



Story Circle Journal

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The newsletter for women with stories to tell...

Be True To Your Innermost Self

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A person's inner life, like the proverbial iceberg, is mostly unseen. How many of your friends and family know the longings you have felt? We seldom speak of them. Remembered prayers, as well as moments when our hearts surged with emotion or tears sprang into our eyes, are tucked away, out of sight, seldom revealed. The essence of who we are exists in a dimension beyond reach of the writers' debate about fact vs. fiction. Our intuitive responses, our impulses, our yearnings, and imaginings are our natural, naked selves. To write candidly about our inner lives is to write the truth.

We *are* our aspirations, our dreams, apprehensions, fantasies, even our misconceptions and lopsided perceptions, as well as the person who experiences certain actual events. We say *actual* events, but our dreams, longings, and imaginings are as actual as any external event, though they are out of sight, deep within us. They reside in the core of our being.

Swedish film director and writer, Ingmar Bergman, wrote in his memoir *The Magic Lantern* about an experience that never *actually* happened and yet was true. Bergman described a detailed scene of soft, quiet reconciliation with his elderly mother, shortly before her death. He imagined it. The reunion is what he wished had happened. It *actually* did happen in his mind and so became part of his experience.

As I rewrite my memoirs, a work in progress, I'll include my own inventive interiority. My external life is conventional, polite, modulated, and appears lacking in libido. With only a few confidantes do I speak of the feelings that pulse at the center of my being, but as I revise I'll follow advice I give to students. I tell them they're free to dramatize their personal narratives, license that gives hesitant writers freedom from personal criticism so they can reveal what they would otherwise hesitate to expose. To give myself similar liberty, I may label my memoir a novel.

We know that to describe scenes vividly we must provide sensory details and approximations of what was spoken. We must fabricate—not fabricate in the sense of to falsify—but to create in ways that stay true to the experience. I may begin my memoir with words such as: "As I begin to write this account, I relinquish my life, for I know that by recreating my story, my present memory of my experiences will eventually fade away, superseded by words that cannot precisely replicate what happened." No words can replicate lived experience. Documentation of the past is necessarily inventive. Eventually, the written version may replace the memory. I'll strain to peer back through the reconstructed version to the original.

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*Congratulations to
the Winners of the
Susan Wittig Albert
2006 Lifewriting
Competition*

Pixie Paradiso (1st Place)
Sandra O'Briant
Lavon Urbonas
Gwen Hatley Whiting

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Nan Phifer: Be True to Your Innermost Self

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Our selection of subjects from among many autobiographical events is an inventive part of the writing process. I certainly won't waste time on uninteresting data, the sort of dry information listed on passports and résumés. I'll go straight to the experiences most meaningful to me, the times when my heart banged, times when I lay awake at night whether from terror or lust, times when tears stained my prayers, times when I wondered how I could live through the coming day. The events I'll choose to recall are not the ones my mother would choose; in fact she wouldn't recognize me from my selection. She would probably say, "This is not *my* daughter!" and that's okay.

As we write the stories of our lives we'll probably give more space to the things we've said and done than to our feelings and thoughts, for it is in doing and saying that we define ourselves. However, the inner life should be included because it is the heart of our stories, the vitalizing force, and it's an inventive part of ourselves that is incontestably true. ❖

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