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Meaningful Memoir Writing

by Jeff Rasley

Most writers have kept a journal or diary during some period in their lives. I started a diary when I was 16. 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 serious about writing adventure travel articles for publication.

Some of my travel experiences, I thought, had value for others and I wanted to share. Creating a publishable piece required more than simply recording the experience. For others to find meaning through reading about my experiences I had to recreate events, places and characters beyond the immediacy of the moment. Eventually I had enough material and confidence to write a book. My first book was a travel memoir with a purpose. It offered the reader the wisdom I had gained from people who live in a remote village in the Nepal Himalayas.

Creating an article or book 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 Kim Kardashians of our celebrity-obsessed culture will find a publisher.) But fortunately, or unfortunately, that eliminates 99 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 our friends by posting the quotidian details of our lives.

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. 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 is BORING. 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.

As to publication, well, much has changed in the last decade. 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 print publishers 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 periodical'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 Stacy!) did not exist as opportunities in pre-digital history. Unfortunately, the writing is often done gratis (d***!).