

Writing Spiritual Memoirs

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Memoirs focus on the hours and minutes most keen in our lives— the times when we are fully alive, when experiences penetrate to the quick. In these moments we define ourselves; the ways we respond reveal our souls. At such times, times of joy or crisis or profound contentment, our individuality emerges distinctly; and at these times we may have a sense of context beyond ourselves.

Writing is a way to enter the recesses of your soul, first by writing about the experiences, people, and places most important in your life. After you've drafted accounts, then you may wish to examine them for spiritual aspects such as compassion, transformation, uncanny knowing, grace, and times when you were imbued with strength or integrated into a spiritual dimension greater than yourself. You may find that your writing already implicitly reveals such dimensions, or you may decide to add reflections.

Memoirs don't focus on where you were born, what schools you attended, or where you've lived. Other documents do that. Rather, you'll write about your inner life, the heart of your being, your essence. Eventually, after you've collected a series of writings, you'll organize them — possibly chronologically, possibly some other way.

Today I'll guide you in creating a personal table of contents, suggest a writing process for you to follow, offer questions you may use to reflect on your quick rough drafts, and you will write the initial paragraphs of your memoirs.

If you would like to contact me, please write to Nan Phifer at nanphifer@mac.com, or 2126 Kimberly Circle, Eugene, OR 97405. I'll welcome your suggestions. Thank you.

My web site at <http://www.memoirworkshops.com> gives additional information.

Steps of a Writing Process

The following approach usually facilitates good writing; but if it does not help you, feel free to alter it. It is meant as a general, flexible guide, not a constricting formula.

1. Gather ideas. Each chapter will help you to use memory aids: photographs, documents, souvenirs, maps, lists, graphs. You'll find that your life is filled with subjects for your book.
2. Tell a friend or writing partner what you are considering writing. By narrating orally before you write, you'll organize your ideas and find the words you want.
3. Scrawl a quick rough draft, skipping lines so you'll have room to revise. Putting fluency first, ignore spelling and punctuation; you'll proofread for mechanics later. Number pages. Dare to ramble.
4. Hear the rough draft. Read it aloud to yourself, or to a dear friend, or to a response group. Any hearing is helpful.
5. Revise the rough draft, if you wish. You may want to clarify, or restate, or add information.
6. If you're concerned about grammar or spelling, consider asking someone to proofread for you. If you word process your final drafts, take advantage of the spelling checker.
7. Hand write, type, or word process a final draft.

These steps are helpful to many writers. Step three allows you to pursue thoughts without being distracted by concerns for mechanical correctness, and step four allows you to find out if what you expressed did convey what was intended. Step five, editing and revising can incorporate as much or as little response from listeners as you wish. Proofreading, step six, should be postponed until just before writing the final draft.

From *Memoirs of the Soul: A Writing Guide*, ISBN: 978-0-9842060-0-1, by Nan Phifer

Writers' Response Groups Guidelines for Supportive Listening and Constructive Responding

Listening

- Suspend judgment of the writer's actions and opinions. Assume that we have all behaved as best we could in the past and that, were we to relive our lives, we would do some things differently. Our role is not to evaluate the actions or feelings of the writer.
- Listen to learn. People from backgrounds different from our own and people who lead lifestyles we have not experienced may broaden our understanding and deepen our wisdom.
- Guard the confidentiality of the reader. As writers, we need freedom to explore all thoughts and possibilities in an honest and searching way. You will inhibit your fellow writers if you talk with other people about the readings you hear.

Responding

- Begin by commending anything you like about the content or rendering of the writing. Point out an aspect you admire.
- Ask a question. Writers frequently assume they've explained things they've left out. Your question will help the writer perceive any ways the writing is incomplete or unclear.

Unless the writer asks for further suggestions, you've said enough. However, if the writer does ask a specific question, try to answer it.

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If these guidelines are conscientiously followed, a safe atmosphere is created in which writers reveal, explore, and examine their lives candidly. Only in such an atmosphere can we freely seek to discover reconciliation, the purpose and meaning, and the workings of spiritual power in our lives.

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### **Questions for Reflection**

The writing of memoirs is a grand adventure, a voyage into one's inner life, into one's soul. I liken this trek to walking a labyrinth because the approach I recommend is to write first about accessible subjects, usually the visible topics of the outer life, and then to gradually work inward to those profound subjects that plumb emotions and raise cosmic questions.

As in any quest, the writer does not know what discoveries will be made along the way. Be aware that important discoveries appear more readily when the first draft is written quickly, without reflection. The course of the spontaneous first draft may veer in unexpected directions. Allow it to go where it will because when this happens, writing becomes revealing and exciting.

The time to reflect on your writing is after the first draft has been written. Then you may find a quiet place where you reread it and reflect on questions such as the following:

What were my emotions at the time of the experience?

At the time of the experience, what were my longings, my needs, my primary concerns?

What relationship was important to me? In what ways did I experience feelings such as confusion, pain, anger, frustration, hurt, or despair?

Write about how your writing shows qualities in yourself such as:

|            |            |             |            |
|------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| creativity | intuition  | inspiration | courage    |
| patience   | resolution | devotion    | service    |
| generosity | energy     | empathy     | compassion |

What kept you going?

What people and teachings guided you?

What was your source of hope?

What comfort did you find?

What surprised you? What did you learn?

As you reflect on your experience, and your response to it, do you glimpse evidence of transcendence, or belonging, or grace?