

Writing from life

by Lois J. PETERSON

As a teenager I spent hours writing in my journal while Bob Dylan droned on in the background. Ignoring my heavy eyelids and the gray dawn sloping through the window, I plundered my soul, exposed my nerve endings, wrung anguished words from my mind. I would have nothing of the world. I needed only solitude and isolation from which to conjure my poems, stories and long, tortured essays.

I re-read some of it lately, and it's all self-indulgent drivel. Just what you'd expect from an angst-ridden teenager.

What I didn't know then was that in order to write I had to be part of the world, not apart from it. I had to witness its follies, its idiosyncrasies. I needed to note the colour of its days and the shape of those who populated them.

What I didn't know then was that the life I had already lived was worth writing about. As a small child I had lived in the Middle East and I still carried its smells, sounds and colours inside me; I'd spent six years in boarding school, which had yielded experiences and sensations that were part of the person I had become; and through these two lives was threaded the stability of my grandmother's home in a small English village, memories of which I still use in my work.

As a teenager I didn't know that both my past and my present could provide material for my writing. Later I would be told to write what I knew, but no one told me what that might be, or how to write about it.

So I had to discover ways to access my past and my present, and only then was I able to put it in writing. Now I teach adults how to ask these same questions of themselves, and what to do with the answers. I try to show them that writers can't work in isolation from the world if they want to write convincingly about it.

I call this process 'writing from life.' This is not the same as writing your life story. The latter involves taking a chronological slant, a systematic view of events, experiences and relationships.

Writing from life is like building a compost heap. First you decide what you can chuck on it and where to find it. Then you have to let it sit for a while so that time and nature can do their work. Then, when it shows signs of life — a thrusting bud, an unfolding blossom — you work to help it develop.

In 1989 I travelled by camel in the Sinai. A camel's gait is hardly conducive to on-board note-taking and I was frustrated at not being able to record my impressions of that "great and terrible wilderness". One of my companions suggested that each night I note just six things in my journal — something I had seen, felt, touched, tasted, smelled and heard.

That evening I very briefly noted the sounds of a camel chewing an acacia bush; the light on a Bedouin's face as he crouched over his fire preparing the evening meal; the taste of the ice cream flavoured with rosewater that I had eaten at the day's rest stop; the roughness of the saddle chafing my legs at each lurch of the camel's stride; the feeling of lying under the dark desert sky, willing myself to stay awake; the smell of the fires that burned all night around me. That's all I wrote, but now, years later, these notes are enough to stimu-

late a hundred other sensations of that day.

This checklist works well for anyone who wants to write from life. It works well in recording details of place. See what you come up with if you employ all your senses at the ball game or the bus station, the staff room or the soccer field, at your daughter's ballet class or your son's Boy Scout meeting.

Places from your past also yield good material. Write about your first bedroom. Now move through the house to the kitchen, the living room, then beyond to the back yard, to the neighbour's house and then along the street or across town to your best friend's house. If you use all your senses you may find that one memory leads to another, and the past opens like a book that has been closed for too long. Now put people in the picture. Describe who else was there, how they look, move, speak.

You can unearth rich materials from the past by developing a 'lifeline.' To do this you need to break down your life, or a block of it (this could be decades, a year, a month, a week) into chunks. Then, from each chunk extract the most resonant incident. Then, brainstorming your memories of this incident, make notes on the people and places you associate with it.

Employ all your senses. Describe what you see, feel, hear, smell, taste and touch. You may find that when you start looking at the past through the lens of your senses, new memories will spring to mind. Follow where they lead and soon you'll have a rich heap of incidents, sensations, sights and insights that you can use in your writing in any number of ways.

Graphically, your lifeline might look like this:

TIME /PLACE	INCIDENT	SENSUAL TRIGGERS
1962/move to Winnipeg.	First room of my own. Sneaking out of my window, landing in the rods	Smell of the uncarpeted floor. Gravel underfoot. Sprinklers left on all night. Streetlight lighting hood of father's car.
1967/cousins' farm for summer	Riding the tractor Getting ducked; fear of drowning	Heat from engine and sun; dust and flies Wet swimsuit under clothes

The fascinating thing about this approach is that each time you do it you come up with something new. You may already have explored the summer you stayed on your uncle's farm, but last time you remembered riding behind him on the tractor, and this time you recall going to the swimming hole with your cousins.

People in the present provide rich material too. If you write about someone you know well as if you were writing about them for someone who has never met them, you may discover elements of your subject's personality or appearance that you'd never noticed. How about describing something you dislike about someone you love, something appealing about someone you hate? Exercises like this broaden your

ability to develop characters who are neither all good nor all bad — people who are believable.

Strangers can be a wonderful source for new characters. I use a caricature approach to describe people I glimpse on the street, in the library, at the bank. I imagine that with just a few concise pen strokes I have to make an accurate rendering of that person. Do they have bushy eyebrows? Bright lipstick? Are their pants too short? Do they limp, swing their arms when they walk, or hold them tight to their sides? Are they carrying a diaper bag, a briefcase, a walking stick?

Later I'll imagine what kind of toothpaste they use. Do they use skim milk or cream in their coffee? Who's their best friend? Where do they go on holiday? Do they like dogs? Before long, what began as a brief glimpse of a stranger in real life becomes a fully rounded character in fiction.

Good listening skills are important for writers. We need to hear real conversation to write good dialogue (with some adjustments for all the backtracking, unfinished sentences, etc., that we use in real life). People say all kinds of things that can generate ideas for fiction, poetry, even essays. Passing a group of teenagers at a bus stop, I heard one say, "I don't know shit about fascism. I just wing it." A man on a radio documentary about wild bird enthusiasts told his interviewer, "A number of my marriages have come to grief on account of my birding." And one night in his sleep my husband said, "What are you going to do with the chicken afterwards?" (I'm still wondering, after what?)

Radio, TV, newspapers and 'real life' yield wonderful quotes that you can incorporate into your writing. Restaurants, movie line-ups, bus stops and grocery store check-outs are just a few places that provide great eavesdropping opportunities.

The media provides writers with lots of issues and events to react to. Essay writing allows us to test our reactions and to believe they count for something, even if only as an exercise in expressing opinions, for discovering passion, for testing causes and commitment.

Someone who writes from life needs to keep both eyes open. A small incident can become an image that prompts a poem, a metaphor or theme for a story, a germ of an idea for a non-fiction piece. I once watched an elderly woman cross a busy intersection. Her hair was the texture and color of shredded wheat. She wore too-short cotton pants and cheap runners with no socks, and she walked with her hands jammed in her pockets, her eyes lowered to watch the road in front of her. When she reached the other side I noticed that her hands, now freed from her pockets, were shaking badly. My friend, who had also been watching the woman's progress, told me that alcoholics often keep their hands hidden to hide the shakes, and that older people like to keep their hands free in case they fall. That image, and that woman's dilemma, has haunted me for years and will, I'm sure, turn up in my writing one day.

Slighter incidents are worth noting too. Seeing a man in a wheelchair prompted me to wonder whether disabled people dream about walking, or flying. One day I witnessed a surrealistic scene in which a man wrestled a huge soap bubble along the street. (A little further along was his pickup truck, in the back of which was the base of one of those giant bubble gum dispensing machines.) The man-wrestling-killer-bubble image will come in handy one day, I'm sure.

Learn to pay attention to other people's stories as well as your own. Ask questions. Stay alert for the punchline. What happens to the friend of a cousin's friend, or what they've seen or heard, can be just as useful and stimulating as what's happened to you.

Every day we are surrounded by radio and TV reports, fillers in newspapers, and classified ads that, if we attend

closely, can provide germs of ideas for fiction, starting points for articles and essays. These too are part of your life, as much as all those things you've experienced at first hand.

So what do you do with all these sights, scenes, sounds and sensations? You need to develop a system to record them and the discipline to work with them. Don't rely on your memory. What seemed compelling one minute can easily be sent packing by what you notice next.

I always carry two notebooks. In the smallest, my 'commonplace' book, I record brief snippets of conversation, sightings, thoughts, etc., for exploring later. I use a larger notebook for longer work and for developing ideas recorded in the commonplace book. I might grab a few minutes waiting for the dentist or on a coffee break to do some descriptive writing, write a caricature, test a few lines for a poem, develop some dialogue. One writer I know keeps an index card and pen in the pocket of her jacket at all times, just in case inspiration strikes when she's out walking the dog or running to the store for a quart of milk, or on any other occasion when she has no other notebook on her.

Once you've worked out your own system for keeping track of all this rich material, you'll want to develop a way to organize and review it so you can retrieve it when you need to. You might want to keep files of material that has been generated by one of your sensory triggers — sight, sound, taste, touch, smell. You might know pretty quickly how you will use what you've recorded and so you might organize your files by genre. Perhaps you'll want to keep third-party stuff (newspaper clippings, quotations, notes on stories recounted to you by other people) in a separate file.

So now you've trained your eyes and ears; you have a way to record your thoughts and impressions; you've organized them so you can retrieve them when you need to. A further discipline to develop is that of working with this material, looking at it from all sides and deciding what it is that you have growing on your compost heap and what you can do with it. I recommend to my students that, apart from their other planned work, they set aside two short periods a week (from twenty to forty minutes each) to work with the serendipitous material they've gathered.

The more you train yourself to be an observer of your own life, the more you'll find to note, record and use. And sometimes, something that you've taken only passing notice of will become embedded in your psyche. You'll dwell on it for days, weeks, months, then one day you'll sit down to work to find that your creative mind is ready to build upon something your rational mind made note of.

Then you know that you are truly writing from your life, and your work will ring with the authenticity of your experience and your voice.



Lois J. PETERSON teaches students to write from life through Continuing Education classes in Surrey, British Columbia, and to inmates at the Corrections Canada Matsqui Institute. She also uses the methods described above in her own fiction, poetry and nonfiction. She has developed an on-line writing workshop page on the World Wide Web at <http://mindlink.net/summit/welcome.htm>.