

Our Life and Times

A Memoir Writing Workshop

In this writing workshop, we'll use the events of our times as prompts for crafting stories about our own lives. Wars, assassinations, elections, social movements, transformative inventions, epochal moments in sports, music, arts and entertainment fields—all of us have lived personal lives threaded through this public landscape but we have our own distinct experiences of it. This workshop will use writing as a vehicle for exploring the life and the times we've been through.

1. Where Were You When

This class begins with an introduction to freewriting as a method for exploring ideas, retrieving memories, and developing personal narratives. I will present a list of 50 or so events, spanning the seventy or so years that we have been alive (slightly more for some of us, slightly less for others). Students will pick any item from the list and apply the freewriting method to explore whatever comes to mind from their selected launch point.

2. Thereby Hangs a Tale

Writing memoir involves remembering, and memory works by association: one thing reminds you of another, which reminds you of another, which reminds you of another. A train of such associations can lead to crucial discoveries about your own life story. As preparation for this session, students will identify/reflect upon items they no longer need or use but for some reason still possess—a letter, a diploma, a key, a theater program, a garment, a piece of furniture... In class, through freewriting and discussion, we'll explore the stories behind these artifacts and the larger questions they bring up: what do the various memorabilia and souvenirs suggest about the world that no longer exists, and what does that world signify for the lives we're living today?

3. Before and After

This session focuses on turning points in (A) the history of our times and (B) our personal lives. Our point of departure will be the following question: if you had to pick *the* pivotal moment of our lifetime—the single event that changed everything—what would you pick? Different people will of course have different answers, even about the public realm, “The night MLK was assassinated.” “The election of Ronald Reagan.” “9/11.” We'll explore in discussion and writing what the world looked like to each of us in the years before that pivotal moment and what it looked in the years that followed. How did that moment change our trajectory? How did it change the way the world felt?

4. Parallel Timelines

Our mind tends to sort events into separate chronological timelines—it's more efficient; but putting timelines together can jog the memory in fruitful ways. As preparation for this session, students create parallel timelines for a year (or more) of their choosing. On one side, they list notable events in the public realm—sensational movies, who-won-the-superbowl, massacres that happened somewhere, political dramas, etc. The other side lists milestones in the writer's

personal life for that period—setbacks, triumphs, job, birthday celebration, new people met, etc. Some students might choose to make parallel-timelines for two years, one that is iconic for personal reasons (e.g. “the year I met my future husband”) the other iconic for public reasons (the year that Nixon resigned”) Listing the historical events will undoubtedly entail Internet research—I’ll provide starter links and suggestions. Writing will involve exploring correlations and connections, public and private.

5. Eras

Most of us have at least a vague sense of having lived through a number of eras in our lifetime. We’ll discuss what these were and how we define eras: by decades? (the Fifties, the Sixties...) by presidents? (The Reagan era, the Bush years...) by cultural tides? (The Beat generation, the counterculture years, the Yuppies era, the digital era...) and so on. Students will explore different eras by recounting an event from each of two different eras in their life, using descriptive writing techniques to bring the two times viscerally to life—that is enriching the story with details about what was there to see, hear, smell, touch...

6. What If

What if Elvis Presley had died in a car accident before he ever learned to play guitar? What if the Vietnam War had never happened? What if Gore had been elected? What if ...What if...? In this last session, we’ll discuss events that shaped our lives and how our own lives might have been different if one or more chosen events had not happened or had happened differently.