

Chapter II

Empower Yourself to Write the Personal Essay

*I believe that I am not alone in my attempts to create,
And that once I begin the work, settle into the strangeness,
The words will take shape, the form find life, and the spirit take flight.*

—Jan Phillips
Marry Your Muse

*We are writers. . . . The words became our friends and our companions,
and without even saying it aloud, a thought danced with them: I can do
this. This is who I am.*

—Anna Quindlen
How Reading Changed My Life

Through the techniques of writing the personal essay, you can recall your experience and release the essence of it in fewer pages than you might imagine. You can write about the time you waited in the car while your father went into his mother’s house to receive an “heirloom,” came out empty handed and slammed the driver’s side door so hard the car rocked like a boat in tall waves. You can write about the time you walked home from high school on a windy day and your mother told you to look at yourself in the

mirror because you were so beautiful in the flush of early spring. You can write about the time the toaster oven you'd received as a wedding gift burnt out and you knew for certain this was a metaphor for your marriage. If you have ever found yourself saying, "If only I could write a book about my life" or "I want to write but I don't know exactly what I want to write," the personal essay is right for you, because you will be able to write to the essence of your experience and find out what it is you have to say.

The term essay may be lumped together in the files of your mind with the dreaded weekly theme and the boring what-I-did-over-my-school-vacation assignments of childhood. If writing was dull, difficult, and removed from anything you really felt, it might have been because you felt your life was not important enough to merit words on a page or because you "couldn't describe things in words" the way you experienced them in life. Perhaps you felt the teacher wanted to hear something other than what was true for you or perhaps you were afraid to put your truths on paper.

In Chapter I, I addressed the need for every author of personal essays to acknowledge the elements of their lives, no matter how mundane, in order to draw meaning from them. In following chapters, I will offer exercises to help you gather words for writing your experiences. Here, though, I would like to address two more inhibitors to good writing: fear of your audience and fear of your truths.

You have the right to say what you want to about your experience. It is, in fact, essential. Using the personal essay, you have what book reviewer Joan Frank describes in the July/August, 1990 *Utne Reader*:

... a two-way mirror, prompting a startling moment wherein writer and reader each recognize some aspect of themselves in the other and come away from that moment transformed.

When you write a personal essay, you write on a topic of your choice, because you want to find the truth in your experience. If you find it, your essay will be interesting to someone else. You and your essay are in charge, not your high school or college English teacher. In fact, as you will find out in the following chapters, your essay itself will be your teacher. This teacher serves you, however, only when you trust in your vulnerability.

In a poem called “Moccasin Flowers,” poet Mary Oliver, writes:

But all my life—so far—
I have loved best
how the flowers rise
and open, how

the pink lungs of their bodies
enter the fire of the world
and stand there shining
and willing . . .

I believe that words and images come to the person who stands “there shining and willing,” that life’s fire can provoke us into bringing forth our voices, rich with human qualities. As writers, we can take a lesson from the lodgepole pine, with its cones that open and drop seeds when fires scorch the forest floor. Let life’s fire provoke you into bringing forth your voice, rich with human qualities.

Seek Knowledge through Writing

Getting to the flower of true voice requires work. Just as a seed cannot perform the miracle of growing into a new plant until it is released from what encloses it, often you must crack open the experience of your life to find the true seed from which to write. In doing so, you learn something new about yourself and your circumstances.

I may think I have a funny story to tell about the time my sister and I went to New Haven, Connecticut, to visit our great aunt and her two sons. I may think what is important is recounting every detail of that first train trip I took between Newark, N.J. and New Haven. Yet when I write, I remember the new hats my mother insisted we wear for the trip because “Aunt Bertha is from wealthy New England.” I remember how we excitedly put the hats on as the train was pulling into the station. Greeting us, Aunt Bertha insisted we take the hats off immediately. “They look so silly,” she said. When I write that and re-experience Aunt Bertha saying those words, I recognize that the deep experience of my train ride is not the ride itself but what it felt like to be a stranger.

How can you consistently get beyond mere recounting of experience and find the wisdom and knowing inside it? The eight “write” questions I share, along with exercises for answering them, will help you both think of personal experience topics and make discoveries in your writing. Using games, I will help you understand the pattern of thinking used in each essay form. By combining your understanding of the form with your answer to the “write” question, you will achieve essays that release your experience onto the page in compelling essays that readers follow. Whether you are writing from joy, hurt, or sadness, you’ll find your triumphs, even the smallest, resound.

If you are using this book with a desire to write but no topic in mind, or with a desire to write about specific experiences in your life, the “write” questions and the writing exercises introduced for each essay style will help you find surprises. You will learn to write from experience even when you don’t yet know exactly what in that experience is significant. Each time you explore one of the forms of essay writing, you will enter a “writing patch” inside yourself, a place where images and details arrive to help you grow the “experience plant” and see it bloom.

Realize That “Bad” Writing Is the Opportunity for Good Writing

When you write in the shadows of fear (and most of us have at least some of those shadows when it comes to writing), your writing may go on and on, like a boring teacher, never distinguishing the important details from the unimportant ones. Your writing may get so busy screaming, like an hysteric, about how you think you *ought* to feel that it can't evoke what you're really feeling. Or your writing may flit from one topic to another like a social butterfly without examining anything difficult.

Accept that sometimes the boring teacher, the hysteric, or the social butterfly will come into your writing. Your job is not to worry about their presence, but to learn to hear them covering or circumventing true experience. Using the three-step response method I introduce, you will learn to recognize the opportunity to cut away words that distort your true voice. You will honor whatever images and details are most important to your experience.

Say “I”

You may have had writing teachers who told you never to write “I” in an essay or to keep the number of times you wrote the word to a minimum. If you took that advice to heart, you may have stopped writing. As you stopped, you probably wondered from whom your writing might originate if not from an “I.” If you kept on writing, you may have twisted and turned phrases so they appeared as if “I” never wrote them at all. After all those maneuvers to eradicate any evidence that you actually wrote your material, your meaning was probably quite blurred.

Just as you dream your own dreams, you live your own experiences. You are the filter for what you see, hear, taste, touch, and smell in this world. It is not only okay to report, "I watched the leaves of the poplar trees blowing silver side up in the wind as my father told me my grandmother was dying," it is imperative for

good writing. You must own your experience, every detail of it, to write well about it.

Each piece of experience builds into a bigger piece of experience. When you report where you are, what you see, taste, touch, feel and smell, you also release what is inside of you, the pattern of what you have learned. It is as if elements of the inside experience attach themselves to specific places on the outer landscape. That the leaves were silver side up as I heard the news of my grandmother's dying leads me as writer to other elements of my experience—the silver of my grandmother's hair and her temper blowing like strong wind. If you are sensitive to all experience, no matter how small, you are more deeply informed, and this information leads you to discovery.

When you are writing, do not worry about how often you use the word I. Use it as much as you need to. Just as you can weed out other words you no longer need when your work is nearing completion, so you can weed out extra "I's" by combining sentences or editing out phrases. It is very easy to take out what is no longer needed at the end. It is much harder to give yourself enough material to work with at the beginning. Say "I." This word lets you speak from your experience.

Recognize that Writing is a Formal Affair

The essay comes in eight styles: description; narration; how to; comparison and contrast; division and classification; definition; cause and effect and, finally, argument and persuasion.

An understanding of each style's structure (its strategies and components) will help you create writing that moves along gracefully—writing that helps you and the reader gain insight from your life events. In your life, things happen and you see and you do and you go. However, recounting what happened, what you saw, where you went, and what you did doesn't by itself aid you in discovering and communicating the *experience* you have gained from those happenings. It is the structure of the styles you are using in your

work that becomes, both for you and your readers, a bridge to your learning, insights, and wisdoms.

In this book, essay styles introduced in later chapters make use of styles introduced in earlier ones. The patterns of thinking you engage to use each style are more elaborate as you move through them. However, it's not that you use one style over another to be more profound. The description essay style, which comes first in this book, creates essays that are just as profound as those created using the argument essay style, which comes last. Knowing all the styles gives you the *dexterity* with which to fully find and communicate the *range* of your human experience.

Here is an excerpt from the writing of a man in his mid-thirties who was assessing his life. Since he wrote without making good use of the styles available for the craft of essay writing, he thwarts his own search for self-discovery:

I am feeling terribly relaxed and thoughtful just now. The sea is rolling slowly toward the gray horizon just after sunset. I stare at it for hours. It is my Mantra. My life has not been a great joy of late. My job is taking more and more and giving me very little nourishment for the spirit. I wander back and forth across the Atlantic in a continuous twilight fog of jet lag with no direction. I can see that now in a moment of clarity.

I have been floating on a ship in the Gulf of Guinea off the Niger Delta for the last five days. Five quiet unhurried days waiting for equipment to be calibrated and parts to arrive. I can understand how a life at sea becomes so addictive to sailors. Such a soothing effect it has. No telephones, no traffic, no panic decisions. Just the rocking of a big cradle.

The seas are very calm today, almost glassy at times, but visibility is very poor. This is the time of year when northeast winds blow down from the Sahara carrying a very fine dust that fills the air. They call it the Harmattan. I like the name. It can last for days

and becomes quite distracting, but it does cool down the otherwise steamy temperatures.

Each of the three paragraphs begins with information about being relaxed: he is relaxed and thoughtful; he is floating on a ship; the sea is calm. However, after the first sentence in each paragraph, the author gives information that contrasts with his stated mood. There is fog of jetlag, waiting for equipment, and the presence of dust and heat. The sea has lulled this writer for five days and now that he is writing about it, his first impulse is to gloss over his emotions by glossing over the dangers of being at sea (don't sailors make panic decisions and face difficult situations onboard?). This writer's easy life is taking place in fog and high temperatures. The writer can't get beyond being stuck in the calm of the sea even as his heart (and ours) is ready to motor into the rolling and difficult waves of life's trials.

If this writer understood the structure of description or narration, comparison and contrast, or some of the other essay styles I share in this book, he would be able to use his experience at sea to make a discovery about himself. The reader would experience not only the discovery, but the author's process of uncovering a hidden truth.

Silence Internal Voices That Keep You from Writing

Sometimes, imagined critics chant, "Your writing isn't good enough." Sometimes, the constant demands of life yell that your writing is not important enough to devote time to. Sometimes deep hurts that you haven't yet spoke about seem to say, "Don't mention it; let sleeping dogs lie."

All of these messages result from worrying that no one will be interested in what you have to say as an essayist. To help free yourself from this worry remember that even professionals succumb to it. Scholar and essayist Joseph Epstein claimed that each time he

wrote his regular personal essay for *The American Scholar*, he wondered if the readers of the magazine would mutter to themselves about it being him again or, more terrifying, think, “Who cares!” Where, Epstein wondered, “does the personal essayist acquire the effrontery to believe—and, more astonishing still, to act on the belief—that his or her interests, concerns, quirks, passions matter to anyone else in the world?” If the “world is too rich, too various, too multifaceted and many-layered for a fellow incapable of an hour’s sustained thought to hope to comprehend it,” Epstein pondered, how could anyone care what he had to say? Despite his fear of the audience, he knew he wrote because he had “hope against hope” that he could “chip away at true knowledge by obtaining some modicum of self-knowledge.”

Epstein warned, though, to “fight off adopting the notion of being in any way a star, at center stage,” because the essay is most profound when it is modest. Be wary of thinking you are more interesting when you are didactic. An overly professorial tone will actually place you the writer center stage through an insistence on being right. The essay has come a long way from its beginnings in American literature, when clergymen used it to spread the influence of the pulpit from moral issues to intellectual and literary concerns. Today, being over-insistent and humorless about knowing what is right and demanding that readers see it your way is out of fashion. “Here,” today’s essays say, “Come and see that all of us are really very human and though flawed most loveable when we seek a way to connect and appreciate.”

If you are afraid of speaking your truths and hurts, remember that the existential moment of the essay demands that we see beyond where we are at the moment. The essayist uses writing to better understand essence and move into new territory. Sometimes the old hurts don’t want to allow the essayist to write through them to someplace new.

Writing essays means to consider life and in that consideration, to set down the glow of one or more of life’s sparks. Whether you

are writing about making and losing friends, moving, hearing children's nightmares and stories, remembering parents and grandparents, planting gardens, exploring new places, walking to the same old store, or about war, abuse, and sad neglect, you are writing not only to capture life's meaning but to capture the very struggle you endure to stay in touch with it. Because we all need to be reminded of how to do this, every essay you write, no matter the topic, has value to a wide range of readers as well as to you.

Get Response

Many writers find it helpful to join a writer's group. Having an audience that meets regularly and is committed to writing affirms writers in their work. Everyone in your group does not actually have to be a writer. Anyone truly interested in experience and in responding to writing can be helpful. Although even one person is valuable for getting response to your work, two or more are better since you will get a variety of responses to consider.

Whether you are reading your work to one friend, forming a new writer's group, or working with an existing one, familiarize those you trust to hear your drafts with the method of responding I present in Chapter III. I developed the three-step response method after years of finding out what goes wrong for new writers as they put words together on a page and finding out what goes wrong for writers when others evaluate their work or offer "constructive" criticism. Responding to writing is different from telling someone how to fix writing. No one who wants to write should flounder and fall away because of criticism and old schoolroom jargon.

When you share your writing, whether with a single friend or in a group, be sure to share only the words on the page. Listen to the response without defending or explaining your work. Don't verbally fill in points. If you explain, the responses will be to what you have said, not to what you wrote. Your job is to develop your writing, not your explaining.

If you do not have anyone nearby with whom you want to share your writing, there are other ways to get response. You can find writers discussion groups online, and you can use email and snail mail with people you know or meet at conferences, regional workshops or at your local library's or bookstore's writing circles. Check sites like writers.com, absolutewrite.com, writersdigest.com and writingitreal.com for information and links to groups online. A written form of the three-step response method works very well.

There are also methods for working without outside response or before you seek it. Writers often read their work into tape recorders. After a break of at least an hour, they play the piece back to themselves and take notes to give themselves response. Writers might record the response as well and listen to themselves before they revise. Other ways of creating some distance from your work in order to become a better responder to work-in-progress include re-typing it to get a new feel for it and using a puppet while reading the work aloud so the work seems to be coming from someone else's mouth and mind. Some people mail their manuscript to themselves so that by the time it arrives back in their hands it seems like something they have not seen before.

Whether you use a group, one trusted listener, pals on the Internet, tape recorders, puppets, or the U.S. mail, what matters is that you detach yourself from your own words long enough to hear them as someone else might. You want an opportunity to learn what is memorable to readers, what they feel, and what they are curious to know more about. Then you will be in a good position to begin revisions.

Writing essays is a lot like hiking through a wilderness. Just as a compass helps indicate the direction to travel and careful observation helps you figure out a way there, your inner voice aided by the response of your listeners indicates the path of your essay.

An essay helps you learn—in a more complete way—what it is you have actually experienced. Unlike journal writing done for your eyes only, essay writing forces you to shape your experience so

it can be fully understood by others. Only when another can receive the full insight, wisdom, and learning of your experiences can you truly see and feel that insight, wisdom, and learning yourself. This is the moment of the two-way mirror.

After you read the sample essays and discussions, take time in each chapter to do the exercises. This will help you prime the pump for writing in each style. After writing your first drafts, seek response, and then use the response to help as you develop your essays.