

Memoir Writing

@ San Mateo Senior Center

Session One

Dr. Chris Alan Foreman, Instructor

chrisalanforeman@gmail.com

chrisalanforeman.com

Memoir Writing

Do you want to pass down a written legacy to the next generation? Write your first-person life narrative. You will learn proper technique, practice your craft, receive encouragement, partner up, and polish your text. Join us!

Instructor: Senior Center Volunteer

Senior Center

142630-A1

Tue

10:00-11:00am

Free

1/6-3/3

Syllabus, PowerPoint, and handouts are available at:
chrisalanforeman.com/memoir

JUST START

—ASHA DORNFEST

JUST START WRITING, THEN KEEP WRITING.

That's the only advice any aspiring author needs. Ignore the unsure voices in your head, the negative voices of naysayers, the 10-step plans from magazines, and even the advice of "experts." They were all exactly where you are now...and the reason they succeeded is that they started writing and kept writing. Success isn't guaranteed, of course.

But the first step toward success is always—simply—to start writing.

WHAT IS MEMOIR?

- Memoir tells your story and muses upon it, trying to unravel what it means in light of current knowledge.
- Memoir is truth re-imagined. You become the editor of your own life.
- Your memoir is a self portrait, an act of vanity for posterity. Do your best to also make it an act of honesty with a measure of modesty.

Reading 1

The seventh year of life is an enchanted age. Alice of Wonderland was seven when she walked through the Looking Glass. Childlike imagination combines with an emerging practical sense to create a magical world. I wrote a story about my wonderland of 1957. ~ CAF

As I walked down the alley behind my house, something caught my eye. It was an umbrella poking up from a garbage can. I plucked it from the trash and studied it. I saw the broken spokes and torn fabric and knew it wouldn't be a prize I could show to mom.

But I thought, "this could be a cool sword." So, I waved it over my head and smacked the metal can. I succeeded in making clangs, but the umbrella was too unwieldy for a sword.

"Maybe it's a walking stick." I put the point into the gravel and strutted past a few backyards, but that didn't work either. The umbrella fell open. I stepped on the black fabric and nearly tripped. I was about to stuff my prize into another trashcan when I noticed the umbrella knob in my hand. Wow! It sparkled like a diamond-and a big diamond too, about the size of my seven-year-old fist. I was too grownup to believe it was really a diamond. My big sister Charlotte had just got a diamond ring from her boyfriend. He said it cost hundreds and it was only the size of a BB pellet.

I twisted the diamond top, but couldn't separate it from the umbrella stalk. I walked into the basement and found Jack reading a Mad Magazine. My big brother looked up. "What you got there?" "I found this in a garbage can."

"Hey, can't you see it's broken," he laughed.

"I know, but look at the diamond on the end."

Jack snatched the umbrella from my hand. "That's not a diamond, just cut glass."

"I know, but it's still pretty neat. I want to keep it but I can't pull it off."

These words were taken as a challenge by Jack, a freshman in high school. He strained and twisted, but the knob wouldn't budge. Then he went to dad's work bench, grabbed a pair of vise grips and unscrewed the top diamond. "Right tool for the right job," he mumbled. I recognized my father's voice. "This looks nice. I think I'll keep it". Jack stuffed the diamond in his pocket and raised the booklet hiding his eyes.

With one burst of lung power, I screamed, whined, and snorted.

Jack lowered the Mad Magazine revealing a grin. "Just teasing," and he tossed the treasure to me.

I carried my prize upstairs, washed it in the bathroom basin, shined it with toilet paper, and walked out the front door. I waved the diamond over my head as I strutted around the block. That's when I discovered its magical powers. Whenever I held it in the sun, the diamond made rainbows! I couldn't believe how it worked. I covered it with my hands and the rainbows went away. Then I held it in the sunshine and the rainbows reappeared.

I showed the diamond to Jacky who was sitting on his front stairs. He tried it a few times and was amazed. I showed it to snooty Linda who was walking back from the corner store.

"I know," she said with a sneer. "My mom's got one of those hanging in front of her kitchen window."

Once I took the diamond to school for show and tell, but since there was no sunshine in the classroom there was no rainbow. Miss Fisher called my prize a prism. I sometimes wrapped it in paper to hide around the house as pirate treasure. I remember when mom helped to attach a string to it so it would dangle in my bedroom window

As a teenager, I had a science project on prisms. I looked for my glass ball in all my closets and around the basement, but couldn't find it. Did I hide my treasure too well to never find it again? I couldn't remember. I sighed as I recalled the enchantment of childhood, a time when common objects could reveal hidden magic. It proved impossible to reclaim that lost wonder again.

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Session Two

GEORGE ORWELL'S 6 GUIDELINES FOR GOOD WRITING

FROM HIS ESSAY "POLITICS AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE":

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Seven Storey Mountain

by Thomas Merton

Reading 2

ON THE LAST DAY OF JANUARY 1915, UNDER THE SIGN OF the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers.

Not many hundreds of miles away from the house where I was born, they were picking up the men who rotted in the rainy ditches among the dead horses and the ruined seventy-fives, in a forest of trees without branches along the river Marne.

My father and mother were captives in that world, knowing they did not belong with it or in it, and yet unable to get away from it. They were in the world and not of it—not because they were saints, but in a different way: because they were artists. The integrity of an artist lifts a man above the level of the world without delivering him from it.

My father painted like Cézanne and understood the southern French landscape the way Cézanne did. His vision of the world was sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure, for the relations of

masses and for all the circumstances that impress an individual identity on each created thing. His vision was religious and clean, and therefore his paintings were without decoration or superfluous comment, since a religious man respects the power of God's creation to bear witness for itself. My father was a very good artist.

Neither of my parents suffered from the little spooky prejudices that devour the people who know nothing but automobiles and movies and what's in the ice-box and what's in the papers and which neighbors are getting a divorce.

I inherited from my father his way of looking at things and some of his integrity and from my mother some of her dissatisfaction with the mess the world is in, and some of her versatility. From both I got capacities for work and vision and enjoyment and expression that ought to have made me some kind of a King, if the standards the world lives by were the real ones. Not that we ever had any money: but any fool knows that you don't need money to get enjoyment out of life.

If what most people take for granted were really true—if all you needed to be happy was to grab everything and see everything and investigate every experience and then talk about it, I should have been a very happy person, a spiritual millionaire, from the cradle even until now.

If happiness were merely a matter of natural gifts, I would never have entered a Trappist monastery when I came to the age of a man.

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Session Three

C.S. Lewis Advice on Writing

TO A SCHOOLGIRL IN AMERICA, *who had written (at her teacher's suggestion) to request advice on writing.*

14 December 1959

It is very hard to give any general advice about writing. Here's my attempt.

- (1) Turn off the Radio.
- (2) Read all the good books you can, and avoid nearly all magazines.
- (3) Always write (and read) with the ear, not the eye. You shd. hear every sentence you write as if it was being read aloud or spoken. If it does not sound nice, try again.
- (4) Write about what really interests you, whether it is real things or imaginary things, and nothing else. (Notice this means that if you are interested only in writing you will never be a writer, because you will have nothing to write about . . .)

(5) Take great pains to be clear. Remember that though you start by knowing what you mean, the reader doesn't, and a single ill-chosen word may lead him to a total misunderstanding. In a story it is terribly easy just to forget that you have not told the reader something that he wants to know—the whole picture is so clear in your own mind that you forget that it isn't the same in his.

(6) When you give up a bit of work don't (unless it is hopelessly bad) throw it away. Put it in a drawer. It may come in useful later. Much of my best work, or what I think my best, is the rewriting of things begun and abandoned years earlier.

(7) Don't use a typewriter. The noise will destroy your sense of rhythm, which still needs years of training

(8) Be sure you know the meaning (or meanings) of every word you use.

Sylwia Plain

PART I

Smith College 1950–1955

Lookout Farm

July 1950. I may never be happy, but tonight I am content. Nothing more than an empty house, the warm hazy weariness from a day spent setting strawberry runners in the sun, a glass of cool sweet milk, and a shallow dish of blueberries bathed in cream. Now I know how people can live without books, without college. When one is so tired at the end of a day one must sleep, and at the next dawn there are more strawberry runners to set, and so one goes on living, near the earth. At times like this I'd call myself a fool to ask for more. . . .

Ilo asked me today in the strawberry field, "Do you like the Renaissance painters? Raphael and Michelangelo? I copied some of Michelangelo once. Ant what do you think of Picasso? . . . These painters who make a circle and a little board going down for a leg?" We worked side by side in the rows, and he would be quiet

for a while, then suddenly burst out with conversation, speaking with his thick German accent. He straightened up, his tan, intelligent face crinkling up with laughter. His chunky, muscular body was bronzed, and his blond hair tucked up under a white handkerchief around his head. He said, "You like Frank Sinatra? So sendimendal, so romandic, so moonlight night, ja?"

A sudden slant of bluish light across the floor of a vacant room. And I knew it was not the streetlight, but the moon. What is more wonderful than to be a virgin, clean and sound and young, on such a night? . . . (Being raped.)*

Tonight was awful. It was the combination of everything. Of the play *Good-bye My Fancy*, of wanting, in a juvenile way, to be, like the heroine, a reporter in the trenches, to be loved by a man who admired me, who understood me as much as I understood myself. And then there was Jack, who tried so hard to be nice, who was hurt when I said all he wanted was to make out. There was the dinner at the country club, the affluence of money everywhere. And then there was the record . . . the one so good for dancing. I forgot that it was the one until Louie Armstrong began to sing in a voice husky with regret ["I Can't Get Started"] . . . Jack said: "Ever heard it before?" so I smiled. "Oh, yes." It was (with) Bob [another boyfriend]. That settled things for me . . . a crazy record, and it was our long talks, his listening

Reading 3

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Session Four

Nine ways to boost your writing motivation (that actually work) ~ Tucker Max

- 1. Don't Confuse Motivation with Passion
- 2. Outline First
- 3. Create Small, Attainable Goals
- 4. Make It a Daily Practice
- 5. Don't Be Perfect—Vomit on the Page
- 6. Focus on the Reader
- 7. Practice Self-Care
- 8. Announce the Book
- 9. Recognize and Face Your Fear

Helmet for My Pillow: From Parris Island to the Pacific

Reading 4

Robert Leckie, 1942

TWO

MARINE

1

Huts, oil, beer.

Around these three, as around a sacramental triad, revolved our early life at New River. Huts to keep us dry; oil to keep us warm; beer to keep us happy. It is no unholy jest to call them sacramental; they had about them the sanctity of earth. When I remember New River, I remember the oblong huts with the low roofs; I remember the oil stoves and how we slipped out at night, buckets in hand, to pilfer oil from the other companies' drums, passing the men from the other companies, thieves in the night like ourselves; I remember the cases of canned beer in the middle of the hut and how we had pooled our every penny to go down to the slop chute to buy them, carrying them

back boisterously on our shoulders, shouting and cheerful, because the warm dry huts awaited us, and soon the beer would be in our bellies and the world would be ours.

We were privates, and who is more carefree?

Like the huts, oil and beer, I had a trinity of friends: Hoosier, the Chuckler and the Runner.

I met Hoosier the second day at New River. He had arrived two days before us, and Captain High-Hips had made him his runner. In that first

unorganized week, his clothes were always spattered with mud from his countless trips through the mire between the captain's office and the other huts.

I disliked him at first. He seemed inclined to look down on us from his high position in Captain High-Hips' office. He seemed surly, too, with his square strong figure, tow hair and blue eyes—his curt intelligences from on high: "Cap'n wants two men bring in the lieutenant's box."

But I was too inexperienced to see that the surliness was but a front for his being scared, like all of us. The immobile face was a façade; the forced downward curve of the mouth a hastily erected defense against the unknown. With time and friendship, that mouth would curve in a different direction, upward in a grin that was pure joy.

Chuckler was easier to know. We became friends the first day of gun drill, our introduction into the mysteries of the heavy, water-cooled, thirty-caliber machine gun. Corporal Smoothface, our instructor, a soft-voiced, sad-eyed youth from Georgia, made

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Session Five

Suggestions for Writing Memoir

1. Utilize 5 Elements of Memoir: Truth, Theme, Voice, POV, Musing
2. Be with writers. They are brave.
3. Think of a family story you have told or have heard told many times. Decide what the theme of the story is. Write the story down.
4. Make a list of your family's or other close-knit group's classic stories—those you always hear at family occasions. Make notes on what purpose you think the story serves, or what myths it fosters in family or group.
5. Keep track of 'scenes', little windows on your life (JB), pieces of conversation, then connect them. LA calls them 'snippets.' ELM calls them 'seedlings.'
6. Write 10 defining moments in your life. Group them according to categories. Are there themes? (loss, birth, love, moving, change, success, tragedy, ambition, relationships, coming of age)

Ethel Lee-Miller *Thinking of Miller Place: A Memoir of Summer Comfort* (ELM)

Lorraine Ash- *Life Touches Life: A Mother's Story of Stillbirth and Healing; Self and Soul* (LA)

Judith Barrington- *Writing a Memoir* (JB)

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JOAN DIDION

THE YEAR OF

MAGICAL THINKING

Life changes fast.

Life changes in the instant.

You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.

The question of self-pity.

Those were the first words I wrote after it happened. The computer dating on the Microsoft Word file (“Notes on change.doc”) reads “May 20, 2004, 11:11 p.m.,” but that would have been a case of my opening the file and reflexively pressing save when I closed it. I had made no changes to that file in May. I had made no changes to that file since I wrote the words, in January 2004, a day or two or three after the fact.

For a long time I wrote nothing else.

Life changes in the instant.

The ordinary instant.

At some point, in the interest of remembering what

seemed most striking about what had happened, I considered adding those words, “the ordinary instant.” I saw immediately that there would be no need to add the word “ordinary,” because there would be no forgetting it: the word never left my mind. It was in fact the ordinary nature of everything preceding the event that prevented me from truly believing it had happened, absorbing it, incorporating it, getting past it. I recognize now that there was nothing unusual in this: confronted with sudden disaster we all focus on how unremarkable the circumstances were in which the unthinkable occurred, the clear blue sky from which the plane fell, the routine errand that ended on the shoulder with the car in flames, the swings where the children were playing as usual when the rattlesnake struck from the ivy. “He was on his way home from work—happy, successful, healthy—and then, gone,” I read in the account of a psychiatric nurse whose husband was killed in a highway accident. In 1966 I happened to interview many people who had been living in Honolulu on the morning of December 7, 1941; without exception, these people began their accounts of Pearl Harbor by telling me what an “ordinary Sunday morning” it had been. “It was just an ordinary beautiful September day,” people still say when asked to describe the morning in New York when American Airlines 11 and United Airlines 175 got flown into the World Trade towers. Even the report of the 9/11 Commission opened on this insis-

Reading 5

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Session Six

STEPHEN KING ADVICE TO WRITERS

- **Read and Write Constantly:** King's #1 rule: read widely and write daily (2000 words/day is a common target) to build your skills and voice.
- **Write for Yourself:** Tell the story you want to tell, not what you think others want; the audience comes later in revision.
- **Be Direct & Clear:** Use simple, strong language; avoid "dressing up" vocabulary or using adverbs excessively.
- **Embrace the Messy Draft:** Write fast, get the story down without self-editing, then step away for months before revising.
- **Kill Your Darlings:** Be willing to cut unnecessary words, sentences, and even scenes during revision to make the story stronger.

The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant

1885

When I had left camp that morning I had not expected so soon the result that was then taking place, and consequently was in rough garb. I was without a sword, as I usually was when on horseback on the field, and wore a soldier's blouse for a coat, with the shoulder straps of my rank to indicate to the army who I was. When I went into the house I found General Lee. We greeted each other, and after shaking hands took our seats. I had my staff with me, a good portion of whom were in the room during the whole of the interview.

What General Lee's feelings were I do not know. As he was a man of much dignity, with an impassible face, it was impossible to say whether he felt inwardly glad that the end had finally come, or felt sad over the result, and was too manly to show it. Whatever his feelings, they were entirely concealed from my observation; but my own feelings, which had been quite jubilant on the receipt of his letter, were sad and depressed. I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse. I do not question, however, the sincerity

Pages 490-491

of the great mass of those who were opposed to us.

General Lee was dressed in a full uniform which was entirely new, and was wearing a sword of considerable value, very likely the sword which had been presented by the State of Virginia; at all events, it was an entirely different sword from the one that would ordinarily be worn in the field. In my rough traveling suit, the uniform of a private with the straps of a lieutenant-general, I must have contrasted very strangely with a man so handsomely dressed, six feet high and of faultless form. But this was not a matter that I thought of until afterwards.

We soon fell into a conversation about old army times. He remarked that he remembered me very well in the old army; and I told him that as a matter of course I remembered him perfectly, but from the difference in our rank and years (there being about sixteen years' difference in our ages), I had thought it very likely that I had not attracted his attention sufficiently to be remembered by him after such a long interval. Our conversation grew so pleasant that I almost forgot the object of our meeting. After the conversation had run on in this style for some time, General Lee called my attention

Reading 6

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Session Seven

THE 3 KEYS

BENJAMIN HARDY, THE #1 WRITER ON MEDIUM AND AUTHOR OF WILLPOWER DOESN'T WORK

1. You must be a good communicator
2. You must know your subject matter really, really well (head knowledge)
3. You must have deep emotional conviction about your subject matter (heart knowledge)

You combine these 3 things and that makes for good writing. Without the emotional side, the writing feels academic and not compelling. With only the emotion, it feels purely opinionated. But when you can write in an emotional and persuasive way, and then back up what you're saying with credible sources, then it's very believable and convincing."

Autobiography of Malcolm X

Reading 7

CHAPTER 1

NIGHTMARE

When my mother was pregnant with me, she told me later, a party of hooded Ku Klux Klan riders galloped up to our home in Omaha, Nebraska, one night. Surrounding the house, brandishing their shotguns and rifles, they shouted for my father to come out. My mother went to the front door and opened it. Standing where they could see her pregnant condition, she told them that she was alone with her three small children, and that my father was away, preaching, in Milwaukee. The Klansmen shouted threats and warnings at her that we had better get out of town because "the good Christian white people" were not going to stand for my father's "spreading trouble" among the "good" Negroes of Omaha with the "back to Africa" preachings of Marcus Garvey.

My father, the Reverend Earl Little, was a Baptist minister, a dedicated organizer for Marcus Aurelius Garvey's U.N.I.A. (Universal Negro Improvement Association). With the help of such disciples as my father, Garvey, from his headquarters in New York City's Harlem, was raising the banner of black-race purity and exhorting the Negro masses to return to their ancestral African homeland—a cause which had made Garvey the most controversial black man on earth.

Still shouting threats, the Klansmen finally spurred their horses and galloped around the house, shattering every window pane with their gun butts. Then they rode off into the night, their torches flaring, as suddenly as they had come.

My father was enraged when he returned. He decided to wait until I was born—which would be soon—and then the family

would move. I am not sure why he made this decision, for he was not a frightened Negro, as most then were, and many still are today. My father was a big, six-foot-four, very black man. He had only one eye. How he had lost the other one I have never known. He was from Reynolds, Georgia, where he had left school after the third or maybe fourth grade. He believed, as did Marcus Garvey, that freedom, independence and self-respect could never be achieved by the Negro in America, and that therefore the Negro should leave America to the white man and return to his African land of origin. Among the reasons my father had decided to risk and dedicate his life to help disseminate this philosophy among his people was that he had seen four of his six brothers die by violence, three of them killed by white men, including one by lynching. What my father could not know then was that of the remaining three, including himself, only one, my Uncle Jim, would die in bed, of natural causes. Northern white police were later to shoot my Uncle Oscar. And my father was finally himself to die by the white man's hands.

It has always been my belief that I, too, will die by violence. I have done all that I can to be prepared.

I was my father's seventh child. He had three children by a previous marriage—Ella, Earl, and Mary, who lived in Boston. He had met and married my mother in Philadelphia, where their first child, my oldest full brother, Wilfred, was born. They moved from Philadelphia to Omaha, where Hilda and then Philbert were born.

I was next in line. My mother was twenty-eight when I was born on May 19, 1925, in an Omaha hospital. Then we moved to Milwaukee, where Reginald was born. From infancy, he had some kind of hernia condition which was to handicap him physically for the rest of his life.

Louise Little, my mother, who was born in Grenada, in the British West Indies, looked like a white woman. Her father was white. She had straight black hair, and her accent did not sound like a Negro's. Of this white father of hers, I know nothing