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Writing to the Center

Nan Phifer

Writing deep into the center of our being is like walking a labyrinth. Most of us need to approach the innermost part of ourselves gradually, circling from the outside, pausing, circling back, turning again toward the center, and gently moving toward our very essence. To write about the times when our feelings were intense, when we pulsed with caring, or knowing, or not knowing, with wanting, regretting, belonging, not belonging, stumbling, and transcending—to write about the times when we have been most keenly alive, it is best to begin with the outer life.

I've created a step-by-step agenda for travel to the core of our lives from outer, accessible experiences to profound experiences. This route is not chronological. When I give workshops, I first guide memoirists in identifying the experiences, people, and places most important in their lives. They accumulate pages of personally meaningful topics that become the subjects for their writing, their tables of contents.

By beginning with the evident, easy-to-tell aspects of our lives, we gain self-assurance and self-knowledge. Gradually we progress toward the thoughts and feelings critical to the core of our being but seldom shared; and eventually, we come to times of doubt, agony, radiant happiness, reconciliation, and to times of reverence, awe, and transcendent compassion.

Memoirs are more selective than autobiographies. Memoirs are about our most meaningful experiences, and in writing about them we often gain surprising insights. On reflection, we see the positive aspects of ourselves we've failed to appreciate. We observe our intentions, strivings, sacrifice, patience and efforts. Autobiographies focus more on events and achievements, life at the surface, while memoirs also reveal our dreams, frustrations, and sources of satisfaction. Autobiographies are usually linear, beginning with birth and continuing to the time of writing. They include facts that may, or may not, be of interest.

Because talking is more spontaneous than writing, we find fluency by first telling a partner about our topics. In so doing we discover where to start and the words to use. When I say, "Write a quick rough draft," every participant can begin straightaway as if speaking. The resulting outpour flows around bends into unexplored territories, and we sometimes surprise ourselves by writing about things we didn't know we know.

Memoirs never plod when the writing arises from one's urge to review significant scenes as they come to mind. Some chapters lead to others that could not be foreseen. After all the chapters are written, they can be spread on the dining room table, or living room floor, to be arranged and rearranged, sometimes chronologically, sometimes by theme or according to some other system. If the writer decides to expand her memoirs into an autobiography, the necessary data can simply be added. An autobiography composed in this way will breathe with life.

Anyone who claims to have an inner life is a potential memoirist. An adolescent filled with questions, concerns, reactions, and longings is ready to write memoirs. Memoirs appeal to reflective people, and such people may be of any age. What makes memoirs interesting has little to do with the writer's importance or achievements; instead, vivid memories, feelings, and reflections affect the mind and heart of the reader and make memoirs significant. Think of the novels you have loved. The main characters are not usually people of renown or great achievement. It is their humanity that is important to us. In writing about our inner lives, we show our own humanity.

Personal, reflective, introspective writing can be scary. We fear self-exposure and hesitate to risk our companions' disapproval. Therefore, I insist that writers working in groups follow rigid guidelines for listening and response.

Listeners must never judge the life or lifestyle of the reader, must faithfully observe confidentiality, and must listen to learn. To respond constructively to a reading, listeners should first point out something—anything—they like about the writing, and then ask a question. Unless the writer asks for suggestions, they should say nothing further. Literary critiquing is not allowed. Advice and interpretation are forbidden. Following these guidelines creates a safe atmosphere. Writers whose convictions and lifestyles differ radically can write together comfortably and constructively. I've observed surprising candor and mutual support among very different people.

Taking time to reflect on the draft after it has been written is an important part of the agenda. I provide questions designed to reveal unrecognized personal qualities and the significance of external events. Most of us are more aware of our shortcomings than we are of our strengths and spiritual dimensions, so we gain insights by asking ourselves questions such as:

- Where do I see evidence of qualities in myself such as creativity, intuition, inspiration, intelligence, courage, patience, resolution, resilience, devotion, service, generosity, energy, or other strengths?
- What needs, strivings, or longings lay behind my actions?
- What was the source of my strength?
- What teachings and people have guided me?
- When did I feel empathy?
- How have I expressed compassion?
- How have I shown, or received, mercy?
- What transitions have I made? Was I transformed?

- In what ways have I experienced both doubt and faith?
- When have I felt grace? Transcendence?
- When have I tasted serenity, harmony, wholeness?

When I give retreats for religious or contemplative organizations, I use a method I adapted from a way of reflecting on scripture in medieval monasteries, *Lectio Divina*. A monk read holy texts to listeners who noticed which word or words resonated within themselves and then meditated on those words. I borrow a portion of that practice.

After workshop participants have read their quick drafts, and listeners have commended some aspect of the writing and asked a question, we re-read the memoirs in a more formal, reverent way. We are silent for a minute or two before each text is read. We read slowly, allowing time for words to penetrate and for listeners to identify those words or phrases that resonate within them. We pause again to reflect in silence. Next, listeners speak aloud the words they noticed. Upon hearing these words, readers often realize the depths of their experience and their inner resources. Listeners write the words and phrases they spoke onto half sheets of paper that are passed to the reader to ponder at a later time.

Some memoirists write to share their lives with family members, fellow writers, or their communities. This sharing creates extraordinary intimacy and acceptance of ourselves as we really are. Memoirs give descendents a way to know their heritage through the people behind photographs. For writers who wish to tell their stories to others, I provide suggestions for revising, editing, proofreading, and composing books. However, not all memoirists want to produce a book for other people. These writers are content with insights into themselves that come from their first drafts.

Many of us think about the purpose and meaning of our lives, and we want to recognize the most important elements in our lives and put the less important parts in perspective. Writing memoirs is a way to sort out, discover, understand, apologize, appreciate, and celebrate. We desire reconciliation with people we have known and with different aspects of ourselves.

I entitled my book *Memoirs of the Soul* to distinguish it from memoirs of the ego. My approach enables us to explore the great experiences of love, suffering, euphoria, inner peace and harmony with the universe, and to recount the times when we transcended self-enclosed smallness. To recapture these momentous experiences, we choose subjects as we are ready to explore them, circling deeper and deeper into our lives as one would walk into the center of a labyrinth.

