



Telling our stories reinforces who we are

By Ellen Waldman

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English writer Philip Pullman once said: "After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world." Some years ago, researchers found that even for those who have a diagnosis of dementia, remembering the past can bring a great deal of satisfaction and understanding. It was actually given a therapeutic name: Reminiscence Therapy (RT): "RT involves the discussion of past activities, events and experiences with another person or group of people, usually with the aid of tangible prompts such as photographs, household and other familiar items from the past, music and archive sound recordings" (From The National Center for Biotechnology, a branch of the National Institutes of Health, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov).

Adults telling their stories is a way to affirm who they are, what they've accomplished in their lives, and a chance to relive happy times. It even led to the creation of Story Corps (<https://storycorps.org>) in October 2003. They "developed a mission to preserve and share stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world." As an example, they found that it increased understanding of people with a disability or serious illness (96 percent) and the understanding of immigrants (95 percent). This sounds like a great idea for this particular time in our world.

Building on this understanding that stories tell us who we are, there is a workshop beginning this evening, Aug. 17, continuing through Dec. 7, called, "Give the Gift of a Lifetime: A Memoir Writing Intensive." I spoke with Maggie McLaughlin, one of the co-organizers, who assured me that there might still be space available if you contact them today. Another session of this workshop will begin in February 2017, and you can register for that one, as well.

From their website: "Writing a memoir is a process of bringing your memory alive to give to others. An autobiography details the chronological history of a life. In contrast, a memoir is a reflection on a particular part of your life that reveals something about who you are and what is important to you."

What this workshop offers is expert guidance as you write and publish your 100-page mini-memoir. Think of it as a gift for future generations. As they remind us, "The best gift you can give is your own story." Each participant will complete the course with a Kindle eBook and 20 paperback copies in hand to give as holiday gifts. These memoir writers will meet in Ashland every week to develop their story. Participation is also offered by teleconference.

During this time, Shoshana Alexander will provide personal attention, guidance, and help with developing your writing craft in order to tell your story in a vivid and compelling way. Shoshana is an author who has published with Harper & Row, Houghton Mifflin, and Bantam, and a developmental editor with award-winning writers. The book design and production is provided by Maggie. (I was fortunate to work with Maggie as my own book designer for *Aging Happens*.) For more information, check out the website ShoshanaAlexander.com/GOAL, or call 541-201-0353.

This workshop promises to be an enriching experience with hands-on personal and professional attention. Another avenue to consider are the many course offerings through OLLI (Osher Lifelong Learning Institute) at SOU (Southern Oregon University: sou.edu/olli; 541-552-6048.) They will have several writing classes available to members in their fall courses, which begins on Sept. 12 and runs through Nov. 18.

My work has brought me into the lives of many older folks who have shared some of their fascinating histories with me. I have heard stories from a woman who was part of the team that discovered the polio vaccine, and from another woman who was a former dancer with the Rockettes. Mostly I've heard stories which, in their seeming ordinariness of both struggles and pleasures, enriched and deeply inspired me. I never tire of hearing these memories.

Here's a personal story. Today is my daughter's 28th birthday. When Alyssa was still in Walker Elementary School in Ashland, she was asked who she thought she might be when she grew up. She said, "I want to be the world's best reader and writer." Quite a goal for a 10-year-old, and what she does now is share her love of stories with students at Springfield (Oregon) High School, as their Language Arts teacher. She encourages her students to experience how reading and writing personal stories helps them to understand themselves and one another, and that everyone's story matters.

I'm so proud of her positive impact on their lives. I encourage everyone to make their own story come to life in a memoir, however you might choose to write or record it, knowing that this gift will have its unique impact on the future.