

Introduction

There is power in storytelling, and that power is accessible to you. *Turning Memories Into Memoirs* will initiate you into the process of writing your personal and family lifestories and will help you make decisions on what to write as well as on *how* and *why* to write your stories. Soon, you will find yourself working the magic of lifewriting for yourself and for your family.

This book has evolved from my memoir work. Since 1988, I have guided thousands of people in the process of remembering and writing their stories—first through local and national workshops and now also through editing, coaching and telephone conference-call classes.

One day in 1988, I read to a group of Foster Grandparent volunteers from my first collection of short stories. Several dozen men and women, sitting at long tables, many smiling in recognition of elements in the stories I had just shared, said in one way or another, “These are people just like us!” They seemed to recognize the child climbing the apple tree at the edge of the meadow or to glimpse once again their own parents in the tired women and men trudging through the tenement district on their way back from the textile factory.

After I read my stories that day, my listeners began to tell me their stories. These were set in a number of countries around the world and in a variety of cultures within the US. As people spoke, some grew animated while others exuded peace. Some spoke with pride; others, with sorrow. All, however, seemed to need to tell the stories of their lives and of their families.

“The telling of your stories is a revolutionary act.”
—Sam Keen
writer

“My life might seem ordinary to others, but it wasn’t to me. I made a good life for myself.”

—Workshop writer

“Those were terrible times. I survived both Hitler and Stalin. My children need to know what it was like to live in a time when devils walked the earth.”

—Workshop writer

“I was taught that if I couldn’t write like a pro, I shouldn’t write at all! That attitude held me back for years. Now I’m going to move ahead. If I’ve learned anything in my life, it’s that not much is perfect—and that’s quite okay.”

—Workshop writer

Once again, storytelling had “primed the pump” of memory to enable personal and family stories to pour out. After my reading that day, I left for home feeling justified in my faith in the primal function of storytelling to affirm and reaffirm meaning in our lives.

Soon, I read again from my collection of stories to a second group of Foster Grandparent volunteers. Afterwards, the state director of the program phoned me at home. “Both groups of volunteers you spoke to would like to write their lifestories,” she said. “Would you like to work with them?”

“Yes!” was my immediate response to this opportunity to help people gain access to the power of their stories. The proposal the director and I wrote for a lifewriting project eventually received two major grants from the Maine Humanities Council.

This book is based on the success of those Turning Memories Into Memoirs® workshops and of the many I have presented since then.

Don’t lose your stories!

Your stories—about the time you woke in the night to see flames engulfing the barn, about the cross-country trip your mother’s family took during the Depression years to look for work, about how your grandparents met in Lithuania—these are the stories that have shaped you and your family.

We might even say that we are the stories we tell, and we are the stories that members of our family tell about themselves and about us.

You intend to record your personal and family stories, of course—someday. For now, though, you tell yourself, writing these stories will have to wait. There are so many of them. Where do you start? What do you do after you’ve started? And you’re busy—you know how it is! You don’t have the time to figure out how to go about writing and organizing your stories.

You tell yourself you're better off relegating the task to another time—or to another person.

Remember how your great-uncle, or perhaps it was your aunt, told marvelous stories about your people back in Mexico—or was it Sweden? But now the family storyteller is gone and where are the stories? Gone too? Lost? Not just the general information ("Our family came from the city of Bratislava in Slovakia") but the details of history and humor, of success and disappointment that flesh out a story and make it real. ("Because I walked to grade school and back every day for six years, I knew the neighborhood well. I always stopped on the Grimes' stone wall for a rest, and if Mrs. Naughton was home, I'd linger near her house, hoping she'd invite me into the kitchen for a cookie.") Many of these details that explain so much about how you and your family were shaped are lost because the family storyteller didn't take the time to write them down—or perhaps, was intimidated by the very idea of writing.

And you—all these years—you've been a housewife, or an insurance agent, or a computer technician, or a math teacher. You haven't done much writing—and high school or college English class was so long ago. How can anyone expect you to write your stories!

Write your stories—now!

This book will lead you through a step-by-step process that will enable you to produce your personal and family stories—one at a time, one after another. In the Turning Memories Into Memoirs® workshops, hundreds of people—"just like you"—have written thousands of pages of memoirs for themselves and for their families. Even those who insisted they couldn't write and declared they had never written anything before the workshop have composed dozens of stories, sometimes adding up to hundreds of pages—and the pages have resulted in coherent, interesting and rewarding accounts of their lives.

"If you start well,
you will write all
your stories."

—Natalie Goldberg
poet

"Because it was on
paper, I was at
peace. My wife's
memory would last.
It would not end
with me."

—Workshop writer



Like all long-term projects, lifestory writing will have its ups and downs. When you experience a “down,” take a moment to remind yourself that what you are undertaking is meaningful and important and that the rewards for you and your family will be great!

With the help of *Turning Memories Into Memoirs*, writing your stories won’t be as arduous as you might think.

■ *Turning Memories Into Memoirs* will increase your ability to remember more vividly the details of the stories you want to tell.

■ *Turning Memories Into Memoirs* will offer concrete suggestions for fleshing out your writing with proven storytelling techniques. Not only will you remember your story, you will learn to record and share it in an interesting and meaningful way both for yourself and for your reader.

■ *Turning Memories Into Memoirs* will teach you the skills to gain access to your life’s deeper, inner meaning—to the realm of your spirit. Using the simple writing and memory-recall techniques you will learn, it will be possible for you to achieve a new understanding of your lifestory and of your family history.

How to read this book.

■ **First, read the two initial chapters.** They will create the context from which to understand the chapters that follow.

■ **Then, either read the rest of the book in the order presented or flip through it to the sections that seem to be the most helpful** to you at your stage of writing. In the *Turning Memories Into Memoirs*® workshops, I generally present material in the order set in these pages. However, individuals will often interrupt the workshops to ask for specific help or information—and I respond to those questions as they arise, not when they are scheduled to be presented.

Approach this book in the same way. Familiarize yourself with the table of contents and read first the chapters that will help you the most. Then go on to read the rest of the book.

There is ample blank space in the margins. Use it to make notes or write your own marginal quotes. This is your book. Make it work for you!

■ **Read the lifestories that follow each chapter and those gathered together in Appendix A.** These are stories



written by people "just like you"—people who, one day perhaps much like today, decided to write their lifestories. Many have written full-length memoirs they then published.

These writers stood at the place where you now stand, at the beginning of a rewarding exploration of their personal and family pasts or perhaps at the threshold of a new stage of understanding and acceptance.

Let these stories be your support and encouragement: **you too will succeed in writing your lifestories.**

■ **Read the book again and again.** As you acquire more and more experience with memoir writing, you will come to understand parts of the book which may not have held much meaning for you before.

Tools you'll need in lifewriting.

You probably already have everything you'll need to write your lifestories. Here's what I recommend you use:

■ **A three-ring loose-leaf binder.** This sort of notebook allows you to add to or delete from your collection of printed stories at any time. Seeing your stories accumulate will be very encouraging.

■ **Manila folders.** These are useful for keeping discarded stories and fragments to recycle into your text later—or to refer to during your rewriting. Folders are also handy for organizing interview and research notes, photocopies of articles and letters, etc.

■ **A computer.** While some people write finished stories by hand, I can't recommend this. Computers (and basic computer instruction) are so readily available that *not* using one is a terrible waste of your time. Computers make corrections and changes easy. Computer printouts are much more readable. Look for an adult education class that will make you comfortable with and skilled at using this important tool. (See Chapter 7, Section I, for more on computers.)



It's okay to start with the writing skills you have now. As you write, you will learn more about writing and your skills will increase. If you wait until you know everything—well, you might never get to write at all!

The Lifewriter's Memory Binder is a companion to this book. It is a three-ring binder with sections for every step of the process. It includes additional prompts, exercises and tips, and many forms that will help you to organize your source material and keep your writings organized as you work.

Chapter One—As You Prepare to Start

- A. Tell me a story!
- B. You, too, can be a storyteller.
- C. What moves you to write your stories?
- D. The payoff for you and your family.
- E. Scope: what's right for you?
- F. Make a schedule for success.

LIFESTORIES FROM THE WORKSHOPS:

The Price of Happiness by Gillian Hewitt

A. Tell me a story!

Stories fascinate us all our lives. As children, we loved to be told fairy tales and to hear, time after time, the tales our parents told us about what we did and said when we were babies, as well as the stories about their own childhoods. As soon as we were old enough, we told stories about ourselves for our parents and for our friends.

As adults, we speak in stories at work, at family get-togethers, at class reunions, at town meetings, at the post office when we meet our neighbors. In fact, stories are such an important medium for us that even the numerous stories we tell and hear daily are not enough to satisfy our enormous appetites—we consume additional stories by reading novels, seeing movies, and watching dramas on television.

What is the meaning behind telling (and listening to) all of these stories? Obviously, stories *entertain* us, but our need to be entertained doesn't fully account for our great hunger for stories. A more satisfying explanation of the power stories hold for us is that they provide rehearsals for life: they furnish us with the *reassurance* and the *guidance* we need to become adults who live full, happy lives.

Let's see if this idea holds true when we examine a story we all know: Hansel and Gretel. In this story, the children are abandoned by a wicked stepmother and a weak-willed father. The children rescue themselves by killing the witch. In the end, in spite of his initial lapse, their “true” parent (the reformed father) welcomes the children back and promises to protect them against overpowering adult forces (the stepmother and the father's own weaker side).

This chapter will help you to understand the larger context of your writing before you start.

It will also help you to feel confident and comfortable about telling your stories.

This chapter will support you in establishing writing-friendly behaviors and environments that will lead to success.

“I needed to live, but I also needed to record what I lived.”

—Anaïs Nin
diarist



We learn a lot about
people by the
stories they tell.
One person, for
instance, is always
the butt of her own
jokes, while another
never tells a story
that doesn't
illustrate how
cleverly he got the
better of some poor,
unwitting adversary.

Does this story provide reassurance and guidance? It certainly does. The story reassures children that there is always hope of a happy ending no matter how bad things get and that their true parents do love them in spite of their weaknesses. It also reassures children that, although they themselves are weak and vulnerable, they are capable of working out solutions to help themselves. It is Gretel, after all, who pushes the witch into the oven.

Grown-ups tell their stories and listen eagerly to the stories of others for the same reasons. We, too, are looking for order and meaning in the chaos of our lives. When we say, "After the house burned down, she went to pieces. She forgot she had a family to live for," we are telling a story that contains reassurance and guidance about order. We are saying that, in spite of the calamity, this woman could have found comfort and meaning in her relationships. It provides a clear guiding message to both the listener and the speaker: tragedies can either be compounded or overcome—it's up to us to choose.

We read novels or watch movies for the same reason we tell stories: we want both reassurance that we can succeed in this journey called life and the guidance to do so. We want to see and hear how others have been successful in the struggles of their lives. We want to know the meaning of the decisions they took: did finishing school afford them a better job? was putting off marriage a sensible thing to do? what were the consequences of following or deviating from the patterns their families had set for them?

We want stories to reassure us that the inner strength we can muster will be sufficient against self-doubt, loss, grief, and disappointment. (People may exaggerate in their stories not to aggrandize themselves or to boast, but to rehearse the strength and meaning that may be missing in their lives and, by doing so, to acquire the strength and meaning they need.)

It's not out of idle curiosity that your children and grandchildren want to know about you and your life. What is more

natural than for them to turn to the stories of their own parents and family for reassurance and guidance? Your stories have this power and, if they are preserved, they can offer meaning and direction for your children and grandchildren—just as they can for you.

When you tell your personal and family stories, you are filling a need that exists not only in your family but in the larger human community to receive reassurance and guidance. Every year, as more and more once-tightly-knit groups in our society unravel and our access to our rightful inheritance of family stories is threatened, telling and writing your stories becomes increasingly important.

“How can the arts overcome the slow dying of men’s hearts that we call progress?”

—W.B. Yeats
poet

E X E R C I S E

Warm up to writing by recalling stories and recording details.

- Recall a family story you heard when you were a child. This story may be a fragment—in fact, that’s how many family stories are handed down.

- Now, write a list of the details you remember about the story (or fragment). When you make this list, use short sentences, phrases, or even just single words. At this stage, you are not writing a narrative, just making a list. The following might be included: the names of the people in the story; their relationships to each other and to you; what they did for pleasure and work; what the story’s context was (physically—the place and event; spiritually—the ideas and emotions; culturally—the attitudes and the ways of doing things); what the conflict (the action that leads to a crisis) was; and how it was resolved.

- Be as specific as you can with the details you put on your list (“auburn hair braided into a coil”; “a scar from beneath his left nostril to just under his left ear lobe”). Make every effort to remember what people might have worn (“high, lace-collared dresses”), or sayings they might have used (“as dark as the inside of a pocket”), etc.

- Using this list (which should considerably stimulate your memory), generate a rough first draft of the story you wish to write. Since writing is a different medium from speaking, you may feel yourself less fluent in writing than in speaking the story. Don’t let this bother you. It is a natural reaction, and over the long run, the practice of writing will provide you with the fluency you seek.

- Keep this story draft in your three-ring binder. You can develop it into a more polished story later.

This section suggests features that make stories interesting to hear or read.

“Nothing you write, if you hope to be any good, will ever come out as you first hoped.”

—Lillian Hellman
dramatist



B. You, too, can be a storyteller.

Some people come to lifewriting with a natural facility for storytelling. Don't despair if you aren't one of them. To a great extent, this is a facility which can be learned. It's a matter of acquiring both **technical skills** and **belief in yourself** and in your role as storyteller.

1) **You can learn to make effective use of a variety of technical skills to write successful stories.** I will mention only a few here. In other sections of this book, you will learn more about these and other elements.

■ **Successful stories usually have a recognizable *beginning*** (“It was the year I was nine that my father fell sick”); a ***middle*** that tells what happened in the story (“He took to bed; my mother went to work; my grandmother came to stay”); and an ***end*** that reveals how the story concludes (“Finally, in the fall, he died, and slowly Mother pieced our lives back together again”).

■ **Successful stories have *characters* who are recognizably human.** Don't let your loved ones come off as “stick characters” in your stories. Even if you are writing about people you do not like and would prefer to show only their faults, write about some of their positive qualities or habits. Otherwise, your readers will not feel the humanity of your characters and may dismiss not only what you say about those persons, but also whatever it is you want your story to convey (see Chapter 5, Section D).

■ **Successful stories have *action*.** Action is often presented as a conflict (the clash of opposing or contradictory desires, or an unfolding of events) that is resolved before the end—see Chapter 3, Section A. (“Afternoons after school, Janie and I would take turns sitting next to his bed, reading aloud, enticing him to drink a little tea or listen to the radio. I willed him to be distracted from his illness and return to being the dad I used to rough-house with in the backyard.”)

■ **Successful stories are full of sensory details** (colors, shapes, textures, smells, sounds, flavors—also in Chapter 3, Section A). When your stories portray a world (“three sweet-scented roses”) rather than a vague one (“some nice flowers”), you make it easier for readers to take the leap of faith into the world of your writing.

If your story has abstract and vague wording like “After a while absence from home made fidelity difficult for him and he committed adultery...,” your readers will be less interested in (and less swayed by) what you have to say than if your narration is filled with concrete and details such as “One evening, four months after he left his wife, he went into a bar. He had worked in the sun all day building houses and he was very tired. Somebody played a love song on the jukebox, and he began to ache with loneliness. A waitress with piercing black eyes asked him how he was doing, and he told her a story. He made it into a funny story because he didn’t want her to know how lonely he really was. When he had finished, she laughed, and her laughter rang in his ears. He had not talked to a woman in this way in a long time and...”

The details above not only make this story more vivid but transform this lonely man into an Everyman.

The Greek myth of the Labyrinth illustrates the need for and material details in stories. The Labyrinth was a maze of passageways at the center of which lived the Minotaur, half man/half bull. In the story, a young man, Theseus, entered the Labyrinth to slay the Minotaur. Many young men had entered the Labyrinth before him only to become lost in the maze and perish. Theseus, however, connected himself to the outside world by a material detail: he used a string. After slaying the Minotaur, he followed his string to retrace his steps out of the Labyrinth and thus re-entered the outside world.

The Labyrinth story provides not only entertainment but guidance and reassurance for us as lifewriters. As lifewriters, we enter a literary maze at the center of which is “the truth”



Your three-ring binder will prove to be a flexible tool.

Because you can remove and insert text anywhere within your binder, it is easy to change your text as new ideas for its content and format occur to you. As the number of finished pages increases, so will your sense of accomplishment and confidence.

You will see your book of lifestories become real day by day!



“I go...to forge
in the smithy of my
soul the uncreated
conscience
of my race.”

—James Joyce
novelist

about our lives. If we are not to get lost in the psychological and emotional labyrinth of characters and events, we and our readers must be connected to the world by sensory and material details just as Theseus remained connected to the outside world by a string.

2) **You can acquire the belief in your role as storyteller that is so necessary to transmit your stories effectively.** If you write your stories as honestly and as thoroughly as you can, you will come to believe in the rightness and importance of this work. This belief will lend your stories moral authority, and in its own way, your lifestory will transport the reader just as the ancient legends and epics do.

Storytellers (and modern artists) are at their best when telling a story—not just because they entertain and dazzle us with their virtuosity but because they are aware that stories play an inherent role in guiding us to live life meaningfully and in reassuring us this can be done.

Being a storyteller is a calling. Even if you don’t understand or accept it now, you, too, are responding to this calling as you undertake to tell your story. (See *At the Workshops*, page 29.)

■ **You will also begin to understand and accept your role as a storyteller** as you do more and more lifewriting and become better with the technical skills (telling the how and the what).

At the Workshops

Tom was from the Azores. He sat in the front of the room, a dark man among the paler Franco-American and Yankee faces, and he listened attentively to my presentation on lifewriting.

When I asked for comments, Tom said, “Where I come from, there are older people who tell the stories of our islands. They know all the stories—even the stories that took place before people living there now were born.

“Whenever we get together, the storytellers tell these stories. As they speak, they look around to see who’s listening—especially the children. There’ll be some of the kids—most of them really—who don’t take too long to start fidgeting, you know. They want to be someplace else, anywhere else. ‘Who’s that by the river?’ and ‘What’s that noise over there?’ These kids leave as soon as they can.

“There’s another group of children who are so-so interested and they listen a while longer, but soon they’ve had enough and they wander away, too. The storyteller has more to tell than these kids want to know.

“But, then there are the others who don’t walk away—maybe just a few, one or two even. They listen to the storyteller’s every word. It’s as if they can’t hear enough. It’s not because they’re being polite or someone told them to listen. It’s because they need the stories the way other children need to run and play.

“The storyteller knows there are kids like these—probably he was one himself—and he makes sure he tells them all his stories. He knows these kids will be the storytellers for the island when he is gone.

“Don’t you have this here, too? You should tell people that all their children need to hear some of their stories and that some of their children, the ones who are really listening even if they’re only one or two, these kids need to hear all the stories. Who else will give these children their stories unless you do?”

Tom paused a moment and then he said, “People have to tell their stories. The new generation needs them.”

E X E R C I S E

Assess how you view your role as a storyteller.

- Recall a storyteller you have known or observed and some of his/her memorable stories.
- Make a list of the elements that made these tales memorable. Was it plot, or character development, or setting? Was the storyteller adept at the technical details: creating drama? reproducing dialogue? setting a scene? Did the subject matter interest you? (Remember: the drama of the subject is not enough by itself. We've all known people who have bored us to tears as they narrated "exciting" elements of a divorce, lawsuit or accident, etc.)
- How did this storyteller see himself as a storyteller? Was he, and the tale, memorable because of his perception: the depth of insight? his conviction or compassion? Was it his moral authority (i.e., sense of the importance of the story's message)? What relationship did the teller have to the story: was he an active participant or an observer? was he sympathetic to or disengaged from his subject? was he humorous or dramatic? How did this relationship affect the stories?
- Of the qualities you identified above, which ones do you possess? Which ones do you think you can acquire?
- Did you know another storyteller whose stories were less successful? What was it that was missing—or present in the wrong proportions? (Sometimes we can learn a lot from what doesn't work!)

This section explores some of the reasons that motivate people to be successful at lifestory writing.



C. What moves you to write your stories?

You will need to be motivated to write your memoirs. The following are motivations that have inspired participants in past workshops.

1) **Many people tell a story because they derive pleasure from the telling itself.** They enjoy the unfolding of the tale, the discovery inherent in creating a story. They are enlivened by a connection with the past which telling their stories provides. These people have reasons like:

- I need to share the pleasure these stories have given me.
- I want to memorialize people and events of my past.
- I want (or need) the energy of storytelling in my life.
- I want to participate in something larger than myself.

These lifewriters are lucky: they have a workable and pleasurable starting point because they are grounded in their own need to express themselves. Such a motivation, combined with various supports mentioned elsewhere in this book, is likely to see these writers to the end of their project.

2) **Some people come with an agenda of troubling memories to be soothed and eventually resolved.** Their untold stories seem to threaten them from deep inside, and as Theseus did with the monster Minotaur, they may wish to “slay” their memories. These lifewriters may have reasons to write such as:

- I need to understand my life.
- I want to see which family patterns reveal themselves as troublesome across the generations of my family.
- I want to work through some blocks I have in relation to myself and my family or my past.

If this second set of thoughts describes your motivation to write your personal and family stories, you, too, are in luck: lifewriting is often successful in expelling personal demons. Writing to heal is often not easy. However, as telling your story frees you of anger or fear or anxiety, you will be strongly motivated to continue because lifewriting will bring you peace and comfort.

Lifewriting is often therapeutic, but therapy is not always easy. Some workshop participants have found themselves overwhelmed with the pain of their memories and have sought the support of a therapist or a group. If you feel overwhelmed and fear you can't continue alone, it may be time to seek out the help of a professional to lead you through your memories. But, for many writers, the writing itself will be enough.

3) **Others approach lifewriting from a less successful perspective.** They are likely to come up with reasons such as:

- I ought to do it.
- It's a good thing to do.
- My children want me to do it, and I want to please them.



“I love the start up phase. That's when I feel most like a god inventing the universe.”

—Workshop writer

“That a man may be free of his ghosts, he must return to them as to a garden.”

—Maxine Kumin
poet

Sometimes, when you feel guilty planning writing time “just for yourself,” that guilt can masquerade as an overwhelming sense that your memoir writing is not as important as all the other things you could be doing that day.

These last reasons won’t, by themselves, provide a solid foundation for your lifewriting project. They are based on meeting someone else’s needs instead of your own. Rather than motivate writers, these reasons are more likely to slow them down by making them feel guilty. To ease their consciences, these writers will eventually have thoughts such as:

- It’s important work, but I’m just too busy right now!
- I just didn’t have time this week!
- I really don’t have anything to say.

People motivated by “I ought to” and “it’s good to” are usually not successful memoir writers.

4) **Everyone needs to ask, “Is lifewriting an effort I need to make?”** This is not the same question as, “Is lifewriting an effort I feel capable of making?” If you enjoy storytelling or if lifewriting is something you must do to meet an inner need, then you will find yourself more willing to show up to write on a regular basis. Being more willing, you will commit yourself to the effort needed to acquire the habits and skills to succeed. Haven’t you already succeeded at many difficult tasks because you were motivated to do them (perhaps it was raising a family, nurturing a career, or supporting a parent or mate through a difficult illness)? You are not unacquainted with responding to a challenge.

“Leap and the net will appear.”
—Julia Cameron
creativity guru

The task of lifewriting will not require more work and energy than you are capable of, but writing your lifestories will require some sacrifice—especially if you haven’t done much writing before.

Remember: when you start from your own needs, you are much more likely to succeed.

Lifewriting is important. Believe in your stories enough to commit yourself—today, tomorrow, and the day after—to write them down for yourself, your family, and possibly the world.

E X E R C I S E

Make a memoir-writing mission statement.

■ What motivates you to write your memoirs? Compile a list of reasons (e.g., “I’ve had an interesting life and I want to share my experience”; “I need to understand why I was always attracted to jobs that I would fail at.”). Does this list include reasons that will motivate you to keep writing?

■ Now place the items from your list of motivators in a mission statement. This statement can begin with “I am dedicated to writing my lifestories because...”

■ This mission statement, which will list benefits you foresee in taking on this project, is likely to change as you pursue lifewriting and become more and more aware of its possibilities. What’s important now is that your statement expresses your motivation and that referring to it helps to keep you writing.

■ Review your statement periodically. Change it or add to it as you need to, but always articulate what motivates you to write.

D. The payoff for you and your family.

As you write your lifestory, you will benefit from the experience in many ways. Let these benefits also motivate you to write.

1) **You will develop a record of your personal and family stories.** This record will be a permanent one to hand down as a legacy to succeeding generations of your family. You will have the satisfaction of knowing that you have fulfilled your responsibility of preserving your family’s past. Your children and grandchildren will be very grateful for this written legacy.

2) **You will enjoy the sense of celebration that comes from sharing a “tale well told.”** Merely telling stories brings many people great satisfaction. Even if you have never felt it before, you will surely experience pleasure in celebrating your life experiences through storytelling.

3) **You will gain insights into yourself and your family.** As

This section lists benefits you will derive from memoir writing.

A lifestory is a gift one generation bestows upon another; a legacy people have been handing down from the beginning of time.

“As you walk, you cut open and create that riverbed into which the stream of your descendants shall enter and flow.”

—Nikos Kazantzakis
novelist

you view parts of your life in relation to other parts (and also begin to view it as a whole), you will undoubtedly perceive patterns and choices that facilitated or restricted growth for you or for other members of your family. This may challenge how you have previously understood your life or your family. Rather than continue to insist that things are “just the way they are,” you may now appreciate the help you have received or see past difficulties not as fate but as symptoms of unresolved personal or family dynamics.

Although most of us spend no more than 20 or so years living with our families, we remain bound in various ways to family culture for the rest of our lives: what we need from relationships, the way we use money, how we view leisure time, etc., may still be influenced by how our families taught us. In addition, no matter how supportive or loving our parents were (and certainly not all parents are), no family is perfect in its ability to nurture and cherish each individual child. Sometimes family attitudes (e.g., views of sexuality) or unfulfilled childhood longings (e.g., to be loved for one’s self) have constricted a writer’s life. These limiting emotional residues are concealed by overlays of false beliefs (“we love all our children equally in our family!”). Although these practices and beliefs may have up until then remained unexamined, they have been—and possibly still are—powerful in their ability to shape or limit your life.

“If you know from whence you came, there are absolutely no limitations on where you can go.”

—James Baldwin
writer

Your children are also products of your extended family and its history. The families we form with our mates can be dominated by tensions and struggles that originate from our birth families and the generations before us. Writing about *what* happened and *why* is one way you can break these repeating cycles of difficulty.

The task is not an easy one, but understanding your nuclear and extended family cultures will often help empower you to be more detached from any negative hold they have on you—whether you are 20 or 40 or 60 or 80!

Sometimes people will say, “But, shouldn’t these unpleasant

(or horrible) things just be forgotten? Why stir up bad memories?” The answer is clear—*our families may forget the past, but the past will not forget our families*. The “sins” of our ancestors reveal ethical and spiritual traits that can pass in the family from generation to generation. Who would think it admirable for parents to hide from their children that kidney or lung or sight problems run in the family? Knowledge of such diseases is necessary for our children to seek the care they need to compensate for or overcome such inherited physical shortcomings. Clearly, most of us would agree that silence is unconscionable and unethical.

On the moral and spiritual planes, the same is also true. When we hide the shortcomings of our ancestors from our children, we may make it impossible for them to compensate for or overcome hereditary ethical or spiritual problems. By not telling certain stories, we may condemn them to repeat generational cycles of pain and loss.

4) **You may have insights about your mate’s family.** Tensions that affect you and your children may originate from patterns in your spouse’s family. Lifewriting can be the means for you to articulate and explore—the first steps in facilitating the resolution of these tensions. Revealing and discussing the past with trust and respect can be healing.

5) **Lifewriting often promotes family unity by initiating exchange.** The discussions you will have with your children about your writing will also be a primary means of transmitting your stories. Many workshop participants have reported that their commitment to writing has created occasions for them to sit and speak with their children or their parents in a way they had not done in a long time.

Your children will ask you many questions and may even take exception to some of your insights. Just as they will reap rewards from your efforts, you, too, will benefit from their input. Because they are one generation removed from your parents and two from your grandparents, they may not be as emotionally involved as you are in the dynamics of those people’s lives.

It’s not too late, and you are not too old to take a more proactive role in your own life.

“The gods visit the sins of the fathers [and the mothers] upon the children.”

—a paraphrase from *Phrixus* by Euripides



“By the creative act,
we are able to reach
beyond our own
death.”

—Rollo May
psychologist

“He who knows
others is wise. He
who knows himself
is enlightened.”

—Lao Tzu
philosopher

In this section, you
will be challenged to
think about how
broad you want your
writing to be.



This emotional distance may provide a perspective you don't have on your own.

6) **Lifewriting often leads to personal growth** because writers feel empowered by the insights they derive from writing their stories. Some lifewriters have even said that the experience has liberated them. *The insights you derive from writing will not leave you untouched.*

■ **Lifewriting can provide meaning and order as you deal with hidden fears and failings.** However, like all long-term projects that are not quickly accomplished, there may be moments as you pursue personal growth through lifewriting when you will doubt both your ability to accomplish the task and even whether it is worth doing at all. At such moments, I urge you to reread the mission statement you articulated in the previous section (Section C, page 33) and to reaffirm your belief in the value of what you are undertaking—for you, for your family, and perhaps for the world.

E. Scope: what's right for you?

How much time and energy are you willing to give to lifewriting? The more honest and insightful you are in answering this question, the more pleasure you will derive from your writing and the greater the satisfaction you will find in preserving your stories.

The scope of your writing ambition is likely to change over the next months (often in favor of more rather than less time and energy). If you can formulate a realistic writing goal for yourself (*underpromise and overdeliver!*), doing so may well save you frustration and disappointment later.

1) **Do you have a definite range of experiences you want to write about?**

- my experiences in Army bootcamp.
- my children's birth stories.
- funny stuff that happened when I was a kid.

If this type of list reflects your thinking, then you have a clear set of parameters in mind to work within. It may be possible for you to write your limited number of stories in a few short months with the help *Turning Memories Into Memoirs* can give you.

When people get “hooked” on lifewriting, they often find they expand the scope of their lifewriting ambitions.

2) **Do you want to write about something more comprehensive?**

- my life and its sociological, historical, cultural context.
- my family’s life and its historical context.
- my community’s history (social, economic, psychological).

If this interests you, you should plan to continue working for many months or even years. You will need a long time to research your material and write about it extensively.

3) **Pacing the project is important.** If you overreach (attempt a too extensive project), you may be exhausted by your ambition. Instead of being a joy and a challenge, the work may feel full of demands and responsibilities. You’ll grow to resent or dread the writing, and you may even feel like a failure. You’ll be very susceptible to giving up.

On the other hand, if you underreach (set too easy a goal for yourself), you may find the job not challenging enough to continue. If you don’t go deep enough into the why of your history, if you avoid the difficult issues and events, if you record just facts and not feelings, you’ll find lifewriting unsatisfying. The demands of your life—work, relationships, responsibilities—will rightly seem more worthy of your attention, and you’ll soon abandon your writing project.

The best choice is to approach lifewriting as you might approach gardening: make your project the right size for your energy, neither too large to accomplish nor too small to satisfy, keep it where it can give you regular, daily pleasure (collect your stories in an accessible three-ring binder), fill it with the “flowers” you find most beautiful and the “vegetables” you



“Work inspires inspiration. Keep working. If you succeed, keep working. If you fail, keep working. If you’re interested, keep working. If you’re bored, keep working.”

—Michael Crichton
novelist

“A lot of people
talk about writing.
The secret is
to write, not talk.”

—Jackie Collins
novelist

This section has
guidelines for getting
the most writing out
of your days!



most love to eat (your self-exploring, self-expressing stories). Your project will be nurtured on a regular basis. You'll be rewarded with the many benefits of lifewriting and will eagerly maintain your commitment to turn your memories into memoirs.

4) **Regularly assess your work to maximize success.** From the start and continually throughout your writing project, ask yourself if the scope of your ambition and the shape your work is now taking are appropriate for you. I have seen many writers wander away from their goals and lose their enthusiasm as their projects either grow out of bounds or remain superficial. *Be willing to do what it takes for the project to continue to be the right size for you.*

F. Make a schedule for success.

You've already taken several steps in lifewriting. You have begun to read this book and you have done some of the exercises. Now you need to take another step by establishing a writing schedule for yourself.

Rather than think in the general terms of “I'll write as much as I can” (who are we kidding here!), base your writing schedule on a specific time or a page quota.

1) **Decide how much time per week you want (or have) to devote to lifewriting.** You may come up with a vague idea like: “Oh, five hours.” If you don't push yourself to be more specific, you are likely to fail at putting in your five hours. If you want to succeed, be specific. Break your hours down to precise times on certain days. Write this schedule down where you will see it and be reminded of your commitment.

Here's an example: “I have five hours a week to devote to lifewriting—two hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 8 to 10 AM and one hour on Fridays from 4 to 5 PM.”

With that schedule, you are less likely to have to confess: “Time got away from me, and I didn't write at all this week!”

Eventually, as your writing schedule becomes a habit, the

pages will accumulate, and you will feel encouraged to continue lifewriting. It will get easier and easier to do.

Sometimes people find it useful to set a date for finishing their work: a holiday, a family reunion, an anniversary. Many writers report that a deadline (but keep it flexible!) helps them to stick to their schedules. It works even better if people expect your lifestories by your deadline!

2) **Or, determine how many pages per week you need to produce to make some progress and achieve your goals.** This is an alternative to the above. Let's say you want to turn out five pages per week. Estimate how many hours it will take you to do that. (Eventually, with practice, you will have a sense of how many pages you can generally write in a given time.) Suppose you write roughly a page an hour. It will take five hours to meet your five-page quota. Now assign those five pages to five hours on specific days. Your schedule might look like this: two pages during the two hours on Tuesday from 8 AM to 10 AM and two pages during the two hours on Thursday from 8 AM to 10 AM and one page during the hour on Friday from 4 PM to 5 PM.

You can do that, can't you? But the rub here (which makes it different from the first suggestion) is that *you must continue to write past 10 AM on Tuesday or Thursday or 5 PM on Friday if you have not met your page quota!* Conversely you may get up early from your writing desk to do something else once you produce your five pages (but I'm not encouraging you to do that—why not write additional text that day?).

■ **Whether you budget writing by time or by pages, you do not have to write accomplished, sophisticated stories at any sitting.** Many lifewriters begin by producing short, even journal-like, entries they place in their loose-leaf binders. After a while, they collect and rework these entries until what they have is a more and more satisfying story. Eventually, the story is finished and it can take its place in the writer's memoir. This bit-by-bit method keeps you producing while you develop both

Do you want to be successful at lifestory writing?

- create a writing schedule.
- establish routines and rituals.
- set and meet your deadlines.
- tell others what you are doing (going public makes you accountable).

Keep fragments and stories that don't seem to belong anywhere in one section of your three-ring binder.

Don't throw away your bits and pieces! You may decide to rework them, or you may eventually revise parts to include in new writing. You may even grow to like them as they are and see where they can fit in!

Inch by inch,
it's a cinch!
Yard by yard,
it's hard!

"I write a certain number of pages per week. The hours during which I write are negotiable, but the output is not. I find that as Thursday approaches, I feel a certain pressure to meet my personal quota by the weekend. I begin to "make more time" to write."

—Coaching client

the regular habit of writing and your skills as a writer.

3) **Either way—approaching the task by the time or by the page—be creative.** A schedule can maximize your chances for success. Both laxity and rigidity will work against you.

If you need to "borrow" time from your writing schedule on any one day, remind yourself to "pay back" before you allow yourself to "borrow" again. Being lax with this "credit" system will set you up for discouragement, and you could quickly feel overwhelmed (how easily and enjoyably can you "pay back" 30 hours?) or you'll find that you are kidding yourself—you're no longer writing at all.

Rigidity will also work against you. If your thoughts are flowing, continue writing even if you've met your page or time quota for the day. Stopping in the middle of your creative process—just because you've met your quota—doesn't make sense.

Pursue writing step by step, day by day. Make decisions that contribute to your success.

Remember: the work you are doing is important.

E X E R C I S E

Create a writing schedule.

- Create a weekly and monthly writing schedule. Be specific about dates, days, and hours.
- Write this schedule on your calendar and advise members of your household. (Be willing to negotiate or to offer something in exchange for their cooperation and support.)
- Pin the schedule to your family bulletin board or refrigerator so that they—and you—will be reminded of it.

LIFESTORIES FROM THE WORKSHOPS

The Price of Happiness

by Gillian Hewitt

In 1953, we moved into a three-bedroom flat above a hardware store in the small town of Tottenham, Ontario. There was no central heat nor hot water, but I thought it was a palace compared to the tiny basement apartment we had left.

The center of activity was the huge kitchen, where a massive Findlay woodstove kept us warm in the winter months. Pale green cabinets sprawled along the opposite wall. They came to an end at the four-burner Frigidaire range.

Every week, my mother would get down on her hands and knees and apply a coat of Johnson's paste wax to the green-and-white-checked linoleum floor. When we arrived home from school, my brother Stephen and I would delight in wrapping old rags on our feet and "skating" over the floor, bringing it to a glossy sheen. This was my mother's Tom Sawyer act, and it worked every time.

Off the kitchen was a large bathroom with a huge claw-footed tub, a pedestal sink, and enough room for our wringer washer and laundry tubs. The bathtub was never used, as hot water was a precious commodity. To conserve hot water, Mom washed us in the wringer washer! She heated water on the range or woodstove and carried it into the bathroom to fill the washer. Removing the agitator, she lifted Stephen and me into the washer. What great fun we had in that "tub!"

In the winter, we brought our pillows and our flannel pajamas out to the woodstove and placed them high up in the warming oven. When they were heated through, we would get dressed for bed beside the stove, snatch our pillows, and race down the hall to our bedrooms. It would take no coaxing to get us into bed, as we wanted to be snuggled in and off to sleep before the warm pillows cooled down. In the morning, we would reluctantly pull down the blankets to see our breath frozen in the air and witness Jack Frost's canvas on the icy window.

On my way to Tottenham Elementary School, where I attended Grade One, I used to pass by a grocery store on Queen Street. Out in front were baskets of fruits and vegetables, and each



Gillian Hewitt, is a certified Soleil Lifestory Network teacher. In this story, she accomplishes what so many lifewriters seek to do: she tells a simple story that fully captures her ordinary childhood days. Gillian offers Turning Memories® workshops and lifewriting services in the Toronto area.

day I would linger in front of some of the biggest, shiniest apples I had ever seen. They were five cents each. I told my mom about them but never dared to ask her for the five cents. I knew we had little money, and we were saving every penny to buy a house of our own.

One morning, she surprised me by slipping a shiny nickel into my hand. "Go buy yourself a nice apple for lunch," she said to me. Just then, I was sure she was the best mom anyone could have.

That day, I skipped my way along the street, pink plastic skipping rope in one hand and my precious nickel in the other. Arriving at the grocery store, I stood there, surveying the apples, trying to decide which one to choose. Shifting the skipping rope into my nickel hand, I reached toward the basket to claim my prize.

The coin dropped out of my grip onto the sidewalk. Before I could bend down to retrieve it, a large, grimy shoe stamped down on top of my nickel. I looked up into the eyes of Susan McMahon.

Susan was a nasty girl with stringy blonde hair. Her family lived in a squalid, ramshackle house on "the other side of the tracks." No one liked the McMahons.

"That's my nickel," I said. "Take your foot off it."

"It's mine now. Get outta here."

One look at her face told me I wasn't going to get that nickel back. She bent down, took my nickel, and was gone.

My lip started to quiver; I felt tears burning my eyes. I turned back towards home and ran.

Wailing and sobbing, I stumbled up the steps to our flat. Mom met me halfway down. I managed to get my story out. Instead of scolding me for losing the money, she took out her little turquoise change purse and handed me another nickel.

"You want that apple really bad, don't you? Put this in your shoe and don't take it out until you give it to the grocer." With that, she dried my tears and sent me off again.

I bought the apple but it didn't taste as good as I had thought it would. All I could think of was how much of a sacrifice my mom had made for me.