

Strategies for Working with Incomplete Memories

*"I must say a few words about memory. It is full of holes. If you were to lay it out upon a table, it would resemble a scrap of lace. I am a lover of history...[but] history has one flaw. It is a subjective art, no less so than poetry or music...The historian writes a truth. The memoirist writes a truth. The novelist writes a truth. And so on. My mother, we both know, wrote a truth in *The 19th Wife*—a truth that corresponded to her memory and desires. It is not the truth, certainly not. But a truth, yes...Her book is a fact. It remains so, even if it is snowflaked with holes."*

--The 19th Wife, David Ebershoff

Is vivid recall absolutely essential to good writing? Many of us start out believing that we must remember accurately and well and then transcribe our memories.

Yet exploring a vague memory, even a memory later identified as false or partial can give rise to vivid writing. This is what we're going to explore today.

As we write, you may be appalled at how much you have forgotten. Sometimes it seems like whole years have been wiped out of your life. You may have generic memories, but not specific memories that make for vivid writing.

Exercise: Choose one vague memory of something that happened over and over. Retell this generic memory as if it happened just once. In telling it as a single, one-time memory, try to evoke the experience as a single vivid moment in time.

WRITING ABOUT WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Writing practice: Do a writing practice to the prompt, "I don't remember"

We all have stories that haunt us that we don't know much about...your mother's breakdown when she was a teenager, your grandfather's desertion of the family, the dead child nobody talked about. These untold stories, family secrets or holes in your personal history can be powerful parts of your narrative.

Here are some strategies for working with what you don't know:

1. Find out all you can. (see separate handout on research).

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2. Acknowledge the fact that the missing information is a problem for you and involve your reader in your efforts to uncover or recreate an unknown or partially forgotten past. Your reflections on what you cannot know and what you imagine to be true, your frustration at not knowing more and your willingness to actively engage in the unknown give your narrative candor and power.
3. Use imagination and invention to speculate on what might have happened, but acknowledge to the reader that's what you're doing. You can use prompts such as: I only know that...Perhaps this is what happened...No one ever told me this story became...I've always wondered if maybe....Nobody knows why...I think he/she did this because...
4. Use what you do know as a jumping off place....for instance you might know about the season or the place or the times....start there and then branch out to explore what you don't know....

You can write a powerful piece through imaginative reconstruction around the edges of a few known events. Sometimes, a piece of writing can be more powerful precisely because so little is known.

Exercise: Think of an event or piece of family history that you want to include in your memoir, one that you only know a little about.

Writing Exercise: Write a speculative piece about what might have happened, exploring several different options. Invite the reader into your speculation. In your narrative, admit what you don't know. Feel free to use what you do know (place, time of year, a few acknowledged facts) as a place to begin.

Consider using one or more of these prompts as a jumping off place:

- I only know that...
- Perhaps this is what happened...
- No one ever told me this story became...
- I've always wondered if maybe....
- Nobody knows why...
- I think he/she did this because...
- The only thing I know about...
- Maybe he saw....Maybe she felt...
- Whenever the subject of my grandmother came up...
- I wonder what my brother thought as he looked out this window...

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Writing Prompts for Memoir

Basic Prompts:

- I remember...
- I believe...
- I've learned...
- I used to be, but now I am...
- Tell me the story of your name
- Where I come from
- What I'm made of
- Tell me about your people
- My foundation
- What I stand on
- Turning points
- A phone call that changed my life

Memory Enhancing Prompts:

- What food was kept in the kitchen when you were a child? Describe it in detail.
- Tell me about your first telephone and how it was used.
- Tell me about your first TV or another time something new entered your family life. This will vary depending on your age.
- Tell me about green stamps, coupons, or another way your family saved money when you were a child.

If you didn't grow up with a mother or father, substitute other significant adults in your life for the following prompts:

- Tell me about your mother's jewelry or something else she treasured.
- Tell me about what your father kept on his dresser. If he didn't keep things on his dresser, choose another place where he took things out of his pocket and set them down.
- Write about something that you saw when you were standing in a doorway.
- Write about something that happened while you were in a car.
- Write about something that happened when you were in a bathroom.
- Write about something that happened while you were on some form of public transportation.
- Write about something that happened in a kitchen.

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- Write about something that happened in a backyard in the summer.
- Write about something that happened in a schoolyard.
- A story my family tells about me
- A habitual story
- A story that is repeated over and over in my family
- A story I tell to new people in my life to create intimacy and reveal character

More Memory Enhancing Prompts:

- A story I tell to shock people
- A story I tell to fool people
- A story I tell about being hurt, abandoned or victimized
- A story that has helped me to survive
- The day (my mother was taken away, my sister died, John cornered me in the barn, the telegram came, I was fired, I got out of jail)
- What I wish I had said
- Tell me about someone who believed in you
- Tell me about a time you lost hope
- Tell me about a time you decided to try again
- Tell me about a time you hit bottom
- Write a letter saying goodbye to your youth (or fill in the blank...)
- Tell me about a subject your father/mother/husband/sister/minister brought up again and again. See if you can write it in his/her voice.
- Make a list of twenty people who are no longer in your life. Chose one person you no longer have in your life and write a portrait of that person. Repeat.
- Describe the clothing you wore during a particular time in your life. Write a story about the clothing that reveals character.
- A promise I made to myself

To Help Get A Sense of Perspective

- What I learned (the summer I was five, in the hospital, when Papa died, growing up on the streets, from winning the lottery...)
- What love has taught me
- What hate has taught me
- What silence has taught me
- How I survived
- What I've lost
- What I've found

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The Role of Research as a Tool for Filling in Gaps in Memory

The first step in writing about what you don't know is researching everything possible you can about a topic. Research can be a creative process.

Every time you do a free writing exercise and tap into your subconscious, you are doing research. We often find we remember more than we think we do.

The more you write, the more you uncover, the more you remember, and the more you begin to identify the places you *don't* know.

There is a time to reach beyond your own heart, mind and soul.

You may remember the canoe trip you took with your family as a child, but you probably don't know that the Hudson River is born in Lake Tear of the Clouds in the Adirondacks, that it's 315 miles long, named after Henry Hudson, 1440 feet wide at its widest, etc. And while you're looking up those facts, you have no idea what else you might find.

You can write your way around a missing fact, but readers will appreciate the extra effort toward accuracy and a frame beyond your personal experience.

Research can also help you learn more about: sports, music, TV shows, movies, radio programs, political events, environmental concerns, events in your home town at the time your memoir took place. Even if not all of this research gets into your final piece (or only just a little), it will take the focus off of me, me, me.

Readers will appreciate a broader context: the look and feel of a city during a particular era, its crime problems, the artists who directed its cultural life, the musicians who populated its clubs, along with your experience moving through its streets, going to those clubs, tapping your foot to those musicians and living your individual life.

Broadening your story is always good for your memoir. Refuge is a perfect example. It's not just the story of her mother's death from cancer. It's about ecological changes, political responses to those changes, nuclear testing, the Mormon faith and a lot more.

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Let's say you grew up on a farm and you want to write about those years. Your personal story of family and crops and animals will be enhanced if you offer the bigger picture, too: some history of agriculture, notes on the weather during those years, stories about water rights, anything that allows the reader to see your personal journey in the context of a larger story.

Questions to consider:

- What major events were going on in the world at that time?
- How did people in your community respond to those events?
- What were the economic realities of the time?
- Why were they that way?
- How did people spend their free time?
- What styles and trends captured the popular imagination?
- What traditions were common?
- What music was popular?
- What did people read?
- What did they eat?
- What values did your community teach its children?

Time for legwork. Time for treasure hunt.

You don't need to know how you're going to use this stuff. Just absorb it. Read old magazines, newspapers, biographies, histories. Watch DVDs, TV shows, old movies. Listen to the music that was popular. Revisit the food through old cookbooks. Talk with strangers who lived during the time. Take notes and make the notes part of you. Then put them away.

If you don't gather them, they won't find their way into your story when you need them....and your writing will be less rich and evocative.

Possible sources:

- Library
- Internet
- Public Records...property records, court records, probate records, police records
- Private Records...photographs, journals, letters, scrapbooks...

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- Travel...how many of you could travel back to a place you're writing about... a particular house, town, office building, school, police station, city....and benefit from seeing, smelling, re-experiencing that place
- Face to face Research—interviews....need to be careful...people you want info about may not want to talk about certain subjects, much less have you write about them...people may have lots of unwanted advice or censure that comes flooding in when a project becomes public property. People will want to control what is said about them. Other times, people will get excited about what's said about them...and be sending pictures, recollections, etc.

Possible ways to proceed:

1. Interview someone who can provide memories, background information, corroborating knowledge or insight into your story.
2. Get someone to interview you about your subject. Record the interview. Do this with another writer. Have the person interview you on the subject matter of your memoir. When the talk is over, transcribe the tape and see what you discover. The questions your interviewer comes up with are important. They let you know the kinds of things your readers will be interested in and what may be missing in your draft.
3. Find a vague place in one of your drafts and do whatever it takes to properly name the tree, the type of hardware, the name of the harbor, the neighbor or the school down the street. See what else you discover as you find the answers. See what surprises turn up that you might use in your writing.
4. Read *Annie's Ghosts* by Steve Luxenberg for a good example of how someone did extensive research for a memoir and then used research to fill in some (but not all) of the gaps.

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