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FOREWORD

Where to begin!

How many times as a writer have I considered those three words? They come up whenever I sit down to write a new article or book. But nowhere are those words asked more often than when we sit down to write about our own lives. Where do we begin to write a memoir? One would think that anything autobiographical would be easy enough. After all, it's our own life story we're writing. We should know it backward and forward. Only when we sit down at the keyboard, or take up pen and paper to record it, do we discover how difficult it is. As author Walter Wellesley Smith once said, "There's nothing to writing. All you do is sit down . . . and open a vein."

Like all authors, I draw a great deal from the experiences of my own life. I travel back in my mind to an event that illustrates something I wish to say. And as often as not, the same old conundrum starts again—where to begin!

We think we have a clear mental picture, an emotional if not intellectual grasp of our past. Yet starting points elude us. When did my love of the sea begin? The first time I looked over the railing of a ship, probably clinging to the hem of my mother's dress? The first time I stood at the edge of Lake Michigan as a child, feeling the gentle waves lapping at my toes? Or with the first boat I owned, an old wooden rowboat that, adrift on the lake, I'd claimed as my own in the last days of summer when I was fourteen? Each experience of our lives seems to have many beginnings. And too often in our efforts to find them we become discouraged and back away from the writing that would otherwise bring us so much joy.

There have been numerous books about writing memoirs, a literary form that in recent years has gained great popularity. Many have extolled the benefits of this venture, of exploring the purpose and meaning, the joys, the sadness, the successes and disappointments of our lives. But Nan Merrick Phifer's *Memoirs of the Soul* is the first book I've found that lays out the practice of reaching into ourselves, finding the events that have been most meaningful, and having identified them, knowing where to begin committing ourselves to paper.

When I first picked up Nan's book and began flipping through the pages, my immediate reaction was, "I wish I'd had this book decades ago, when I first decided I wanted

to be an author." Here are the essentials, all that's needed for the foundation upon which to build a memoir or autobiography. This is a nuts-and-bolts sort of book that, like a great tour guide, points a finger and says, "Look right there! Do you see that little wrinkle on the waves?" And there, moments later, the whale breaches and you are thrilled.

Nan has found the themes that take us to the inner ocean of our own consciousness, without making a big deal of it—and, perhaps more importantly, without losing the magic. Whether it's exploring the soul of a child (chapter 6), encountering the numinous (chapter 23), or revising your rough draft (chapter 28), there's wisdom, support, and secure guidance here that comes from one who knows of what she speaks. As comprehensive as Nan's instructions are, what's clear throughout is that each of us has our own unique story to tell; and while she may point and tell us exactly where to look, we always know that the only story we have to tell is our own and it is there that we find the greatest rewards.

Is there anything left out that I, as an author and writing coach, would add? I honestly don't think so. There aren't many books I can say this about. *Memoirs of the Soul* is a wonderful guide that tells us not only how to write the stories that only we can tell but how to journey within to the mysteries of our own special beginnings.

—Hal Zina Bennett Author of Write From the Heart and Write Starts

PREFACE

Memoirs of the Soul goes beyond being a how-to book on memoir writing. It takes you on a journey into your own life that will reveal aspects of your experience you never knew existed. The author gives you all the nuts and bolts—writing prompts, warm-ups, creative exercises, doing first and second drafts, suggestions for revision, instruction on how to give and get feedback, and lots of emotional support—the practical things writers need in order to get started and make progress. But the true gift of the book is the way it introduces you to yourself.

Most people who set out to write a memoir have some kind of story to tell: memories of crucial events, interpretations of their own and other people's behavior, some scenes from childhood or adolescence, perhaps a life-changing moment of realization. But the stories about ourselves we carry around in our heads often turn out to be surface accounts, convenient shorthand versions of much deeper realities. The work of writing a memoir is really the work of learning who you are. It's archaeology—dusty, dirty, and sweaty, though never tedious. Mainly what it takes is courage, to allow your mind to transport you where it wants to go once you've started to dig. That's where a book like this comes in. It's written by a person who has taken the journey herself and who has accompanied many other people on the way. So with her you are in good hands.

Gently and respectfully, Nan Merrick Phifer takes on the role of guide, asking you questions no one has ever put to you before, leading you to places in your own psyche you have never visited, opening landscapes of your history that you have never glimpsed, making you aware of dimensions of your being you have not realized were there. You do the work yourself, but she is there to show you the way. If you follow her leads faithfully, she will take you very far. And even if you don't, you'll come away from this book with a different sense of yourself, of who you've been and who you might become.

—Jane Tompkins, Ph.D. University of Illinois in Chicago

PART I Beginnings

Memoir as Voyage into the Soul

External facts about a life can be researched generations later, but the inner life is irrevocably lost unless written during one's lifetime.

THIS BOOK WILL enable you to record the voyage, not of your ego, but of your soul. Public records sketch the statistics of your physical existence, while photographs, certificates, and documents show how you appear to others and what you accomplished. However, unless you reveal the feelings and thoughts you had when you were filled with love, grief, satisfaction, longing—the great sweep of feelings that shaped your soul—few people will ever truly know you. This book will help you identify the vital elements of your inner life and write about them. Furthermore, the material you are about to write will not only produce a lasting, written account, but in the very process of writing, you are likely to discover previously unrecognized dimensions of spirituality in your life.

The word *spiritual* comes from the Latin word *spiritus*, meaning "breath," "breath of god," "inspiration." *Spiritual* as used in this book refers to the essential and activating principle at the center of your being, your intangible essence. It encompasses but is not limited to experiences traditionally thought of as religious. It refers to your inner life, the part that lives at your vital core providing the animating force within you.

The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely "understandable" world. Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region, whichever you choose. So far as our ideal impulses originate in this region (and most of them do originate in it, for we find them possessing us in a way for which we cannot articulately account), we belong to

it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong.

—WILLIAM JAMES American philosopher and psychologist

A GRAND VOYAGE

The very writing of your memoirs will stimulate spiritual growth, for in articulating your ideals and your responses to the great events and formative influences in your life you will reveal your values, motives, beliefs, and hopes. Just as you'll discover the things in your life that matter most and the ways you've worked to advance them, you may also show the price you paid when they were ignored. Your personal traits and patterns will emerge, and you'll observe characteristics from deep within yourself. Strengths and dimensions not previously appreciated will become apparent. Later, when you compile and organize your memoirs, you may feel that you are reintegrating elements of yourself.

You'll also gain perspective on relationships between the events and people in your life. One of the workshop participants who followed the method presented in this book suddenly exclaimed that for the first time she understood why she had married her husband; in ways she had never consciously recognized, he was like her beloved grandfather. Someone else came to realize that for years she had carried a burden of guilt for a death that was beyond her control. Such insights are not uncommon.

Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.

—SØREN KIERKEGAARD Danish philosopher and religious thinker

First and foremost, the exploration of your spiritual life through writing will be a great adventure. Your writing will help clarify the meaning and purpose of your life, as well as reveal its underlying spiritual dimensions. If you wish, you will also produce a lasting, edited, well-written book of which you can be proud, a book that opens your life to the people who are dearest to you and makes possible communication and understanding that might otherwise never exist.

EARLIER VOYAGERS

The first-known spiritual autobiography in Western literature is *Confessions* by Saint Augustine. Subsequent writers include such people as Boethius, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Merton, C. S. Lewis, Elie Wiesel, Harvey Cox, James Baldwin, Karen Armstrong, Alfred Kazin, and Maxine Hong Kingston.

Memoirs, however, are different from autobiographies. Autobiographies present broad overviews, while memoirs focus on only the hours and minutes that are keen in our lives—the times when we are most alive, when experiences penetrate to the quick. In these moments we define ourselves; the ways we respond reveal our souls. At such times—moments of joy or crisis or profound contentment—our individuality emerges distinctly, and we sometimes have a sense of context beyond ourselves.

If you wish to extend your memoirs into an autobiography, you can supplement the critical core chapters in this book by adding narrative data about external events. Such additions will not be difficult. The memoirs you'll write at this time will give heart and soul to your autobiography and ensure that it is engaging.

Memoirs are also different from journals. They are more selective. Memoirists focus on the most significant experiences in their lives and then organize the chapters in a sequence that tells a story; journals tend to log or record daily growth, musings, and insights. Memoirs, because of their story structure, feel whole rather than fragmentary. Also, memoirs are usually more polished than journals and can become an art form, a type of literature. Memoirists often want to edit and revise their work and have it proofread. They may even select photographs and other documents to insert and then construct a book. These works can be suitable for publication and often make extraordinary gifts.

YOUR ITINERARY

You'll find your way to the recesses of your soul by first writing about the experiences, people, and places most important in your life. Each chapter of this guide provides a strategy to help you identify those elements and readily write about them. Writing "prompts"—starters for sentences that lead into your memories—will guide you to times when you were filled with significant emotions. After you've written rough drafts, you may choose to examine them in light of questions suggested for reflection on the topic. The reflections will help you perceive spiritual aspects such as compassion, transformation, uncanny insight, grace, times when you were imbued with strength, were in communion with something beyond yourself, or sensed the divine. You may find that your writing already implicitly reveals such dimensions, or you may decide to add insights based on the reflections suggested in this book.

As you proceed, you will not write chronologically. The memoirs you're about to compose won't focus on where you were born, what schools you attended, or where you've lived. Other documents do that. Here you'll write about your inner life, the heart of your being, your essence. Not until *after* you've collected a series of writings will you organize them—possibly chronologically, possibly some other way. Chapter 27 suggests ways to arrange your chapters and write satisfying conclusions.

Because your approach will be to write about the critical experiences in your life rather than to render a chronological account, your writing will never plod. Because you'll not begin with "I was born..." and then cite many not very interesting facts, your chapters will be compelling from the first pages. Readers will feel involved as they move from one important and dramatic aspect of your life to another. Most of us wish we could see into the hearts of those we love, and we certainly would like to look back into the souls of our ancestors. Through your writing you will share the most interesting aspects of yourself with your descendants and other readers of your memoirs.

Many thoughtful people would like to write about their most meaningful experiences but don't know where to begin or how to proceed. Because the undertaking seems overwhelming, they procrastinate and write little or nothing. However, by following the steps suggested in this guide, you will produce a collection of writings about your inner life.

WRITING TO THE CENTER

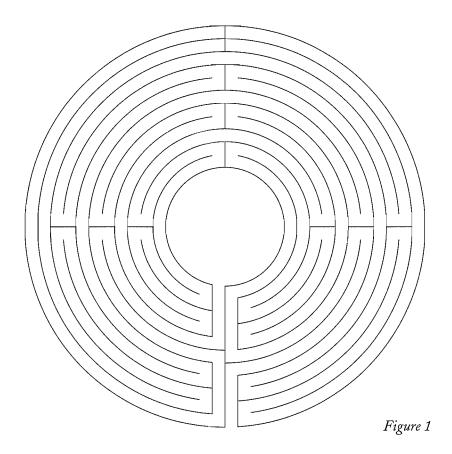
Each chapter provides step-by-step directions to assure that inexperienced writers as well as those with experience can produce writing of high quality. Chapters are ordered to progress from subjects easiest to write about and share with others to subjects that might be daunting if not preceded by the earlier chapters.

The early chapters begin with your outer life—the people, places, and events that shaped you. Although you'll select subjects from those accessible, factual realms, a series of questions will help you reflect on and write introspectively about the spiritual dimensions of those realms. Later chapters will enable you to write directly about your deepest emotions such as love, suffering, and ecstasy. If you've already written a reflective family history, you may prefer to skip ahead to the advanced chapters. Write in the order that best serves your purpose.

The course your voyage will follow will not be linear. Autobiographies tend to be linear, starting with birth and moving year by year to the time the autobiography was written. Your memoirs, moving from your outer life toward your inner life, will spiral inward. If the word *voyage* evokes images of ocean travel, it is time to broaden your concept of the word, for voyages can be over land and into space as well. Visualize the map for your journey as a great labyrinth in space.

THE LABYRINTH MAP

Labyrinths, or mazes, are ancient patterns of paths along which one progresses from an opening at the outer edge into lanes that circle, turn back, resume direction, and make unexpected twists—all the while bringing the walker from the outer entrance toward the center. One of the earliest labyrinths was constructed in Egypt for the tomb of King Perabsen, circa 3400 BCE. A well-known mythological labyrinth was in the Cretan palace where Theseus killed the Minotaur. Indoor and outdoor labyrinths have been built all over the world. The drawing depicted in figure 1 shows a labyrinth paved with blue and white stones in the Cathedral of Chartres, completed in the thirteenth century in France.



Medieval labyrinths were thought of as paths leading us to our own spiritual centers. In a similar way, your writing will lead you from your outer life into your spiritual center. Moreover, as walkers in a physical labyrinth can turn back to retrace their steps and linger along the way, you too may return to earlier chapters to write about more of the many topics you will have generated. Unlike the walkers of labyrinths, you will not return the way you entered. When you've written into the heart of your memoirs, you will have arrived at your destination.

People who walk through physical labyrinths report surprise at the twists, turns, and resulting feelings of disorientation that frequently produce insights and discoveries. Upon reaching the center, many walkers experience a soothing sense of wholeness and balance. As your writing moves from your outer to your inner life, may you gain insights, make discoveries, and arrive at a sense of balance and wholeness.

"PROMPTS" PROVIDE AN EASY LAUNCH

"Prompts" will evoke your flow of words. Always feel free to rephrase the writing prompts to fit your individual life and way of speaking. When workshop participants first consider the prompts, they typically react blankly for a few minutes, then begin to write

haltingly, and soon accelerate into a flow of writing. Strive to scrawl a rapid rough draft without pausing to consider what you're saying. Writing that springs uncensored from the subconscious onto the page is often revealing and insightful. One workshop participant said, "Nan, your prompts are like a can opener." Always allow the flow of your writing to take you wherever it goes; when it strays far from the prescribed subject, you may make stunning discoveries. The prompts are simply catalysts. No matter how you use them, you're "doing it right."

Moreover, if you use this book in the company of other writers you'll find their drafts to be more stimulating than any written prompt could be. Upon hearing what fellow writers have written, you'll often think, "Yes, of course!" and immediately know what in your own life must be told that would otherwise go unnoticed. To provide you with inspiration, ideas, and examples, this guide contains excerpts from the drafts of many people who, like you, are composing their memoirs.

A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of had he not started to say them.

—WILLIAM STAFFORD Poet Laureate of Oregon

This book provides the process.

Modus Operandi

Ultimately, if the [writing] process is good, the end will be good. You will get good writing.

—NATALIE GOLDBERG
American author

WE NOW KNOW that to write well we must be free to write badly. In the past, a common misconception stymied aspiring writers: they assumed that as they wrote they should choose the right words and spell and punctuate correctly. Those writers did not differentiate between a rough draft and a final draft.

Writers were liberated when it was shown that the best first drafts are filled with errors because we focused on what we were saying, not on how we were saying it. The first draft should capture ideas while they flit through our minds. We must not turn our attention from what we are writing to how we are writing because if we pause, our thoughts escape. While we puzzle over word choices and spellings, the rich feelings, perceptions, and ideas within us slip away. We must write quickly in order to include everything we have to tell.

The messy first draft, a rough draft, is later revised and proofread, but first the writer tries to be sure the ideas are complete and clear. The best way to do this is to hear the draft. We can read it to an attentive, nonjudgmental friend; we can ask someone to read it aloud to us; or we can simply read it aloud to ourselves. Any of these techniques affords perspective. Inevitably, we hear phrases that don't sound right, and we even "hear" what we inadvertently left out. Sometimes we hear that the impression made by the writing is not what we intended. Once we know what needs to be fixed, we can add to, change, rearrange, or delete what we wrote. As we do this, we're still working on content and should not be distracted by the mechanics of spelling, punctuation, or grammar. When we hear what we have written, we gain a new perspective; and upon seeing our content from an outside angle, we can reenvision it.

To write introspectively, memoirists need the freedom to make mistakes with content as well as with mechanics. After a draft is completed, it's not unusual for the writer to read it, reconsider, and conclude that the account gave the wrong impression or was somehow untrue to the experience. Memoirists, like philosophers and others who discover as they compose, need freedom to err and revise as they write.

Writers who work together in critiquing groups read their first drafts to one another, hear how they sound, and ask each other for suggestions. Writers working alone benefit from reading their rough drafts aloud to themselves, or to the cat, or by recording them and listening to the tape. Any oral reading and listening assists in the revising process.

After you have revised the content of your rough draft, you're ready to proofread it. If you are on a computer, use its spellchecker, but remember that spellcheckers only catch misspelled words; they do not distinguish between "here" and "hear," for example. If you're uncertain about your choice of words, punctuation, or paragraphing, you can ask someone to proofread for you. However, unless you plan to publish your memoirs, don't let concerns about mechanics be overriding, and certainly don't let them stop you from your undertaking. Your close friends and family will be glad to have your memoirs, whether or not they contain mechanical errors.

THE WRITING PROCESS

General Guidelines

The following steps of the writing process will be helpful as you write each chapter of your memoirs. Mark the next page with a Post-it so you can readily refer to it.

Starting with chapter 4 of this book, each chapter will begin with a preliminary warm-up writing, followed by a second writing. The warm-up writing will awaken your mind and stimulate your fluency. It will serve to propel your writing, and usually it will initiate subjects you'll want to develop further. If you are writing independently, you'll probably want to revise, proofread, and write the final version of your warm-up writing before going on to the second writing. However, if you are working along-side other writers you'll want to set the first rough draft aside for completion later and proceed with the others to the second writing. The first four steps of the writing process—gathering ideas, telling your story, writing your rough draft, and listening to it—are interactive. People writing in groups will want to do those steps while they are together, but you can complete the last three steps—revising, proofreading, and writing an improved final draft—apart from your group.

Some topics presented in this guide develop better for certain individuals than for others. Writers are often surprised when an unpromising prompt leads into a full, rich chapter, while another rough draft may remain meager. Because this book approaches each chapter subject in two different ways, at least one of your drafts will thrive and



Steps of the Writing Process

The following approach usually facilitates good writing. If it does not help you, feel free to make alterations. This approach is meant as a general guide, not a constraining formula.

- 1. Gather ideas. Using memory aids such as photographs, documents, souvenirs, maps, lists, and graphs, as well as other idea-gathering strategies, you'll find that your life abounds with subjects. Record your ideas, select one to cultivate, and store the remaining ideas in a "greenhouse" file.
- **2. Tell a friend** or writing partner the story you are considering writing. Narrating it orally before writing it will help you organize your ideas and find words to express them.
- 3. Scrawl a quick rough draft, skipping lines so you will have room to revise. Putting fluency first, ignore spelling and punctuation; you'll proofread for mechanics later. Number pages. Dare to ramble. Pursue your thoughts without concern for mechanical correctness.
- **4. Listen to the rough draft.** Read it aloud to yourself, a dear friend, or a response group. Any listening can help you find out if you conveyed what you intended to.
- 5. Revise the rough draft if you wish, clarifying, restating, adding, or deleting information. Your revision may or may not be influenced by listeners' responses.
- 6. Ask someone to proofread for you if you are concerned about punctuation, grammar, or spelling. If you write your final drafts on a computer, take advantage of the spellchecker.
- 7. Handwrite, type, or key in a final draft.

flourish, and usually both will. The second writing is designed to develop more fully than the first, but the warm-up writing sometimes supersedes it.

Your Greenhouse File

Keep a manila folder or a section of your notebook as a "greenhouse" file. This "holding bed" is a place to store ideas for later chapters and to "plant" drafts you don't like, stunted beginnings, and even unexpected inspirations. Sometimes an idea forms when we don't have time to put it in writing. Store the idea, the seed, in your greenhouse file along with the various beginnings that need germination time. Later you can remove anything that looks promising and give it a new opportunity to flourish in whatever form it takes.

The Rough Draft

A successful technique for writing rough drafts is to skip lines so you'll have space to rewrite sentences and insert new ones. Packages of ordinary, lined notebook paper are ideal, but some writers prefer cheap spiral notebooks or legal pads. Choose any sort of paper on which you can skip lines, make insertions, and write error-strewn impulsive drafts. Before beginning to write, make an X in the left margin of every other line as a reminder to write on alternating lines. You may feel you're using lots of paper, but you'll need room to write in changes and additions.

Write on only one side of the paper so you can later cut pages apart to insert and rearrange paragraphs. You cannot cut and paste if you write on the back.

Number pages, and even identify them with a chapter number or subject word so you can reassemble them more easily if they become shuffled. Of course, if you are using a computer many of these arrangements will automatically be taken care of.

We all have our individual habits and quirks and may not feel fluent unless we approach our writing in a familiar way. Therefore, consider the advice in this book and then do what will work best for you.

The Final Draft: A Lasting Book

Not every voyager cares about creating a book. The expedition, the discoveries that come from the writing itself, is the great adventure. You are no less a traveler if you do not produce a book for others to read; however, many voyagers do find satisfaction in polishing their first drafts and leaving a lasting account. Just as you would value a book written by one of your ancestors centuries ago, the memoirs you are writing now may someday be of keen interest to your great-great-great-grandchild. You may even decide to publish copies for a broader community.

Ordinary paper becomes brittle and crumbly after about thirty years, but acid-free paper will last for three hundred years. You can find it at stationery or art supply stores. The store where you purchase paper may sell several qualities that range in price; the

least expensive will serve well as long as it is labeled "acid free." Handwrite, type, or key in your final version onto the acid-free paper. When making copies of your memoirs, you may need to bring your own acid-free paper to the copy shop.

Leave space to insert photographs, clippings, and documents you want to include. Those pictures and other items will be preserved when copied onto the acid-free paper. If you like to sketch, consider embellishing your book with drawings and ornamentation.

Office supply stores carry a variety of binders, some inexpensive and some costly. Choose according to your preference and means, and consider making copies of your memoirs for the people to whom you feel close. It is the most personal gift you can give and will be increasingly treasured by the people who come to know you through your book, perhaps long after your lifetime.

OBSTACLES YOU MAY ENCOUNTER

Procrastination

"Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll really sit down and write. Next week. Next year. After I do the dishes, mow the lawn, fix the faucet, watch a TV show."

To be able to write your spiritual memoirs, however, you must first be convinced of the worth of your undertaking. If you feel dubious about it, then you'll give priority to routine chores and passive pleasures. Sitting down to write won't just happen; you have to resolve to make it happen.

Many writers benefit from keeping a schedule. They reserve certain hours of every day or every week for writing. To succeed with a schedule, to be able to decline tempting invitations and distractions without hesitation, you must first believe in the merits of your project. Then earnestly ask your family and friends not to interrupt you during your time for writing.

Another way many writers conquer procrastination is by scheduling regular meetings with a small group of other writers. At these meetings everyone reads from a work in progress. Knowing that fellow members expect everyone to bring a draft to read provides strong incentive to produce writing. For suggestions about how to write with companions or colleagues, see chapter 30.

A rigid writing schedule and regular meetings are arbitrary structures, but they do help many successful writers accomplish their goals. If we wait for the muse to whisper in our ears, we may never do more than intend to get around to writing tomorrow or next week or next year.

Honor the grand voyage of writing your spiritual memoirs. Most people have never considered doing what you are about to do. It isn't frivolous, easy, or trivial. Close the door to the room in which you write, unplug the telephone, breathe deeply and slowly, and in a prayerful manner approach each day's writing. Award-winning science fiction writer Bruce Holland Roger has taped a motto to his computer that says, "I am an angel

in disguise writing a holy text." He chuckles as he tells this, yet he believes in the significance of his work. You are undertaking the writing of your spiritual memoirs, a profoundly meaningful project, so find symbols for your workspace, create rituals for yourself, respect your writing schedule, and your success will not be waylaid by procrastination.

Negative Criticism

Criticism from contemporaries is of greater concern to memoirists and autobiographers than to most other writers. We worry about what our families will think and how listeners and readers will evaluate not only the writing but our lives and ourselves as individuals. These worries can become debilitating. If we dwell on them, our writing will be stunted.

For memoirs to be genuine and deep, your writing must be as candid as possible. Write your first draft for yourself alone. Write honestly. If your writing is intended only for yourself and, perhaps, a few selected friends, then you are free of concern. However, if you are writing for members of your family, for your community, or for broad publication at a later time, before you write your final draft you can decide whether to edit out parts that might cause harm or distress.

Frequently, the information we feel guilty about revealing actually ends up eliciting sympathy from readers. For the first time, readers understand our intentions, our problems, and our regrets. They usually respond with compassion.

At all stages of your writing you'll have the option of sharing or not sharing your writings with friends and fellow writers. If you are writing with a partner or workshop participants, you may always say, "This time I'll pass" when it is your turn to read. Step four of the writing process suggests that you read your rough draft to listeners. To encourage your listeners to respond constructively, give them the guidelines on page 33. At the top of the guidelines is the Chinese symbol for "listen." The left section denotes an ear, while parts of the right section indicate "you," "undivided attention," and "heart." Be guided by this wisdom. Listen earnestly from your heart.

Groups of writers who follow the guidelines for listeners ensure that the response group is safe, supportive, and constructive. This procedure has been repeatedly tested and found reliable. In groups that have not followed these guidelines, uncomfortable feelings have occasionally festered. So please mark the guidelines for easy reference or make copies to avoid potential difficulties.

A few words of encouragement for those who may be writing independently: If you are writing alone, without the support of a writing group or colleagues, you can still take advantage of the guidelines for listeners by responding in the recommended way to your own drafts. Acknowledge the strength of your drafts, and then stop to wonder what questions a listener who doesn't know you might have. Often, we inadvertently omit essential information when we fail to ponder what a stranger might want to know about us.



Guidelines for Listeners

- Listen with a nonjudgmental, open mind.
- Listen to learn.
- Remain totally, unfailingly confidential about what you hear.

To respond constructively:

- **Describe what you like** about the writing. Point out a strength in either the content or manner of writing. Always do this first.
- Second, ask a question about something the writer did not tell.

Now you, the listener, have said enough. Unless the writer asks your opinion about something else, say no more.

Concern about Mechanical Correctness

Writers should never hesitate to write their memoirs because they cannot spell or do not understand grammar and punctuation. Poignant, priceless memoirs have been written by unschooled writers. The thoughts and feelings of the writer are what matter most. The people who love you will overlook or will notice your mechanical errors; either way, they will be grateful to you for proceeding to write your memoirs.

Look at the proofreading tips in chapter 29 for ways to proof your rough drafts before writing your final versions.

Questions about Regionalisms

Memoirists sometimes wonder if they should drop their regionalisms. The answer is no! The locale where you grew up has flavored who you are. If, when you write, you "reckon" or "hanker," and you call the frying pan a "spider" or use "gum bands" rather than rubber bands, include these terms. To whitewash them out of your memoirs would be to erase a part of yourself. If you were writing a technical report or an academic essay, then you would replace your regionalisms, but if you were doing that kind of writing you wouldn't be writing about yourself.

The daughter of one writer I worked with said she intended to read only the first chapter of her father's memoirs before going to bed. When she began reading, however, she "could hear Dad talking" and was unable put his book down until she had read all of it.

FINAL PREPARATIONS

Notice the suggested readings at the end of the book. This list is a resource for people who write alone or with informal groups, as well as for people who teach or enroll in memoir-writing classes. As you scan the authors' names, be aware that by writing your spiritual memoirs, you are joining an esteemed company.

Use *Memoirs of the Soul* as a manual, a travelers' guide that you will follow step-by-step to the center of your spiritual labyrinth. Along the way you'll find two kinds of guideposts: one identifies where you are along the steps of the writing process and the other leads you through the labyrinth. If you sometimes feel jerked about, have faith that these twists and turns will eventually bring you to a place you could not have reached by a direct path; each lane you explore will prepare you for the next.

READY TO EMBARK

You are about to launch forth on a grand adventure, a voyage of discovery through writing. As you reflect on the most important dimensions of your life, you'll gain new perspectives and insights. Moreover, because questing writers don't know exactly what they'll find until they write, you're likely to surprise yourself. You'll write both to discover and to record your very essence—the inner workings of your soul.

Whether you write independently, with a partner, or as part of a writing group depends on your personal preference and circumstances. Some people prefer the privacy and tranquility of writing individually, while others find interaction with fellow writers to be stimulating and helpful. If you decide to write with colleagues or a friend, please see chapter 30 at this time.

You are now ready to make a spiritual voyage and, if you wish, to produce memoirs that will enable the people you love to see into your heart and mind.

Please step aboard!