

INTRODUCTORY GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Coordinator: David Grogan

Introductory Guided Autobiography is a mindful writing workshop open to anyone who wants to take stock of the experiential wisdom they have accumulated over the years and tell their life story, but who doesn't know where to begin. Each participant will write a two-page story every week on a progressive sequence of themes and, in the process, create a 7000-to-8000 memoir by the end of the term. The themes, developed by social psychologist James Birren, include laundry lists of priming questions. The primary focus of the workshop is on the process of life review rather than on producing polished prose. Participants gather around an imaginary campfire each week to read their essays aloud and provide non-judgmental support to each other. Cultivating the art of mindful listening is emphasized as much as the art of mindful writing. Few among of us can be considered natural-born writers, yet each of us has a story to tell. The key to finding your own writerly voice is simple. In the words of Oscar Wilde: "Be yourself. Everyone else is taken."

David Grogan is a former magazine editor.

Type of Study Group: Workshop

Readings and other Materials/Online Services:

Priming questions for thematic stories will be provided on a weekly basis by the study group leader.

******* SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS *******

WEEK 1

Inward Ho! Introduction and impromptu writing exercises.

WEEK 2

Forks in the Road Each of us experience unique turning points in our lives--events or moments of insight that propel us in one direction or another. They may be big events such as marriage, war, moving to a new city, or retirement. Or they may be small events that had big outcomes, like reading a book or going on a hike. Sample questions: Were there choices

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your parents made as a child that changed the course of your life? Were there any serendipitous events—such as winning a lottery, getting a new job, or falling in love—that proved to be a fork in the road for you? Where were there any particular individuals—for example, relatives, friends, teachers or a stranger with whom you had a chance encounter—who had a significant impact on the direction you took in life?

WEEK 3

Family Ties Our families of origin (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins) can exert a powerful influence on the course of our lives, for good or ill, that can reach across generations. Sample questions: Who held the power in your family and made the major decisions? Which family members have you felt closest to? Were there any hero figures in your family who had stories told about them? Were there any events that made your family stronger or tore it apart?

WEEK 4

Money & Wealth Most of us learn our financial values early in life. We mimic those around us, picking up both good and bad habits. And how we manage our wealth through the course of our lives reflects how we see the world. Sample questions: How did your family's financial situation compare to that of other people you knew? What were you taught about money? What has money come to mean to you—power, position, comfort, security, or something else?

WEEK 5

Working Life Most of us work to live; the lucky ones live to work. In either case, our life's work includes the activities that occupy a lion's share of our time and energy. Many people change careers several times or have to balance two, sometimes three jobs at once. Others stay with the same job for decades. In some cases, volunteer work is a person's most important legacy. In one form or another, the work we do defines who we are. Sample questions: When you were young, did you dream about what you wanted to be when you grew up? What have been the greatest benefits from your chosen field of work? What were the greatest challenges? Did you have a mentor who helped you with your career?

WEEK 6

Health & Wellness Good health is one of the primary components of our well-being. Acute or chronic illnesses, whether experienced personally or by someone close to us, can lead to major changes in the way we live. Health

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and self-image are also often intertwined in complex ways. Sample questions: Were you considered a well child or a sickly child and did it make any difference to you? Were you ahead or behind your peers in growth and development as an adolescent and how did this affect your image of yourself? If you have suffered serious injury or disease at any time in your life, how did it change you?

WEEK 7

Gender Variables Our ideas about what it means to be a woman or a man evolve and come from many sources, including family members, friends, reading and our experiences in life. This identity can vary with different periods of life. A young girl may grow up as a tomboy and strongly express her male attributes. A young boy may grow up delighting in the more feminine aspects of life and feel disinclined to participate in the rough-and-tumble world of sports and skinned knees. As sexual preferences come into play, further categorization may define us lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or straight. Sample questions: What was your first remembered experience of being male or female? When and where did you get your education about sex and the facts of life? Have your ideas about appropriate gender behavior changed over time?

WEEK 8

Death & Dying Our perceptions of death can affect our lives in many ways. As a child, the death of a pet or a national hero may have had a profound impact on you. Or the loss of someone close to you may have pushed death to the forefront of your reality at an early age. You may have had a close call with death and been given a second chance to appreciate what you almost lost. You might fear dying. Or perhaps you've accepted it as inevitable. Sample questions: How was death talked about and treated in your family? Did it frighten you? What was the most significant death you experienced and how did it change your life?

WEEK 9

Quest for Meaning The history of our spiritual lives need not be confined to experiences in organized religion. Nor does it necessarily exclude someone who is an agnostic or atheist. In a broad sense, the notion of spirituality encompasses the quest to discover meaning and purpose in our lives. Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? Sample questions: As a child what kind of instruction and ideas were you given of a spiritual, religious or philosophical nature? Were you ever challenged to take a stand on religion or defend your values? What is a core belief that

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you hold about yourself and your place in the world and how is it reflected in your life?

WEEK 10

Life Goals Our goals and aspirations form an integral part of the fabric of our lives. Over time, experience may teach us that we should change our goals or change our aspirations for new ones that better fit with the realities of our lives and our changing values. Sample questions: When you were a child, whom did you want to be like, or what kind of person did you want to be when you grew up? What do you think have been the most important achievements of your life? Is there anything you feel so strongly about, you would sacrifice almost anything for it? What legacy would you like to create that reflects how you led your life?

WEEK 11

Legacy Letter Each life is significant, and we all want to be remembered for something. One way for you to do this is to write down your values, your hopes, and the life lessons you hope to impart to your family and others you care about.

WEEK 12

Wrap Party A Six-Word Memoir: If you were publishing your autobiography, what would your title be? What is the central theme of your life story? Can you sum it up in exactly six words?

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