

Leaving *a* Legacy

– writing down memories

The bulge in the aging population has definitely triggered an interest in family history, evident in the increased number of people exploring Genealogy, and focusing on writing Memoirs.

Allyson Latta, who teaches memoir writing, says, “A lot of people come to my classes because their parents are aging – there may be a health problem or loss of memory, and my students want to capture their parents’ stories before they’re gone. I always tell them, ‘That’s great. But there’s an irony to that – we never realize that we should be writing things down until something like a parent’s illness triggers it. But the truth is that you should be starting now with your own memoirs, while your memories are intact.’”

Laura Suchan, is an instructor for Trent University in Oral History. She says, “I teach my students that our families are a part of history. We’re taught in public school about public history and social history and sometimes we get the ideas that history is all about politicians and important men. I give my students assignments to get out and interview people and get their stories down on paper. It’s so great when you see the students grasp the idea that personal story is history too – regular people also experienced history and contributed to it.”

Ms. Suchan also teaches memoir and works one on one with people to help them capture their memories. She agrees that a lot of people out there are writing to help someone else get their stories down. “I have one student, for instance – his wife is in the early stages of Alzheimers. He’s taking my course so he can preserve her stories for the family. It’s important to them that the grandchildren be able to read these later and have access to who she is as a person.” She adds, “A lot of people make it out to be much more difficult than it is. Once you get started, it’s an amazing adventure.”

Ms. Latta worked with her 80-year-old father. “We joke that he is my least successful student –he hasn’t written nearly everything I want him to. But we did produce 14 stories together. I now know much more about his life than I did. The point is not to get everything down, but to at least start somewhere.

“Our process was that I would email him prompts and he wrote the stories and sent them back. This is ideal – I’m fortunate that he is so computer literate. His first reaction to many of my prompts was, “Oh, you know all about that,” or “you wouldn’t be interested in that.” But I didn’t know all about it, and I was interested. This is common. It’s the parent’s story and because they know it, they assume the rest

of the family knows it. But they don’t – or at least, not in all its interesting detail.”

What to do once it’s down on paper? Ms. Latta suggests, “Some of my students are interested in being published commercially or in self-publishing their book. But there’s a huge value for family members in simply photocopying it on 8 1/2 x 11 sheets and collating it in a binder. They treasure it.”

Ms. Suchan, who also works with the Oshawa Museum and Archives, notes, “Once the memoir is in hard copy, the family could offer to donate a copy to the local archive if they’re from that area. Donating copies of photographs is very much appreciated too.”

With all the desktop publishing software available in personal computers now, there are many ways of distributing family information. Scanning in those old one-of-a-kind family photos is a possibility and then giving everyone their own disk of the photos. Or a family calendar each year with old photos and a story underneath is a very special gift.

Alex Haley, the author of the book *Roots*, noted “When an old person dies, it’s like a library burning.” It’s important to fire-proof your family’s stories so they won’t be lost. And don’t forget, those stories should include yours.

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How to Start

The task of writing the story of a life may feel overwhelming. But a memoir does not have to be the entire story of a life. It can be focused on a particular time or event, or on a particular relationship. Begin by asking yourself or the person you’re working with if there’s anything in particular that is calling to be written about. If there is nothing special, Laura Suchan suggests that beginning with the family photo album is a great idea. Go through the pictures and write something about each one; write as much as you can remember about the individual people in each picture. If your mother is talking about her wedding picture, try and interview other family members and friends who were there and include details from those other perspectives.

Another great source of prompts is to go through your CV or your resume. Each one of those positions listed will bring back a flood of memories – the building, the co-workers, the accomplishments, and the challenges.

When writing, include sensuous details – what things sounded, smelled, felt and tasted like, as well as how they looked. The world comes to us through our senses – if you want to make it come alive for those who will read the stories, you need to include details to prompt the senses.

When writing about repetitive events like family holidays, religious holidays, birthdays, etc. it is best to write about the singular event. For example, it is more interesting and vivid to write about the time that the dog ate the Christmas turkey off the counter than simply to write about the fact that the family had a gigantic turkey for Christmas each year.

**Start with a list of topics as prompts.
Choose one topic and start there.
Below is a short list to get you started.**

- Birth
- Parents, grandparents and great-grandparents
- Brothers and sisters
- Other relatives (aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, and more)
- Neighbours and the neighbourhood
- Toys, first memories, etc.
- Illnesses and Remedies
- Places you and/or your family have lived
- How you survived the Depression, poverty, etc.
- Children
- Jobs
- Turning points in your life
- Hobbies
- Pets and other animals
- Family feuds
- Gifts – special gifts you have given or received
- Food
- Brushes with physical danger
- Lessons you have learned
- Natural disasters: blizzards, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, etc.
- Tears you have shed
- Vacations & other trips

