

Objects in the Rear View Mirror:
How Life Writing Reshapes
Our Future and Our Past
Irene E. Karpiak

And if life is just a highway
Then the soul is just a car
And objects in the rear view mirror
May appear closer than they are
—Jim Steinman

How does one capture a life into a story? How does the writer distill certain memories from among the array of possible others and connect them into a coherent sequence that becomes at least for the moment “the story of my life”? Where to begin? These questions arise for soldiers in university classes when first faced with the challenge of writing their life story in five chapters. As their instructor, who includes life story as an optional final course project, with the intent of fostering personal learning, I have witnessed both their resistance to writing and the rewards of completion. Having read hundreds of these life stories, I now appreciate the power of life writing both for the author and for the reader. This literary initiative began by chance when I began teaching in a graduate program that extended to military personnel. It has since shaped my style of teaching, my appreciation of life writing for personal learning, and my way of relating to students. I have begun to look at students and people, in general, in a different light—as individuals with a story.

The *JME* and its theme of personal narrative creates a forum for writers to share their stories as well as to explore what has been learned so far about the practice of life writing. It also invites a discussion on the importance of story, of writing it, and sharing it, both for what it offers for personal learning and guidance through life’s terrain. For this purpose I turn to the autobiographies of the soldiers enrolled in courses that I have been teaching, who have willingly

taken on the task of writing the story of their life in five chapters. By drawing on selective episodes from their life and structuring my text around their voices and images, I explore the processes of autobiography, of drawing selected life events closer into view, shaping the memories into written text, reflecting on what is seen, and envisioning a possible future and how to live.

Soldiers Shape their Experiences into a Story

If you, the reader, were to be invited to write five chapters of your life story, what would your chapter titles be? What event surfaces immediately—a change, a move, an offer, a loss? Such appears to be the case for these student writers, who build the chapters of their life journey around one or more central episodes, turns, or transitions from one era to another. As if on an archaeological dig into their historical past, they recover and reassemble the scattered parts and pieces of their life into language for the written page. Some have enjoyed carefree and caring childhoods; some have had the same fortune later in adulthood; some have had strong models providing clarity and direction; and others have had none at all. Through the titles given to each of their five chapters and the title of their overall story, they capture and highlight the key features of past life events, the central figures that affected their growth, and the defining moments and turning points that shaped their life and sense of self.

1. *Transitions of Childhood*

Most student writers begin their narratives with their birth and earliest years, some even with the courtship days of their parents. They recall early first experiences of family, describing details of their parents, siblings, and close others. They highlight first experiences in school, birthday celebrations, and dreams of growing up. One former Navy SEAL began his “Mi Vida Loca” with a description of his dear grandmother:

My earliest memory is of my grandmother, the wonderful woman who raised me. Even though she was no taller than a barrel, she had the strength of a giant. My grandma taught me how to catch a chicken; she also taught me that hard work was good for the soul. To this day, I still remember these two things.

Writers reveal also how quickly all can change from a time of ease and security to a life of uncertainty and family dissolution—a brother chokes on a popcorn kernel, his only photo being the one in his tiny casket; a brother is killed on the road moments after the two brothers fight over a potato chip. They highlight the dawning of realization that they are the “other” through their race and that the society they trusted was not so benevolent, but more, a “vulture culture.” They write of parents who neglected them, of mothers who left, of fathers who disturbed them in the night, and of stepfathers who did worse. And they describe the steps they have taken to come to terms with their past.

Like so many writers, Rick, a military nurse, turns to his early childhood experiences that left a mark on him as a growing individual. He builds his autobiography around football episodes; his first chapter, titled “First and Ten,” opens with an image of a secure and contented child, who receives a gift of a football at his birth, and a cherished gift of custom-fit golf clubs from his father at the age of two. Lessons of football and baseball follow shortly after, as he describes his growing pleasure in sport. But the pattern shifts through an unexpected and consequential event that remains a vivid memory:

Playing youth-council ball is one of my fondest memories. . . Although playing sports as a child is a fond memory, not all of the memories associated with this time hold the same fondness. I remember distinctly the season that occurred when I was eight years old. It is not the football, in particular, that I remember, but the effect of the events that occurred during that time. We had been undefeated throughout the season and were asked to go to Texas to play a little-league team from the Dallas

area. My grandfather owned a six-seated Cessna and flew my family down for the game. My mother did not come with us though, and I found out during the flight that she stayed home to move out of our house. She had filed for divorce from my dad and moved out that weekend. I do not remember if we won or lost that game. . . .

In the overall game of life, being a child of divorced parents is a fumble that would take many years before my sister and I would recover. In some ways, I believe this still affects us, both positively and negatively, each day of our lives.

The way in which Rick narrates this event, how he structures it not into a mere chronology, but a story with characters and plot, illustrates the coherence-building feature of autobiography. His re-description of boyhood loss serves to string the events of his life together, such that his narrative of early childhood events becomes connected to the events that follow.

For other writers, the rear view yields images of childhood that come so close into view as to be experienced once again, along with their attendant emotions. Here, their style may turn to what Philippe Lejeune calls the “narrative present,” as if these writers return to and seemingly relive the moment. Angelina demonstrates this feature, as she shifts between past and present voice, in her opening chapter, “Meeting Mother.” Her memory returns her home to her tiny island kitchen and her delight at the news that she will be visited by her mother, whom she has not seen since infancy:

The smell of breakfast woke me up this morning as it has every other day. . . I guess it was time to wake up and get ready for school. I attend the M Secondary School and am in the sixth grade. As far back as I can remember in my twelve years of living, things have always been the same. . . .

My mom was coming down this Christmas, which was approximately six months away. . . In my entire life of living I had never

seen my mom. My eldest sister L could vaguely remember her but I had no such memories. My mom left [the Island] when I was six months old. Leaving my sister who was six years older and myself with my grandparents. . . . We did and still do all those parental things together but recently I'm beginning to long for my real mom. I think it is because I'm turning thirteen. Now the thirst to know my real mom has become more intense and seems to consume my every waking moment.

As Rick illustrates earlier and Angelina later in this paper, opening their chapter to childhood events serves not only as a place to start their story, but also as the beginning point of "making the self" (Eakin), in recognition of the significance of childhood events in the years that follow, and their causal links between present self and past. One student acknowledges this link:

I believe that who we are as a child and the events that unfold in these early stages also contribute in a substantial way to our development as adults. For this reason my first chapter and part of my second focus on my childhood and major events which shaped my development.

2. *Transition to Soldier*

Few resist mention of the episode of enlistment or commission into the military. For those who enlist, the transition from civilian to soldier begins with the recruitment and the Basic Training experience, where the beginning weeks present some of the greatest, up to then, life challenges that will remain as defining moments. For some, the roots of their career decisions lie in the family history, where past military careers set the example to follow. For others it comes with an expectation that the military will offer an escape from a life of struggle, aimlessness, and failed efforts, as it did for one former Navy Seal:

Things did not phase [*sic*] me or interest me. Until one day when I met this guy that had been in Special Forces during Nam and he got me interested in this kind of stuff and one thing lead to another and I signed

up with the Navy and told them I wanted to blow stuff up and jump out of planes. The recruiter told me that I would fit right in with the Navy.

In a more sobering voice, Michael, who grew up in an African American community in southern Mississippi, recalls his earlier misdirected life and the sudden turn of motivation to a military career:

My grades were terrible and I dropped out after one semester. I worked full time at the restaurant and socialized with the wrong crowd. I had little ambition totally satisfied to make a few hundred dollars a week and hang out with peers in the same boat. This pattern persisted until the death of my father. My father's death caused me to reevaluate life and set goals for myself. First I realized that my parents had hoped for better things from me, for that matter I expected more than working at a fast food restaurant. Also, life was not a given thing, but could be taken at any time, so I had better make the most of mine. I decided to enter the Air Force active duty full time.

In the case of Angelina, mentioned above, the trials of first "meeting mother" and then her life of "living with mother" directed her to the recruitment office and enlistment. Her rear view of the following days once again calls on the "narrative present" voice, as she shifts between past and present, re-experiencing the emotion of the event:

I must be out of my mind I'm thinking. That would be the only reason why I'm in the Army. Escape is one thing but sanity is another thing entirely and I think I've just lost mine. I came about with a start to find a Drill Sergeant screaming in my face to move faster. All of a sudden I have this uncontrollable urge to laugh but I don't dare. I'm too frightened to laugh.

[The Fort] must be the ugliest, most barren place in the whole United States. I hated it on sight. Whoever picked me to come over here must know me personally and hates me. It was cold also. I just felt miserable

and on seeing the living quarters my spirit lowered even more. I could feel the tears streaming down my face as I slowly dragged my two bags up the stairs. The place was quiet; everyone was asleep as I made my way to the first available empty bunk I could find. Getting ready for bed it finally dawned; I've really lost control of my life.

Basic Training follows, as does the much feared and failed thirty-foot jump in Air Assault School. The second time, with the support of a friend, Angelina succeeds and passes. In the following paragraph, she reflects on the training and the consequential shift to her identity:

Thinking back Air Assault School taught me a lot about myself. I gained confidence in my ability to conquer any obstacles standing in my way. Developing that train of thought made life easier for me at [the Fort]. I accepted my fate for being in the military as what it was and began to make the best of it. . . I hated taking orders but the more accepting and less challenging I became, military life just got better. I began seeing myself more like a soldier.

Writers detail further transitions in relation to family and personal relationships. They consider the effects of family relocations and the strains of deployments, their anticipated retirement, and questions that still remain. Don begins his story with the lessons learned as a child growing up amid the poverty and racism of rural Tennessee. He turns to adult life lessons, along with those associated with the loss of his children and wife, "She knew what she wanted and it was not me . . . Somewhere between the roast beef and the mashed potatoes one night she told me she was unhappy and that she was leaving." Later, he reflects on the more disheartening features of his career:

I had somehow hoped for more. My "great crusade" had come with strip malls and Hard Rock Cafe Baghdad tee shirts. It was seedy. Kuwait was back in the hands of the King. The Iraqis were still in the hands of Saddam and smoke from the oil fires blotted out the desert sun at noon.

Who knows what breathing that did stuff will do to you in later life? I wonder what it was really all about. It changed nothing.

3. *Transition to Student*

Earning a university degree, especially as an adult learner, stands as a powerful goal and motive for soldiers for whom higher education represents both an opportunity for advancement during their military career and an avenue for career building at the completion of military service. Their narratives detail their struggles of becoming students and the unexpected shifts in perspective that formal learning engenders. Roger represents the former. In his autobiography, “Overcoming My Obstacles as a Learner,” he recalls his distress in finding himself once again in the classroom with all of the emotions that plagued him years earlier in school. How is he to fit in with these students, clearly so much younger? How is he to keep up? Roger reflects:

I encountered a rude awakening. I did not understand the “norm” of the university. . . I struggled mentally trying to recall and relate what I remembered as a senior in high school. What type of book bag did I need to bring? How should I dress? Should I bring a lunch or buy snacks to appear I was not on a budget? Should I walk to school or drive (I lived about a 13-minute walk)?

And Grant, who seems to have none of the anxieties of Roger’s experience, confronts his own challenge with an unexpected turn, when he enrolls into a class at the local community college. He titles his autobiography “Through My Goggles”:

Then it happened. In the classroom of a community college in southern California I was introduced to the notion of critical thought. I was not, at that time, familiar with the term, though I had been performing the action for many years. The class was an Introduction to Western Civilization, and at some point during that semester it dawned on me; every

civilization that we had studied had created some sort of religion to explain away the inexplicable. Some of these religions were very close, in concept, to my own and some were nowhere near. Who was right? Were we the right religion? . . . I began to think that I had little right, as a Christian, to even *think* that my religion was the one *right* religion, while dismissing these others as false myth. . . .

Although I was now armed with many questions, I still had few answers. I also had an imbedded idea of a Supreme Being from the Christian tradition. This was becoming difficult to deal with.

4. *Writers Reassemble, Reflect, and Resolve*

As the soldier-students move through their five chapters, their perspective reveals subtle shifts. Whereas the early chapters are invariably composed of past events brought closer into view, the last chapter takes a turn to reflective observations and meaning-making of the text. Making meaning of the past, from the perspective of the present, they consciously link past to present. They echo also Lejeune's observation that writing reveals a point of view of the self and of "how I became who I am" (124).

Finally, having reflected on past significant transition points, these authors turn their eye to the future. They assert their commitment to their families, friends, and career or vocation. As they first compose and then read their life story, as they search for solutions and for hints on how to live, some directions, principles, and conclusions emerge. This practice of examining the past and directing the gaze to the future is illustrated in Angelina's closing chapter, titled "What If." She is reminded of what she has missed as a daughter who hardly knew her mother, and the scars she has carried from that loss. Based on her own struggles, her decisions, and her learning from the past, she articulates what she now wants for her (soon-to-be born) daughter, and she closes with contemplation on the kind of mother she wants to be:

I hope my baby does not choose to walk in my shoes because they were very heavy at times. Yes the choices I have made and what fate has dealt me have made me a stronger person but the tears and turmoil it took me to get there were sometime more than I could bear. I'll love my daughter but also allow her to make her own choices. I never want her to feel that she has to run away from me in order to get some breathing space. . . I believe in building a strong foundation from day one with my baby.

Adding layers of cement so strong that no weak links can pass through.

Michael, who earlier wrote of how his father's death precipitated his commitment to the military, closes his autobiography with reflections on what he has learned as an adult and what he now knows to be of worth, and, notably, he looks for the sources in his past in Mississippi:

The true education of my life has been travel and the interfacing with people . . . When I speak of the places I've lived it's the people that live there which make the place memorable, not the place itself . . . The places will soon fade into my distant memories but the characters, no the friends will always be at the forefront of my mind's eye. I've also learned one other important lesson of life and that is that the only important thing in life is people. All ambition and gathering of material wealth is secondary to the relationships we cultivate with our fellow human beings. . . .

From seedling in a small Mississippi town, to a sprout in junior and senior high school. Many trials and stumbles along the way, some causing leaves to develop and then fall off. To now the true beauty of the learning tree, the blossoming of flowers. The blossoming of flowers from the lesson life delivers.

And Grant, whose chance encounter with a course in Western Civilization precipitated a momentous clash with his belief system, closes his autobiography with a commentary on the effect of this disorienting experience:

While none of us has the option of writing our own prescription for life's goggles, critical thought, should we choose to utilize it, allows us a hand in who we become. In many ways I am the holder of a very fortuitous birthright. Had I followed the religion of my parents, I'm sure I would still have been a good person. . . .

I think, however, that the challenge of casting off blind faith, no matter how well intended, to embrace the enlightenment of the question, "Why?" has allowed me to become an ontologically deeper individual. Perhaps most importantly, for this part of this life, it is what I have *chosen* to learn.

B.J. Mandel summarizes the significance of this process of remembering in the continuing process of shaping one's personality:

In ratifying the past, the autobiographer discloses the truth of his or her being in the present. Thus, personal history is put forth in a certain light. The past may be an illusion, but the light of now is never an illusion. What it illuminates, it makes real. *Now* is the only source of light. Anything it shines on may be clarified. (65)

5. *Learning Moves Writers Toward Possibility*

As I read through the many life narratives composed by my students that reveal so much of the events that both shattered and shaped their life, often leaving me distraught, I wonder why they would write *this*? How come they would trust me with *this*? They could write about anything since they had many choices of assignments, yet chose to write their life story and about *this*. And as I hear more from students about their experience with this assignment, I come to know more about life story and the importance of telling it in one form or another, I now understand why these lives are making it to the written page—to tell our story is to claim it as our own—as something *that was*, as something *that*

happened, to become a *part of who we are*. As one student-veteran wrote, “It’s only until we understand who we were that we know who we are.”

Out of the fragments and accidents of their life, these student authors manage to create a pattern, a rhythm, a set of connections. One student described the writing as “a process of unraveling, pulling [my life] in a bunch of pieces and then putting it back together.” This process of pulling apart and putting together, witnessed in so much of life writing, is a feature of personal learning that appears to build identity and integrity, two processes that educator Parker Palmer has defined as essential to our interaction and work with others. Identity, Palmer notes, is associated with our recognition of the inner and outer forces that have shaped us; it includes our own limits, fears, wounds, and potentials, as well as the acknowledgment of those who have done harm to us, and the harm we have done to others. Integrity refers to our capacity to draw the past events together and acceptance of their place in the whole and undivided self that we are. Palmer notes the reduction of self-protection, fraudulence, and fear that come with the growth of identity and integrity, and he acknowledges the supportive role of autobiography:

The discoveries I make about myself when I remember the encounters that have shaped and revealed my selfhood are sometimes embarrassing—but they are also real. Whatever the cost in embarrassment, I will know myself better, and thus be a better teacher, when I acknowledge the forces that play within me instead of allowing them to wreak witless havoc on my work. (29)

Finally, it is possible that the ones affected are not only the author, but the reader, too, as readers come to know something not known before. Having been drawn into the story of another, the reader now responds to it, in light of his or her own life. Reading from a place so different from that of the author—perhaps as parent, spouse, sibling, friend, or one embarking on a military career or a student status—the reader is touched, perhaps even affected. These life stories

offer examples, models, road maps, and guideposts through life's terrain. They tell us what it can be like and possibly how to get through. Prospective students or soldiers may be encouraged to overcome obstacles that come earlier in life or that arise later. Those who have assumed that higher education is not for them may find hope.

And So . . .

The past is where the story happened, but the work of autobiography continues into the actions of the future. Nuala O'Faolain understands this relationship: "A memoir may always be retrospective, but the past is not where its action takes place" (52). For these student writers, as these events are brought from the past into consciousness to "appear closer than they are," to be reflected upon and possibly reshaped, they permit recognition of what has been gained, perhaps even the reclaiming of what has been lost. These new understandings position writers into the next stages of their life, equipped with an understanding of who they are.

This paper closes with an invitation to readers to consider the power of life writing, how our stories told shape our future but also reshape our remembered past. Write your story, since only by looking back will you find the pattern, and only through knowing your story can you envision another. Tell your story for the human mutuality and human connection that it brings, a way to share what you have discovered, and for the pathways for others it provides. Attune to the stories of others as a way to reach the solitary and to create community.

Works Cited

- Eakin, Paul John. *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999. Print.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Trans. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. Print.
- Mandel, B.J. "Full of Life Now." *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. J. Olney. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980. 49-72. Print.
- O'Faolain, Nuala. *Almost There: The Outward Journey of a Dublin Woman*. New York: Riverhead, 2003. Print.
- Palmer, Parker J. *The Courage To Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998. Print.
- Steinman, Jim. "Objects in the Rear View Mirror May Appear Closer Than They Are." Perf. Meat Loaf. *Bat out of Hell II: Back into Hell*. MCA. 1993. CD.