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Memoir Writing with a Purpose

by Jeff Rasley

Most writers have kept a journal or diary during some period in their lives. I started a diary when I was sixteen. After two weeks I quit and burned the document out of fear my parents might find it. There was too much incriminating evidence, and my strict Midwestern, Presbyterian parents would not have allowed me to take the Fifth to avoid self-incrimination. I didn't take up journal writing again until I became a serious adventure traveler. (Serious in the sense that it was a favorite avocation since age 18.)

Some of my travel experiences seemed worth recording in photographs and in writing. In some cases there was meaning to be interpreted from the experiences beyond the immediacy of the moment. So, I began to try to turn some of my travel journaling into publishable articles. Eventually I had enough material to write books, which were travel memoirs with a purpose. In the journal I would record the facts of the experience and my reaction to it. To turn the journal writing into a worthy article or book there had to be meaning beyond the experience. There had to be an insight, lesson or wisdom which I could interpret from the experience and offer to others. The next challenge was, of course, finding a publisher.

Creating an article worthy of publication meant going beyond mere biographical journaling. If one is a person of historical or cultural interest, then autobiographical writing may be worthy of publication. (No matter how poorly written the Paris Hiltons of our celebrity-obsessed culture will find a publisher.) But, fortunately or unfortunately that eliminates ninety nine percent of the rest of us. Journaling for one's own pleasure, or to pass on to family and heirs, of course has value. And social media has created the opportunity to bore the hell out of friends by posting the quotidian details of one's life. ["Here I am enjoying my first copy of coffee of the day looking out my window and a blue bird landed on the sill, blah, blah, etc."]

The personal essays, or memoirs with a purpose, I have been inspired to write are mostly about extreme experiences such as Himalayan mountain climbing or solo sea-kayaking. I have learned, or had reinforced, great lessons about life from these adventures. For example, I was inspired to write about the strength and beauty of the human spirit and the willingness to be self-sacrificial after witnessing a Nepalese guide and porter risk their lives to save and care for others who had been trapped by an avalanche.

Other writers have found meaning worthy of publication in more mundane experiences. My sister-in-law, Cherri Megasko, writes for the Yahoo Contributor Network. She uses personal experiences to write about topics of interest to homeowners, parents and a general readership.

For example, her article entitled “Groundhog Wars” is a delightfully humorous essay about the different approaches her and a neighbor applied to dealing with a resident groundhog. Its wider application for animal lovers is how to deal with what some consider pests and others consider lovable critters.

Essential to making a memoir interesting and worthy of publication is to have a central theme that carries the narrative forward. Without a thematic narrative, we are back to mere observation or a random collection of insights without a guiding light. [And I know from hard won experience it is best to have a guide in uncharted territory and a light to see in the darkness.] In other words, the piece should make a point.

The narrative must include factual details to make it interesting. Without interesting, quirky or astonishing factual details, a personal essay gets placed in the folder labeled BORING. Even hard core academic writing must include the important facts on which an argument is based. A point made in the abstract is likely to be forgotten as soon as the magazine or book is closed or the reading device turned off.

The last point I cover when teaching a class about memoir writing is to consider carefully whether to identify or to change the identity of individuals, organizations or companies referred to in the piece. Friendships can be damaged and libel / defamation suits can be filed. It is easy enough to disguise an identity with a fake name and to attribute some intentionally misleading characteristics to protect the privacy or reputation of a person or organization. Consider the consequences and choose wisely.

As to publication, well, much has changed in the last decade or so. When I first began writing for publication in the 1980s, I would go to my neighborhood library and page through Writers’ Market looking for the magazines or journals interested in publishing the type of article I had written. Now, the neighborhood library has probably closed. Information about publishers is online, but many of the print publications have ceased to exist or been downsized. The advent of the digital age and online publishing has created vastly more opportunities for publication than ever before. And I don’t subscribe to the view that quantity has reduced quality. Great writing still happens and is more accessible. But there are fewer traditional publishers of successful magazines and books.

One significant consequence for writers of the traditional publishing industry’s decrepitude is that pay is harder to come by. For several decades a writer could expect to be paid from \$100 to \$2,500, depending on the newspaper’s / magazine’s / journal’s prestige and circulation, for a feature length article. And there were multiple publication possibilities for many different categories of articles. While the multiplicity of online publications (especially blogs) has vastly increased the possibility of publication, the possibilities for remuneration seem to be much reduced. Writing for “content farms” or guest blogging (thanks Morgen!) did not exist as opportunities in pre-digital history. Unfortunately, the writing is often done gratis (damn!).