchee Key, were living off the sea and land, had birthed two of my great aunts, and were surviving hurricanes as well as a notorious murderer named Edgar Watson. My mother, Charlotte St. John Evans, published the story in American Heritage magazine, titling it: "The Woods Were Tossing with Jewels: A Childhood in the Florida Wilderness." But more importantly, she recorded our family history, for which several generations have been grateful.

In John Snyder's memoir, "Hill of Beans: Coming of Age in the Last Days of the Old South," he writes movingly of his bittersweet childhood growing up during the Great Depression. Dedicating his book to William Zinsser, who wrote the classic guide to writing memoir "On Writing Well," Snyder says, "I took a writing class from Bill, who encouraged us to write about our lives because all of us have stories and if they're not recorded, they're gone forever. It's important to write while people are still alive because you have questions. It's important to leave a record, to preserve history for these stories increase in value as time goes on."

For Aileen Steinberg, the wish to record one of the highlights of her life drove her to write about travelling to remote places in her memoir “Keepin’ On, Walkin’ On: Tales of Travel and Mid-Life Adventure.” Her international journey began after receiving a diagnosis of osteoporosis and osteoarthritis in her fifties, which prompted her to get into tip top shape so she could explore some of the wildest parts of the world on her own. and so, she ventured to Nepal, Peru, China, Pakistan, Russia and the Arctic, where she travelled by foot, raft, elephant, jeep, horseback and dogsled. In this inspiring story, Steinberg captures the essence of living life to the fullest.

Writing memoir can be fun. It was for me when I wrote a column for Writer’s Digest magazine about the unlikely way I launched what would become a 40-year journalism career. The column – “Five Minute Memoir: Tales from the Writing Life” – was limited to a mere 600 words. Forty years in 600 words! Somehow, I managed to do it, catapulting from my first job writing for a national women’s magazine to earning a Master’s Degree from Columbia University’s Journalism School to years of reporting for Newsweek, the United Nations and Parenting magazine. It was a good lesson in editing for often, less is more, especially in writing memoir.

There are many ways to begin writing your memoir – whether it’s a single essay, a group of essays or a book. You can start writing on your own, join a writing group for support, or take a memoir writing class to hone your skills. Learning how to engage the reader by setting the scene, developing character, writing dialogue and zeroing in to the heart of your story can be useful as you begin to write about – and leave a record of – your life. And what is more interesting than your precious life?

Daphne Larkin is an award-winning book author, columnist and magazine writer. She will be teaching Memoir Writing classes at the Blue Ridge Community College on the Brevard campus in March and April (Tuesdays from 3 to 5 p.m.) and in June and July (Tuesdays from 10 to Noon). To register, go to www.blueridge.edu for the Continuing Education Program, and then “Special Interest” classes. For questions about the class, email Daphne Larkin at Daphne@daphnelarkin.com.