



Making the Story My Own

It is only when you open your veins and bleed onto the page a little that you establish contact with your reader.

—Paul Gallico

I n a former professional life, I was a journalist. My first job after college was at a small weekly newspaper in Indianapolis where I wrote obituaries, covered local art fairs and did “man on the street” interviews, asking a different question every week. From there I became a feature writer for a daily paper upstate, and then Lifestyle Editor for another. For years, I wrote a Friday column that profiled everyday people doing everyday things, and I loved the challenge of turning what my subjects might think of as ordinary or boring into a story others would want to read. “Why would anyone care about me?” I heard over and over.

I always followed a set formula: Start with an attention-getting lead, follow chronologically with the details of the story, and end with a wistful quote from the subject, capturing the lesson he or she learned. It worked every time.

Eventually, I gave up journalism for a career in public relations, but my writing still tended to be formulaic, and I remained under the strong influence of my two long-time friends: *The Associated Press Stylebook* and the inverted pyramid.

When I moved to Chicago in 2006, I went looking for a creative outlet, an opportunity to take a deeper dive into my writing. I wanted to go beyond the “who, what, when, where and why” that was so

ingrained in my journalistic mind. I found a writing studio close to an “L” train stop and signed up for a class in memoir writing because of the challenge I knew it would provide me. I was a third-person writer, I told myself, more comfortable writing about others, telling someone else’s story. Could I dig as deep within myself? Did I have the guts to tell my own story?

In my Introduction to Memoir class, I learned the importance of balancing scene and summary. I read excerpts from books by masters like Joan Didion (*The Year of Magical Thinking*), Frank McCourt (*Angela’s Ashes*) and Mary Karr (*The Liars’ Club*). I practiced sensory writing, describing smells, tastes and textures during impromptu writing assignments. I experimented with metaphor and dialog. It opened up my literary world.

When I nervously sat down to begin my first piece for class, I had every intention of writing about my recent move to Chicago—the transition from suburban home to city condo, from mother to empty nester, from divorcee to newlywed the second time around. Instead, I ended up writing about my mother, whom I lost to cancer when I was twelve. I hadn’t planned to go there, but the story came to life after I discovered an old stack of letters one weekend while unpacking some boxes following the move. In the pile was a small note I had written as a child to my mother during one of her long hospital stays. “Please get well and come home soon. I am waiting for you,” it said. It had a pencil-smudged drawing of a sad face with tears. I felt a wave of inspiration to share that little girl’s story.

I hadn’t thought about that small child for years—decades really—and when I immersed myself in those memories I was afraid the first draft of my piece might be too sappy and personal to interest anyone else. “Why would anyone care about me?” echoed in my head.

As I wrote, however, my piece became more than just the story of my mother’s long years of illness—the story I probably would have written in my newspaper days. It evolved into the story of how the rest of the family coped—our day-to-day survival. I reached deep within myself to unveil the ugly truth of how that little girl felt:

scared every time her mom had to go to the hospital. Overwhelmed by all of the well wishes and pity from others. Angry because she had to empty bedpans and be extra quiet around the house. Embarrassed that her family was different from the others on the block.

It was the hardest story I had ever written, and an even harder one to share with others.

After three or four rewrites—with plenty of feedback from my writing instructor and classmates—that piece became my first published work of creative non-fiction, when it was selected for inclusion in an anthology entitled *Wisdom Has a Voice: Daughters Remember Mothers*. My writing teacher had learned of the project and encouraged me to submit my work.

When I worked for newspapers, I never got tired of seeing my byline in print, even after ten years or so of reporting. It was always a thrill. When I received a copy of the *Wisdom* anthology in the mail and was able to hold the book in my hands, turn to my piece, and see my name at the top of the page, that feeling returned. With gusto. I felt accomplished, yes, but more importantly, I felt a sense of ownership. I hadn't just reported that story, I had lived it.

I don't have a formula for that.

~Diane Hurles



Perseverance

*Most of us, swimming against the tides of trouble
or encouragement — and we will make the goal.*

~Jerome Fleishman

It was 1985, and my life was at a crossroads. I was thirty-five and, after years of floundering about, I had finally found a job with the Canadian federal government that looked like it was going to be a long-term career.

My background as a trade-mark lawyer had landed me a position with the Trade-marks Opposition Board, a small administrative tribunal that rules on disputes over trade-mark applications. Conducting hearings and writing decisions made use of my acquired skills and, to some extent, satisfied my lifelong urge to be a writer.

But writing legal decisions was not going to sate that long-held desire forever. I knew that something more had to be done.

In years past, I had made the occasional attempt at writing fiction and non-fiction, but nothing much ever came from those attempts. Whether it was lack of confidence, motivation or possibly talent, I seldom followed through and actually produced a final written work.

Yet I still had a desire to be a published writer. So in the fall of 1985, I enrolled in an evening personal interest course at one of the local universities.

The course was called "Writing for Publication" and was taught