

..... Skill Set

Everyone Has a Story to Tell

To write a memoir, just cultivate the habit of listening to yourself

By ABIGAIL THOMAS



● My husband, Rich, lost his memory after he was hit by a car and suffered traumatic brain injury. In a moment of perfect clarity, he once described his loss like this: “Pretend you are walking up the street with your friend. You are looking in windows. But right behind you is a man with a huge paint roller filled with white paint and he is painting over everywhere you’ve been, erasing everything. He erases your friend. You don’t even remember his name.” It’s terrifying. Because who are we without five minutes ago? Who are we without our stories?

Recently I went to a conference given by the Brain Injury Association of New York State, and I sat in on a talk by the director of a traumatic-brain-injury rehab

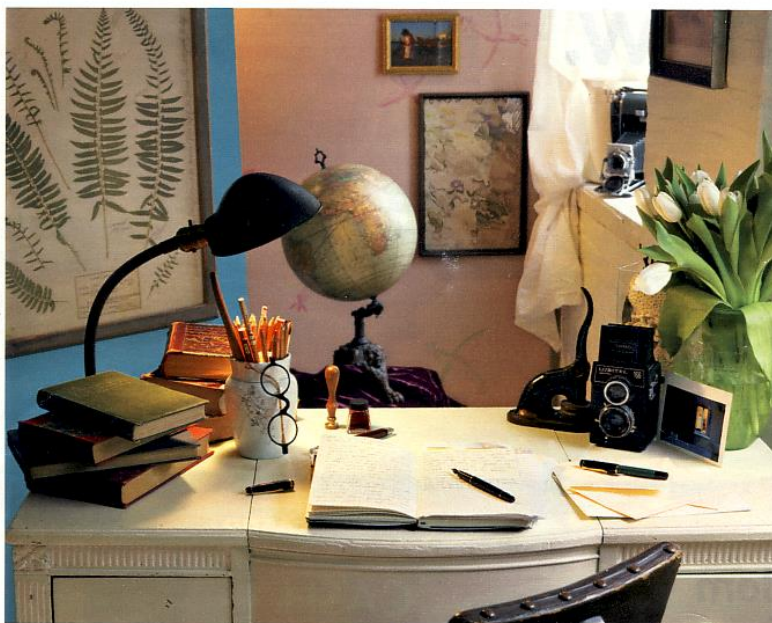
facility. She said the first thing they do to assist a person who has experienced a loss, not just of memory but of self, is to *make a story*. With the help of family and friends, they write a story of the patient’s life—the events, names, and faces.

It is basic, our need for story, perhaps because it is such a handy way to carry our experiences around—story as container, so to speak. What was Rich carrying? He stared for a long time at a photograph of himself, his brother, and an old friend, taken maybe 65 years ago. I don’t know what went through his

mind. Perhaps he wasn’t thinking; perhaps he was absorbing. There are notebooks he wrote a few things in when he first got hurt, trying to figure things out, things that made no sense to him. It’s what I do, too.

Writing is the way I ground myself, what keeps me sane. Writing is the way I try to make sense of my life, try to find meaning in accident, reasons why what happens happens—even though I know that *why* is a distraction, and meaning you have to cobble together yourself.

Sometimes just holding a pen in my



• 21 MORE WAYS TO START WRITING

I give assignments in my writing classes because it's hard to make something up out of the clear blue sky. Two pages is all I ask, and it doesn't have to be a story. It doesn't have to be an anything. I have learned we do better when we're not trying too hard—there is nothing more deadening to creativity than the grim determination to write.

Write two pages of apologies.

Write two pages of instructions to the child you once were.

Write two pages in which something is broken.

Write two pages about an unwelcome surprise.

Write two pages about a jinx.

Write two pages in which something is too small.

Write two pages about a proposal of marriage.

Write two pages in which you do something wrong you do not regret.

Write two pages about an untrainable animal.

Write two pages that take place in the woods.

Write two pages in which you were unmasked.

Write two pages about scolding a child.

Write two pages about sitting in someone's lap.

Write two pages on being too cold.

Write two pages on a tantrum you regret.

Write two pages on taking your time.

Write two pages about a bad haircut.

Write two pages in which someone kills something by accident.

Write two pages in which a child comforts an adult.

Write two pages that end "I could go on and on."

Write two pages on what you can't remember. My father, Lewis Thomas, began his memoir, *The Youngest Science*, "I have always had a bad memory; as far back as I can remember. It's not that I forget things outright; I forget where I put them. I need props." —A.T

hand and writing *milk butter eggs sugar* calms me. Truth is what I'm ultimately after—truth or clarity. I think truth's what we're all after, although I'd never have said such a thing when I was young. Writing memoir is a way to figure out who you used to be and how you got to be who you are.

There are as many different kinds of memoir as there are motives for writing one. There is memoir written as pure story: you start at the beginning and end where you are now, a breathless headlong rush through what happened. Or you can start at the end and look back, or with some middle moment, an

event that precipitated change and clarity, or the need for clarity. Put the point of your compass there, and start circling. Ilene Beckerman has written a perfect memoir called *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* (Algonquin Books), an account of her life illustrated by what she was wearing at important moments. I believe someone else has fashioned a memoir composed entirely of lists.

The jumping-off place isn't always obvious. You can't always find the way in. Sometimes you need a side door. That's where writing exercises come in. Here's the one I give all my students the first week of class:

Take any ten years of your life and reduce them to two pages. Every sentence has to be three words long—not two, not four, but three words long.

You discover there's nowhere to hide in three-word sentences. ("Walk by river. Stare at emptiness. Demons still around.") You also discover that you can't include everything, but half of writing is deciding what to leave out.

Learning what to leave out is not the same thing as putting in only what's important. Sometimes it's what you're not saying that gives a piece its shape. And it's surprising what people include. Marriage, divorce, love, sex—yes, there's all of that, but often what takes up precious space is sleeping on grass, or an ancient memory of blue Popsicle juice running down your sticky chin.

When you have those two pages, run your mind over everything the way a safecracker turns the tumblers with sandpapered fingers to feel the clicks. If there is one sentence that hums, or gives off sparks, you've hit the jackpot.

Write another two pages starting right there.

A lot of writing consists of waiting around for the aquarium to settle so you can see the fish. Walking around muttering seems to hasten the process. Taking public transportation nowhere helps. Looking out the bus window lets the back of your mind move forward. Don't listen to anything but natural sound.



● **“Be sure to include what you can’t make fit neatly into your idea of yourself,” says Abigail Thomas, above, who has published two memoirs.**

Don’t look at anything you have to turn on. This is about the pleasure of silence. This is not meditating; this is reacquainting yourself with yourself. Something interesting might enter your head if you let it alone.

Write two pages of uninspiring diary entries (to break the ice).

When I began writing *Safekeeping*—which is, for lack of a better word, a sort of memoir—I had no idea what I was doing. All I knew was that I couldn’t stop. What were these little pieces I was feverishly scribbling? They had started coming a few weeks after an old friend had died, a man I’d been married to once upon a time, someone I’d known half my life. The pages piled up. Memories, moments, scenes, nothing longer than a few pages, some only a line or two. There was no narrative flow. There was no narrative at all. But these bits and pieces kept flying out of me, and I kept writing them down. I didn’t know if what I was doing would amount to anything, but I never cross-examine the muse. The only thing I was sure of was that I would stop with my friend’s death. Grief had been the catalyst; grief would be the end.

My editor turned it down. She wanted me to write a *novel* about that marriage. But life doesn’t arrange itself conve-

niently into chapters—not mine, anyway. And I wanted it to feel like the way I’ve lived my life.

Write two pages about the moment you knew something was over.

Write two pages that end with “You can’t get away from it.”

Write two pages of something that makes you laugh every time.

Is there one image or object that appears over and over in your memories? I don’t know what baked Indian pudding is doing alongside certain terrible moments, but I know that stirring at the stove is a meditative activity for me. My mind can go elsewhere, off its leash, while I stir the spoon round and round making circles, ellipses, parabolas, keeping the stuff smooth, keeping it moving so as not to burn the bottom. Adding more butter when nobody is looking.

Write two pages about the softest thing.

Write two pages about where you would fly if you could.

Sometimes all you have to do is open a jar. The smell of Noxzema takes me back to the summer of 1957 and the front seat of the old Hudson my boyfriend drove, and how we parked at the Amagansett beach at night and made out like crazy. Afterward I was afraid I was pregnant, even though we didn’t do anything but kiss. The fear and the pleasure is fresh to me every time I smell the stuff, and I keep a jar around so I can remember being young.

Write an ode to a part of your body.

Write two pages about your treasures.

Be sure to include what you can’t make fit neatly into your idea of yourself, or whatever it is that ruffles the smooth surface of your life story. Suppose at some point your mother told you that you had a half sister who was ten years older than you. Suppose you once discovered love letters in your father’s raincoat pocket, and never asked questions. So where does this stuff go? It doesn’t fit anywhere. To which I say,

well, what is the *anywhere* where this doesn’t fit?

Write two pages about something you wish you didn’t know.

Write two pages about something you regret revealing.

Memoir is not a place to get revenge or to appear angelic or to cast oneself as victim. If that’s on your mind, write fiction. Memoir should not be self-serving, even accidentally. If you come out as anything but profoundly human, you’ve probably got the wrong motives for your writing or you haven’t stood far enough back, or come close enough.

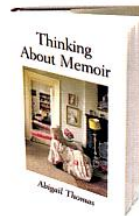
If you do the exercises, you are going to have a larder full of material. If there is a common thread, follow it. If you return again and again to a specific time or place, set up a tent there. If you remain plagued by the question of who is going to find it interesting, please remember that most of us are curious about other people’s lives. My rule of thumb is that if you find something interesting, chances are good that it is interesting.

After all, we are full of contradiction and conflict; we have evolved out of many different selves. We have been thanked, we have been humiliated, we have gossiped and worried and gone to bed hungry for one thing or another. We have gone out on a limb, and we have stayed on the porch.

As I said earlier, writing memoir is one way to explore how you became the person you are. It’s the story of how you got here from there.

Believe me. It’s a good story. ■

Abigail Thomas, author of *A Three Dog Life* and *Safekeeping*, teaches memoir-writing seminars nationwide. This article is adapted from *Thinking About Memoir* (AARP Books/Sterling, 2008). For more information, visit www.aarp.org/books.



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