

How You Can Write Your Own Life Story

By Marjory D. Lyons

CHAPTER ONE

HELPING YOUR WRITE YOUR STORY

Everyone has a story to tell. It doesn't matter if you are a senior citizen, a middle-ager, or at teenager. In my memoir-writing workshops, everyone wants to tell a story. And by the time they leave, everyone has a good start on their stories. Even two of my grandchildren, Haley and Roman, when they attended my workshop, both wrote interesting stories. And they were teenagers at the time.

Of course, you might say, the reason people come to the memoir-writing workshop is that they want to write their book, their story. That may be true. But it isn't necessarily true all the time. (My grands were visiting me, and I guess they had little choice.) Sometimes folks are sizing me up, trying to figure out if they can learn anything from me, or whether they feel they can ask some particular or personal questions of me. Especially, I think they come to see if they can trust me and whether I know what I am talking about. They may even be wondering about asking me to help them embark on writing their book. So sometimes folks come to hear what I have to say, to get the structure of what memoir-writing is about, and find out how to begin to gather their thoughts and artifacts and write their life story.

However, sometimes folks come because they want to help another person tell a story. That was the case with Abe.

I recall when Abel Spieler came to my workshop; he didn't actually stay the whole two hours. Abe was a unique and marvelous person. He was what could be called "street smart" meaning he learned about the world and how to deal with it by what he learned in his neighborhood in Brooklyn and by the influences around him. And applying that code of behavior, he succeeded in life, to a profound degree.

However, I didn't know this when he stood up, marched right down the aisle and stood in front of me---while I was standing at the podium. He said, "Now, Margie, I don't mean to be rude, but I have an appointment. I have listened to your talk for over an hour now, and I have to leave. But you can bet, I am going to keep in touch. I want to write my book."

I managed to refocus my attention on the class. They were writing a short description of their first memories. I watched as Abe sauntered out the door. What a man, I thought.

The class concluded with questions and comments. It was during that period that I found out more about Abie. Sam raised his hand and stood up. An elegant man, he spoke with authority and clearly articulated what he had on his mind.

"I would like to point out that Abe Spieler is one of a kind, Dr. Lyons. Please don't take offense at his departure."

I smiled and nodded my acceptance of his comment. And Sam continued.

“In fact that is the reason I am here today. I don’t have a book to write; Abe does. My wife Lee and I brought Abe. We wanted him to find out about writing his book.”

“Thank you, Sam,” I replied. “I hope that Abe does write his book.”

Then Lee raised her hand. I had noticed Lee earlier, a sophisticated-looking blonde woman. She had been an editor in New York, and based on her responses to me, she seemed to grasp and agree with many of my comments about how to approach writing a memoir.

Now she said, “Sam and I brought Abe and Arlene here today to encourage him to write his book. Abe has been telling stories for years. Now he’s talking about writing his book. But I don’t think Abe would have come on his own. So we brought him.”

Well, I thought, he is a unique individual to get up and interrupt my talk and then say he will be in touch. And now these two friends speak about him and his need to write a book. We’ll see what happens.

I finished the workshop and shook hands and chatted with some of the participants as they left

By the time I got home, Abe was on the phone. He was still in charge, saying he wanted to schedule an appointment with me—at the same library---a week later. Yet when we met, his was unsure about the material he had written, and what material he needed to write or to bring to me to help him write. So, being Abe, after twenty minutes, he concluded the meeting, overstepping me completely. I was somewhat amused, a little wary, but willing to go along with this man. For all his brusqueness, he seemed sincere, and also seemed to have a clear story in mind. And believe it or not, he scheduled another meeting. At another library! And, to make a long story short, he did ask me to help write his book. And we did.

The point to this whole story is that Sam and Lee attended the workshop for a special reason: they wanted to be sure that their friend got the information he needed to start on his book. Those friends should feel good about their efforts. Abe’s book “You Can Call Me Brooklyn” was published in July 2009.

CHAPTER TWO

WHY WRITE YOUR STORY?

What are the reasons for wanting to write a life story? Why do people want to tell their stories? Why do YOU want to write your story? What is your story? Is it a whole life that you want to write about, your own autobiography? Is it a biography of someone else that you want to tell? Or is it portions of the life that you want to tell about, a recollection of a special time, a memoir?

RECORD THE LIFE OF AN IMPORTANT ANCESTOR

Perhaps you want to record the life of an important ancestor or family member. Let's say you have heard family stories and you admire what this person did in his or her lifetime, and you want to set down that information. In a sense you might want to be the family historian for that time. Perhaps you want to tell about what it was like for that person to come to America 100 years ago. Or perhaps his or her story does not include America, yet you want to tell it.

A friend of mine wrote a wonderful book, detailed to the minute—and it was not his story but the story of his father, the Merchant Marine Captain. In the book, Alan described the decision that his young father left the harshness of New England and went to sea, as so many men did. And he tells of the achievement, dangers and adventures his father had over a long career, all based on the meticulous notes his father—his often-absent father-kept, as a good sea captain would. Obviously, it was by reflection, the life of the young boy as he grew up without his father and realized the toll it was taking on his lonely and angry mother. Eventually, Alan came to show affection for his father through interviews with him in the final years of his life, much the way Tuesdays with Morrie developed.

HONOR THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF A FAMILY

Perhaps you want to honor the achievements of a whole family. Maybe you heard about a much-admired great great grandparent who went on to create a whole family activity, a business, or community service, or fame and achievements a particular profession. Perhaps science, or art or literature.

Another reason to write the story is to complete the story that you know. As e get older, folks who knew the events and times and places, leaves this worked and we know that it is important to tell the story. Or there is a mystery that you know about, and only you know how the whole situation resolved. Think about the mystery of Amelia Earhart and her disappearance. Wouldn't it e a grand story if you knew that ending?

COMPLETE THE STORY YOU KNOW

Sometimes only you know now the facts of a story. My friend always wondered how a particular girl was in her family. They were about the same age, but she was never really told where this girl had come from, who her family was, who her parents war. But here she was, growing up with my friend. And they loved each other like sisters. But they mystery still remains: who was this woman?

TELL THE FACTS AS YOU KNOW THEM

In my little town, there was a famous dispute between two of the town fathers, Melville and Milton. It had to do with the access to the pond, whether the road circled informative the pond, and thus on Melville's private property, or whether, as Milton asserted, that the road circled behind the pond, and therefore the pond was to be considered public access. No matter, in actuality, because we all skated on the pond in the winter and slid down the hillside nearby, from Melville's barn under the barbed wire fence and right onto the frozen ice of the pond.

Often the facts have to do with parenthood. Today there seems to be openness about whose child was born by whose parents. But in your family, there may a story that you know about and only you. And you want to tell it.

RECOGNIZE THE IMPACT OF THE FAMILY IN THE COMMUNITY

What an honor it would be to have the family name on the local hospital or school. Does your family have that distinction? If so, where did the influence of the family originate? With the grandparents? Or the present citizen? What were the types of achievement? My uncle lived a modest life, and was not a man of means. However he had a great impact on the community through his service as a volunteer fireman. I imagine he volunteered for the Port Jefferson Volunteer Fire Department at least forty years until he retired to Florida. He was treasurer, I know, and for many years was the driver of the impressive hook and ladder fire truck. My little sister and I always waited eagerly to wave at Uncle Bob as he drove proudly along the parade route in the forties and fifties. And you can be sure our mother, his sister, wept a tear of joy as well

RECITE AN AMAZING STORY OF AN ANCESTOR

Do you have in your family the story of an astonishing feat? Did someone climb the Himalayas? Or work with the astronauts? Or walk on the moon? My friend Gene Ceran in his book tells of his amazement at accomplishing the world's most amazing feat: waling on the moon.

In some cases, the amazing feat was simply to survive. Living in Florida, as I do, I hear so many stories about survival of the Holocaust. Or of World War II. My brother-in-law served during World War II served in the headquarters of General George Patton. He was not hero, as he is quick to say, but he was there during the battles and eventual defeat of the Nazi terror. He has amazed stories of simply doing his daily job in the office. He has the advantage of learning how to type in school in Queens, very unusual in those days.

DESCRIBE THE DEVELOPMENT OF A FAMILY BUSINESS

Look at the story of the Sam Walton family He worked hard all his life, and brought his children into the business, expecting them to so the same. And now the Wal-Mart enterprise reaches all over the world.

A wonderful family who came to Florida during the early days o Castor's takeover of Cuba set up their book bindery business in Miami,. Today when you walk into their shop it seems to me the atmosphere is what it was like in the early days when a craft was practiced with pride and devotion to high standards. The old folks do the handwork of binding while the young folks do the marketing and business management.

LEAVE A WRITTEN LEGACY FOR YOUR FAMILY

Perhaps you family has scattered and live far away from one another, as is the case with so many families today. Yet there is the recognition that it all started in a particular place or area. Maybe it was a mill town in Vermont, like the town of Cavendish. There the Gay family built the mill and operated it for years, before selling to another family who also operated the cotton mill until its conversion to plastic works. The original families have moved away. Yet the story needs to be set down fact by fact for the next generation to read about and know.

PROVIDE A HISTORY FOR THE COMMUNITY OR STATE ARCHIVES

The owner of the mill and the wonderful Glimmerstone mansion eventually became a state senator in Vermont. Does your family have an ancestor who served in the government? In elected office? On the local level, like town commissioner like my friend Dan Churchill, who was just awarded recognition for his faithful service to community? Or did your family member perform some mundane, but important service, like census taker? When I was selected to take the school census at age 17, I was the only person who was going on to higher education in my little town. The little town watched over the development of the children and families. And there I was, taking the census and recording it, as I recall, in long hand using a straight pen dipping it into the black inkwell occasionally and carefully recording the names and informant of the fifty children in that little school district.

ESTABLISH A FAMILY LINK WITH GENEALOGISTS

Memoirists differ from genealogists. Those folks see the scope of recollection not in terms of stories, but dates and facts and figures. Both groups need to know what the others are doing. Your memoir will fill in the missing blanks regarding dates of births, marriage and deaths, along with the more interesting ones of sweet sixteen birthday parties, fiftieth anniversaries held maybe your ancestors were explorers and the dates and circumstances need to be recorded. Or maybe they invented something wonderful.

SATISFY YOUR PERSONAL DESIRE TO TELL THE STORY

If you are wondering whether it is sufficient reason to pursue writing your story simply to tell the story for our own satisfaction, ponder no more. Desire to tell the story is the primary motivator. And along with desire goes the passion that promotes you in the first place. Maybe you have been aware of the story all your life, and you have wanted to tell it, the way it has been for me telling of my ancestor's sailing trip to China in 1854. Maybe you have been able to visualize the way things were in the Gold Rush, and your family was there. Or maybe you heard about the whaling industry and want to tell the story from your own point of view. Maybe someone rose from poverty to riches and led a life of kindness to others. You want to tell that story.

ILLUSTRATE YOUR OWN PLACE IN THE FAMILY HISTORY

A person usually sees himself or herself in the context of the family. Often a story teller wants to figure things out for himself or herself as to what the relationships were in the family, whether the story describes a long time ago or more recent past.

Maybe you had the same attribute as a parent, and became a doctor or a teacher, too. Or you want to layout the story so that you are reassured that you do occupy a place in the family. Maybe you have been away and need to reconnect and want to see yourself in the family picture. Or maybe you had a family member who does not fit into the family and you want to tell about that.

DEMONSTRATE YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS BASED ON FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

Families always expect the best. How did your life meet those expectations? Were you the first one to get a college degree, like me? Or the first to travel to another continent? Or to fly a plane or take part in the Olympics? What are the achievements that your family expected of you and how well have you attained those? What have you done beyond that expectation? By writing your story you can demonstrate those achievements. Is it important to receive family recognition for your work? Many times they are not clear about what those have been and why they are important to you. I remember a lady who, as she turned 100, and thought back over her life including two world wars, the Great Depression, life with a mentally ill husband, needing a job and taking a teaching job on the Lower East side of NYC. When I asked Florence what she was most proud of,

she said, "Teaching little children to read." An amazing response, humbling and magnificent.

ENSURE YOUR FAMILY CULTURE WILL LIVE ON

The play, *You Can't Take it With You* by Kaufmann is spoof of the foibles and idiosyncrasies of some families, maybe most families. Set in the 1930s the play portrays an atmosphere of misunderstandings and lack of communication and amusing characters focused on what they were doing and not other. But it was the family, with all its peculiarities. Your story will ensure that your particular family culture will be recorded, read about, marveled at and remembered.

YOUR OWN PERSONAL REASONS

Perhaps, after all of those reasons for writing your story and for all the new thoughts that may have arisen in reading them, you still have your own reasons for telling your story. Great! That illustrates my point that everyone has a story to tell and that each one of those stories is unique. Yours is unique. And needs to be told.