

Like the other chapters in this volume, this essay was the basis of a presentation made at an ACRS breakfast meeting. Unlike the other memoirs, however, it offers not so much the story of the author's life as it does her reflections on the process of memoir writing. This process resulted in the publication of many personal essays and Shirley's delightful book-length memoir, BLUSH. One of her goals is to encourage other writers to reflect on and write about the ways the history and culture of Anabaptism have shaped their lives. Her website: www.shirleyshowalter.com includes a place to sign up for weekly writing prompts called Magical Memoir Moments.

Shirley Hershey Showalter

Why Writing Memoir Is Hard . . . And Why You Should Do It Anyway

I owe the Lord a morning song
Of gratitude and praise,
For the kind mercies he has shown
In lengthening out my days.[i]

The filmmaker Samuel Goldwyn once said, "I don't think anyone should write his autobiography until after he's dead." [ii] I'm beginning to think, after

six years of writing numerous personal essays and one book-length memoir, that Goldwyn was right. In fact, on some days, I think this whole process might be shaving a year or two off my life. Of course, this essay was written smack dab in the middle of the process, and we all know why the phrase “murky middle” exists.

The middle place, however, offers some opportunities that no other vantage point can boast: the ability to stand between the beginning and the end, between the good and the bad. This piece stakes a claim to the middle position and asks what is good and what is bad about writing a memoir. My argument will sound a lot like the great platitude of the sports world: “No pain, no gain.”

Behind that generic truth hides a deeper one. After exploring both the pain and the gain, I will explain why I think all of us should write or record or at least verbally share stories about our lives.

Pain: Why Memoir Writing is *Hard*

All writing is hard work. Watch a child who is trying to write a paragraph while twisting her hair into a knot or another who is biting his lower lip.

Remember the pain of your first research paper? Well, practice may produce better outcomes as time goes on, but the pain only gets worse!

William Styron once said, “Let’s face it, writing is hell.”^[iii] But perhaps the most famous description of all is this one: “Writing a novel is like traveling from Vladivostok to Paris on your knees.” No one seems to know with certainty the author of those words, but all writers know the feeling; and any author who claims to enjoy writing all the time is not to be trusted!

The posture of being on one’s knees makes an overt connection to prayer, which is a good analogy, I think. One thing prayer and writing have in common, at least in my experience, is that they attract distraction. As soon as I determine to do either one of them and settle myself down in my chair, my thoughts run wild:

- Those plants look like they need water.
- My nose itches.
- What shall I make for lunch?
- Maybe there is a new picture of the grandchildren in my inbox.
- I think I hear a ping on my computer. *Facebook* status update!

Writing, like meditation, requires persistence in silence. Those first minutes of “monkey mind” thoughts about other things give way only when you sink

down lower below consciousness. Some days you can get there soon; other days the chatter and little interruptions never end, and you reach the end of a day with nothing to show for it.

Writing about oneself is doubly hard. Many people get stopped before they start. Where do I begin? What will people think if I tell the truth about my life?

Here is a paradox for you: It takes ego to write a memoir, but ego unleashed is an ugly thing. Some memoirs go down the path of revenge, self-pity, or whininess. No wonder the words *memoir* and *narcissist* often appear in the same sentence.

Yet a memoir without conflict loses the main ingredient of story. Some writers, especially those taught to value peace at any price, brush over conflict and paint with only the bright, sunny colors, leaving out the shadows.

Mennonites have always emphasized the importance of humility and modesty, especially for women. So a Mennonite woman memoirist pushes the boundaries for some readers, not least of whom might be herself. Not surprisingly, when I wrote my first draft, I could hear voices whispering, “Who does she think she is?”

The truth about my life is that I loved attention when I was a child; and as a first-born, I got a lot of it, especially at home. I had a mother who loved to dress me up and encouraged me to enter contests as a teenager, who named me after a movie star, Shirley Temple. A mother who sadly left her jewelry, make-up, fashionable dresses, stylish coats and chic hats behind when she joined the church at age eighteen. A mother who loved my exuberance and aspiration yet disapproved of pride when she thought she saw it in me. She herself struggled to find a place for her gifts in the church and was happy when she saw me develop as a Bible quizzier and Sunday night speaker in the Mennonite Youth Fellowship, yet she was not at all sure that I should go to college. My father was even less sure.

I had to learn the hard way, in school and in church, that I was not the center of the universe. When that happened, I blushed. I also blushed when I tried to pretend to sophistication I did not have or when others made fun of Mennonites in general or of me in particular. Hence the title Herald Press and I chose for my memoir was *Blush: A Mennonite Girl Meets a Glittering World*.

When you begin to reflect on the themes of your own life, you inevitably find embarrassing, painful situations. You will be tempted to turn

away. Don't. Your story probably lies somewhere close to those pain points. For example, when I wrote about Mennonite courtship, I remembered one young man I had not thought about in years, a high school senior I dated once or twice who was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer soon after our last date. I did not consider him my boyfriend; but when I heard the news about him, I was sad. I never went to visit him, fearing he would think I was "serious" about him, not trusting myself around either death or romance. At the time, avoidance seemed a wise choice. Now I regret that I did not have the strength to be present for a dying friend. Perhaps my regret about what I did not do at age seventeen contributed in some small way to later hospital visits and later acknowledgments of failure.

The biggest fear many memoirists have stems from the fact that it is impossible to tell your own story without also telling the story of the other characters attached to your life. You leave yourself open to their criticism and correction if you include them. If you let all those characters read your book, you may get confused. If you give them veto power over what you say, you may end up losing your own voice.

Ironically, you can also offend people by leaving them out of your story. So it is best to write for yourself as your first audience and then to an

“ideal reader” who needs to hear your story. Strive always to be truthful, but recognize that your truth may not always match the memory of others in your life. Choose those whose opinion matters most to you and share your story with them. Listen to their critique, but change your work only if you were wrong about factual details, time sequence, or other external forces. Your feelings and thoughts are your own, and you need to find your own internal truth.

How you tell your story can be one of the biggest challenges of all, especially if you choose to write a lengthy memoir or autobiography. The longer the form, the harder the task will be. I got started by writing short pieces called “personal essays” in the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, I began to think of memoir as my favorite genre only after the *Kalamazoo Gazette* newspaper offered a literary awards contest in 2007. The category that most appealed to me they called *memoir*.

Remember the little girl whose mother encouraged her to enter contests? Well, she still exists inside the adult Shirley. I decided to test whether I had any memoir to write about. I spent a weekend at Gilchrist, a nearby retreat center, and invited God to guide my memory and my hand. I came back from that weekend with three stories. The experience of writing

them was holy. “The Fresh Air Girl” won first place in the newspaper contest. Eventually it became a chapter in my longer memoir.

When I proposed a book-length memoir to Herald Press in 2011, I knew my greatest challenge would be structure. I felt very comfortable with the essay form of ten to twenty pages. But how could I create a long memoir with enough suspense and action to sustain the reader’s interest all the way to the end?

I had attended a few workshops on writing memoir, and I remembered this piece of advice: “Throw your character into a pot of boiling water and then turn on the heat.” The trouble was, however, that my “boiling water” was pretty tame stuff by the standards of most memoirs. I would have to find a way to dramatize and make sacred everyday life on the farm and church. And I would have to find a structure that held all this material together. I was relieved and a little amused when I discovered author Paulette Alden’s great description of my own problem:

But it wasn’t a straight-forward or easy process to turn that short piece into a book. A book is so LONG! I had to find a structure, I had to figure out what to put in and what to leave out, and what order all the material should be in. I had to get in backstory, which would give meaning to the present action story.[iv]

I was relieved to discover that some writers did not follow the narrative arc (with a carefully designed introduction, development, conflict, and resolution) in memoir writing. Like me, they enjoyed the short essay and hoped to weave thematic threads through a series of chapters that could stand alone as essays. The model that I found particularly helpful was Mildred Armstrong Kalish's *Little Heathens: Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm in the Great Depression*.^[v]

What I eventually came up with was a structure similar to Kalish's, in which title, introduction, conclusion, and thematic allusions throughout the book do the work of the narrative arc. I know that some readers, especially those that love a rippin' fast read, will find my book slow, maybe even boring. But I counted on finding readers who appreciate the small-scale dramas of long-ago farm life and long-ago Lancaster Conference. Most Mennonites know how huge those small dramas can seem to those who lived them.

Finally, writing memoir is hard because it is often done at a computer. I have spent too many hours in front of screens ever since I first bought my own personal computer in the early 1980s. My jaw, neck, and shoulders take a beating as I sit for hours at a time, straining for the right word. I walk

an hour each day, do strength training, yoga, and massage; but I still feel aches and pains in my body, especially when a deadline looms.

Gain: Why Memoir Writing is Important

Even when writing memoir causes suffering, as it undoubtedly does, we should still do it. The stories of our lives matter to God, to our family, and to our community. The Bible itself, a book full of stories, is proof of this fact. True, very little of it is written in the first person, but some of it is. Jesus, for example, in John 12:32 (KJV) says, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.” Our Bible Quiz team in the 1960s spent a lot of time talking about the meaning of that sentence. Now I see it as a one-sentence memoir!

Sometimes I am consciously aware of writing as a spiritual experience. One of my favorite proverbs is this one: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pitchers of silver.”[vi] I can testify to the joy of wrestling mightily for the right word or sentence, and then suddenly, like grace, receiving words as gifts. Sometimes the tears flow also, an outward sign of the inward connection between joy and sorrow, pain and gain.

The sentences I love most in other authors' work flow like music and poetry. One example is this sentence from *My Antonia*, by Willa Cather:

"That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great."

[vii]From among the many other lovely ones she wrote, Cather chose those words to be inscribed on her tombstone. A few years ago I placed flowers and a stone on her grave in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, gazing at those words etched in stone and recognizing that Willa Cather was still alive! She was alive in my heart. Her words had cheated death.

That spiritual connection between writing and the eternal value of the fitly spoken word applies to our own lives and also to those we love. In my case, I felt the desire to write a memoir in part to honor my eighty-six-year-old mother while I could still talk with her about the details of my story. I dedicated the book to her. We spent hours together going through memorabilia—photos, clippings, report cards, calendars, and souvenirs. Each one of them brought new memories. My father died in 1980, so I couldn't talk with him. I know some day I will not be able to talk with Mother, either. But writing the memoir brought us closer and taught both of us things we did not know about each other.

One of the pieces of memorabilia I found was a Valentine that Mother wrote to me in 1969 several months before I got married. The note said,

You are the dolly I never had,
You are the figure I lost long ago
You are the stories I never wrote
You are the plays I was never in.

I realized by writing a memoir how much of her own life, her hopes and dreams, my mother poured into me. A quotation from Carl Jung came back to me in a new wave of understanding: “The greatest tragedy of the family is the unlived lives of the parents.”[viii]

I had another force pulling on me as I wrote. Just as my mother has connected me to the past and to the ten generations of my Mennonite family in America, in the same way my young grandson connects me to the future. I drafted the text of my memoir while living temporarily in Brooklyn, New York, and while working as “granny nanny” for baby Owen. How would Owen know what it was like to milk cows and sled down the hill and pick bluebells along the creek bank unless I told him my stories? And how will he know what I believe and how my faith was transferred from generation to generation unless I sing him my songs?

For me, writing a memoir, despite all the pain in the process, has been a great adventure. I am always happy when I am learning. In this case, I had to learn much not only about writing but also about history, technology, and social media. I enjoy the process *after* the writing and editing even more than the early retreat weekend in 2007 when three stories from my childhood came so easily to my hand.

Now, as I blog at www.shirleyshowalter.com and get to know readers interested in memoir and in my Mennonite story, I am already entering conversations that I look forward to on book tour. My logo on the website includes these words: “Discover the power of writing your story.” The circle will not be complete until *you* find your own way to tell your story. By all means, start with the short form: a journal, a scrapbook, a story. Or just pull up a chair and tell your story to a friend. Children make a great audience and will help you simplify, which is part of the process of figuring out what a story is *about*.

Memoir writing has drawn me back to the very beginning of my life. I think of my childhood as a magical time. Time mattered little, partly because it matters little to all children and partly because time changed things so slowly in my Mennonite farming community. But space—that was

different. I was a tiny creature set in a vast landscape, able to explore freely and safely. Every day brought a new adventure.

When indoors, I had a favorite way to play. I would line up chairs facing the front of the room and place my little brother, my dolls, and our stuffed animals on the chairs. Then I would sing, preach, and teach. Whatever I had gathered in my last adventure would pour forth out of me. Learning was exciting, but it was not complete until I shared what I learned with others.

This memory brings me to my final point about the value of memoir. It should help us understand more fully who we are and where we are headed. Most human beings, especially most Americans, do not take time to reflect deeply, but when we do, the rewards are great.

I chose a personal mission statement in 2004, before I realized I would write a memoir. I chose it while a friend was dying, and I think of her whenever I say these words: “My mission is to prepare for the hour of my death one good day at a time and to help others do the same.”

Chaplains and doctors tell us that the tasks of the dying are fourfold.[ix] They need to find a way to convey these ideas to those they love:

I forgive you
Please forgive me.
Thank you.
I love you.

I tried to say all these things in my memoir. I will need to say them many more times before I die. I thank God for “lengthening out my days” long enough to allow me to study my life, not because it is more important than other lives but because it is not.

Maybe Samuel Goldwyn was right after all. We should write our autobiographies after we die. Only after we die to our need for importance, the very force that drives many of us in our youth, can we find the deeper stories of our lives – the stories that connect us to all other parts of God’s brilliant, eternal, yet ever new creation.

September 10, 2012

Revised, August 2015

[i] Amos Herr, “I Owe the Lord a Morning Song,” Lancaster County bishop, 1890. (Published in nine hymnals).

[ii] <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/03/14/goldwyn-autobiography/> (accessed August 21, 2015)

[iii] <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5114/the-art-of-fiction-no-5-william-styron> (accessed August 21, 2015)

[iv] Paulette Alden, “Writing a Book-length Memoir” <http://paulettealden.com/articles/writing-a-book-length-memoir/> (accessed March 1, 2015).

[v] Mildred Armstrong Kalish, *Little Heathens: Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm in the Great Depression* (New York: Random House, 2008).

[vi] Proverbs 25:11 (KJV).

[vii] Willa Cather, *My Antonia*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1918, 1954) 18.

[viii]

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/22674-the-greatest-tragedy-of-the-family-is-the-unlived-lives>
(accessed August 21, 2015)

[ix] Ira Byock, M.D. *The Four Things that Matter Most: A Book About Living*. New York: Atria Books, 2004.