Ngugi wa Thiong'o

DECOLONIZING THE MIND

I was born into a large peasant family: father, four wives and about twenty-eight children. I also belonged, as we all did in those days, to a wider extended family and to the community as a whole.

We spoke Gīkūyū[1] as we worked in the fields. We spoke Gīkūyū in and outside the home. I can vividly recall those evenings of storytelling around the fireside. It was mostly the grown-ups telling the children but everybody was interested and involved. We children would re-tell the stories the following day to other children who worked in the fields picking the pyrethrum[2] flowers, tea-leaves or coffee beans of our European and African landlords.

The stories, with mostly animals as the main characters, were all told in Gīkūyū. Hare, being small, weak but full of innovative wit and cunning, was our hero. We identified with him as he struggled against the brutes of prey like lion, leopard, hyena. His victories were our victories and we learned that the apparently weak can outwit the strong. We followed the animals in their struggle against hostile nature—drought, rain, sun, wind—a confrontation often forcing them to search for forms of co-operation. But we were also interested in their struggles amongst themselves, and particularly between the beasts and the victims of prey. These twin struggles, against nature and other animals, reflected real-life struggles in the human world.

Not that we neglected stories with human beings as the main characters. There were two types of characters in such human-centered narratives: the species of truly human beings with qualities of courage, kindness, mercy, hatred of evil, concern for others; and a man-eat-man two-mouthed species with qualities of greed, selfishness, individualism and hatred of what was good for the larger co-operative community. Co-operation as the ultimate good in a community was a constant theme. It could unite human beings with animals against ogres and beasts of prey, as in the story of how dove, after being fed with castor-oil seeds, was sent to fetch a smith working far away from home and whose pregnant wife was being threatened by these man-eating two-mouthed ogres.

There were good and bad story-tellers. A good one could tell the same story over and over again, and it would always be fresh to us, the listeners. He or she could tell a story told by someone else and make it more alive and dramatic. The differences really were in the use of words and images and the inflection of voices to effect different tones.

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1. Language spoken by the Kikuyu people, the majority of Kenyans.
2. Type of chrysanthemum, often used as an insecticide or for medicinal purposes.

We therefore learned to value words for their meaning and nuances. Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words. So we learned the music of our language on top of the content. The language, through images and symbols, gave us a view of the world, but it had a beauty of its own. The home and the field were then our pre-primary school but what is important, for this discussion, is that the language of our evening teach-ins, and the language of our immediate and wider community, and the language of our work in the fields were one.

And then I went to school, a colonial school, and this harmony was broken. The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture. I first went to Kamaandura, missionary run, and then to another called Maanguuū run by nationalists grouped around the Gīkūyū Independent and Karinga Schools Association. Our language of education was still Gīkūyū. The very first time I was ever given an ovation for my writing was over a composition in Gīkūyū So for my first four years there was still harmony between the language of my formal education and that of the Limuru peasant community.

It was after the declaration of a state of emergency over Kenya in 1952 that all the schools run by patriotic nationalists were taken over by the colonial regime and were placed under District Education Boards chaired by Englishmen. English became the language of my formal education. In Kenya, English became more than a language: it was *the* language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference.

Thus one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gīkūyū in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment—three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks—or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money they could hardly afford. And how did the teachers catch the culprits? A button was initially given to one pupil who was supposed to hand it over to whoever was caught speaking his mother tongue. Whoever had the button at the end of the day would sing who had given it to him and the ensuing process would bring out all the culprits of the day. Thus children were turned into witch-hunters and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one's immediate community.

The attitude to English was the exact opposite: any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded; prizes, prestige, applause; the ticket to higher realms. English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences, and all the other branches of learning. English became *the* main determinant of a child's progress up the ladder of formal education.

As you may know, the colonial system of education in addition to its apartheid racial demarcation had the structure of a pyramid: a broad primary base, a narrowing secondary middle, and an even narrower university apex. Selections from primary into secondary were through an examination, in my

time called Kenya African Preliminary Examination, in which one had to pass six subjects ranging from Maths to Nature Study and Kiswahili.[3] All the papers were written in English. Nobody could pass the exam who failed the English language paper no matter how brilliantly he had done in the other subjects. I remember one boy in my class of 1954 who had distinctions in all subjects except English, which he had failed. He was made to fail the entire exam. He went on to become a turn boy[4] in a bus company. I who had only passes but a credit in English got a place at the Alliance High School, one of the most elitist institutions for Africans in colonial Kenya. The requirements for a place at the University, Makerere University College, were broadly the same: nobody could go on to wear the undergraduate red gown, no matter how brilliantly they had performed in all the other subjects unless they had a credit—not even a simple pass!—in English. Thus the most coveted place in the pyramid and in the system was only available to the holder of an English language credit card. English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom.

Literary education was now determined by the dominant language while also reinforcing that dominance. Orature (oral literature) in Kenyan languages stopped. In primary school I now read simplified Dickens and Stevenson alongside Rider Haggard. Jim Hawkins, Oliver Twist, Tom Brown[5]—not Hare, Leopard and Lion—were now my daily companions in the world of imagination. In secondary school, Scott and G.B. Shaw vied with more Rider Haggard, John Buchan, Alan Paton, Captain W.E. Johns.[6] At Makerere I read English: from Chaucer to T.S. Eliot with a touch of Grahame Greene.[7]

Thus language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds.

What was the colonial system doing to us Kenyan children? What were the consequences of, on the one hand, this systematic suppression of our languages and the literature they carried, and on the other the elevation of English and the literature it carried? To answer those questions, let me first examine the relationship of language to human experience, human culture, and the human perception of reality.

Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Take English. It is spoken in Britain and

3. Swahili, a major East African language.
4. A tout; someone who brings in customers.
5. Charles Dickens (1812–1870), British novelist, author of *Oliver Twist*; Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894), Scottish novelist, creator of Jim Hawkins in *Treasure Island*; H. Rider Haggard (1856–1925), British adventure novelist; Tom Brown, chief character in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* in the novel by Thomas Hughes (1822–1896);
6. Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), Scottish poet and novelist; George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), Irish-born playwright; Buchan (1875–1940), Scottish adventure novelist, author of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, and also governor general of Canada; Paton (1903–1988), South African novelist; Johns (1893–1968), British writer, famous for the Biggles stories for boys.
7. Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–1400), British poet, author of *The Canterbury Tales*; Eliot (1888–1965), American-born poet; Greene (1904–1991), British novelist.

in Sweden and Denmark. But for Swedish and Danish people English is only a means of communication with non-Scandinavians. It is not a carrier of their culture. For the British, and particularly the English, it is additionally, and inseparably from its use as a tool of communication, a carrier of their culture and history. Or take Swahili in East and Central Africa. It is widely used as a means of communication across many nationalities. But it is not the carrier of a culture and history of many of those nationalities. However in parts of Kenya and Tanzania, and particularly in Zanzibar,[8] Swahili is inseparably both a means of communication and a carrier of the culture of those people to whom it is a mother-tongue.

Language as communication has three aspects or elements. There is first what Karl Marx[9] once called the language of real life, the element basic to the whole notion of language, its origins and development: that is, the relations people enter into with one another in the labor process, the links they necessarily establish among themselves in the act of a people, a community of human beings, producing wealth or means of life like food, clothing, houses. A human community really starts its historical being as a community of co-operation in production through the division of labor; the simplest is between man, woman and child within a household; the more complex divisions are between branches of production such as those who are sole hunters, sole gatherers of fruits or sole workers in metal. Then there are the most complex divisions such as those in modern factories where a single product, say a shirt or a shoe, is the result of many hands and minds. Production is co-operation, is communication, is language, is expression of a relation between human beings and it is specifically human.

The second aspect of language as communication is speech and it imitates the language of real life, that is communication in production. The verbal signposts both reflect and aid communication or the relation established between human beings in the production of their means of life. Language as a system of verbal signposts makes that production possible. The spoken word is to relations between human beings what the hand is to the relations between human beings and nature. The hand through tools mediates between human beings and nature and forms the language of real life: spoken words mediate between human beings and form the language of speech.

The third aspect is the written signs. The written word imitates the spoken. Where the first two aspects of language as communication through the hand and the spoken word historically evolved more or less simultaneously, the written aspect is a much later historical development. Writing is representation of sounds with visual symbols, from the simplest knot among shepherds to tell the number in a herd or the hieroglyphics among the Agĩkũyũ gicaandi[10] singers and poets of Kenya, to the most complicated and different letter and picture writing systems of the world today.

8. Island off the east coast of Africa; part of Tanzania since 1964.
9. German political philosopher (1818–1883).
10. Agĩkũyũ, another term for Kikuyu, the group that forms the majority of the Kenyan population; gicaandi, a particular Kenyan song genre.

In most societies the written and the spoken languages are the same, in that they represent each other: what is on paper can be read to another person and be received as that language, which the recipient has grown up speaking. In such a society there is broad harmony for a child between the three aspects of language as communication. His interaction with nature and with other men is expressed in written and spoken symbols or signs which are both a result of that double interaction and a reflection of it. The association of the child's sensibility is with the language of his experience of life.

But there is more to it: communication between human beings is also the basis and process of evolving culture. In doing similar kinds of things and actions over and over again under similar circumstances, similar even in their mutability, certain patterns, moves, rhythms, habits, attitudes, experiences and knowledge emerge. Those experiences are handed over to the next generation and become the inherited basis for their further actions on nature and on themselves. There is a gradual accumulation of values which in time become almost self-evident truths governing their conception of what is right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, courageous and cowardly, generous and mean in their internal and external relations. Over a time this becomes a way of life distinguishable from other ways of life. They develop a distinctive culture and history. Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next.

Language as culture also has three important aspects. Culture is a product of the history which it in turn reflects. Culture in other words is a product and a reflection of human beings communicating with one another in the very struggle to create wealth and to control it. But culture does not merely reflect that history, or rather it does so by actually forming images or pictures of the world of nature and nurture. Thus the second aspect of language as culture is as an image-forming agent in the mind of a child. Our whole conception of ourselves as a people, individually and collectively, is based on those pictures and images which may or may not correctly correspond to the actual reality of the struggles with nature and nurture which produced them in the first place. But our capacity to confront the world creatively is dependent on how those images correspond or not to that reality, how they distort or clarify the reality of our struggles. Language as culture is thus mediating between me and my own self; between my own self and other selves; between me and nature. Language is mediating in my very being. And this brings us to the third aspect of language as culture. Culture transmits or imparts those images of the world and reality through the spoken and the written language, that is through a specific language. In other words, the capacity to speak, the capacity to order sounds in a manner that makes for mutual comprehension between human beings is universal. This is the universality of language, a quality specific to human beings. It corresponds to the universality of the struggle against nature and that between human beings. But the particularity of the sounds, the words, the word order into phrases and sentences, and the specific manner, or laws, of their ordering is what distinguishes one language from another. Thus a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history. Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries.

Language as communication and as culture are then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.

So what was the colonialist imposition of a foreign language doing to us children?

The real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth: what they produced, how they produced it, and how it was distributed; to control, in other words, the entire realm of the language of real life. Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others.

For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer. The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized.

Take language as communication. Imposing a foreign language, and suppressing the native languages as spoken and written, were already breaking the harmony previously existing between the African child and the three aspects of language. Since the new language as a means of communication was a product of and was reflecting the "real language of life" elsewhere, it could never as spoken or written properly reflect or imitate the real life of that community. This may in part explain why technology always appears to us as slightly external, *their* product and not *ours*. The word "missile"

used to hold an alien far-away sound until I recently learnt its equivalent in Gĩkũyũ, *ngurukuhĩ* and it made me apprehend it differently. Learning, for a colonial child, became a cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience.

But since the new, imposed languages could never completely break the native languages as spoken, their most effective area of domination was the third aspect of language as communication, the written. The language of an African child's formal education was foreign. The language of the books he read was foreign. The language of his conceptualization was foreign. Thought, in him, took the visible form of a foreign language. So the written language of a child's upbringing in the school (even his spoken language within the school compound) became divorced from his spoken language at home. There was often not the slightest relationship between the child's written world, which was also the language of his schooling, and the world of his immediate environment in the family and the community. For a colonial child, the harmony existing between the three aspects of language as communication was irrevocably broken. This resulted in the disassociation of the sensibility[11] of that child from his natural and social environment, what we might call colonial alienation. The alienation became reinforced in the teaching of history, geography, music, where bourgeois Europe was always the center of the universe.

The disassociation, divorce, or alienation from the immediate environment becomes clearer when you look at colonial language as a carrier of culture.

Since culture is a product of the history of a people which it in turn reflects, the child was now being exposed exclusively to a culture that was a product of a world external to himself. He was being made to stand outside himself to look at himself. *Catching Them Young* is the title of a book on racism, class, sex, and politics in children's literature by Bob Dixon.[12] "Catching them young" as an aim was even more true of a colonial child. The images of his world and his place in it implanted in a child take years to eradicate, if they ever can be.

Since culture does not just reflect the world in images but actually, through those images, conditions a child to see that world a certain way, the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition.

And since those images are mostly passed on through orature and literature it meant the child would now only see the world as seen in the literature of his language of adoption. From the point of view of alienation, that is of seeing oneself from outside oneself as if one was another self, it does not matter that the imported literature carried the great humanist tradition of the best Shakespeare, Goethe, Balzac, Tolstoy, Gorky, Brecht, Sholokhov,[13] Dickens. The location of this great mirror of imagination was necessarily Europe and its history and culture and the rest of the universe was seen from that center.

But obviously it was worse when the colonial child was exposed to images of his world as mirrored in the written languages of his colonizer. Where his own native languages were associated in his impressionable mind with low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence and ability or downright stupidity, non-intelligibility and barbarism, this was reinforced by the world he met in the works of such geniuses of racism as a Rider Haggard or a Nicholas Monsarrat;[14] not to mention the pronouncement of some of the giants of western intellectual and political establishment, such as Hume (". . . The negro is naturally inferior to the whites . . ."), Thomas Jefferson (". . . The blacks . . . are inferior to the whites on the endowments of both body and mind . . ."), or Hegel[15] with his Africa comparable to a land of childhood still enveloped in the dark mantle of the night as far as the development of self-conscious history was concerned. Hegel's statement that there was nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in the African character is representative of the racist images of Africans and Africa such a colonial child was bound to encounter in the literature of the colonial languages. The results could be disastrous.

11. An echo of T. S. Eliot's famous term "dissociation of sensibility," a break from the past, when thought and feeling were unified.
12. Bob Dixon's *Catching Them Young* appeared in two volumes: *Sex, Race, and Class in Children's Fiction* and *Political Ideas in Children's Fiction*.
13. William Shakespeare (1564–1616), English playwright; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), German novelist and playwright; Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), French novelist; Leo (Count Lev Nikolayerich) Tolstoy (1828–1910), Russian novelist; Maxim Gorky (1868–1936), Russian dramatist; Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), German dramatist; Mikhail Aleksandrovich Sholokhov (1905–1984), Russian novelist.
14. British novelist Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Tribe That Lost Its Head* (1956) was a satirical look at British colonialism and the African independence movement.
15. David Hume (1711–1776), Scottish philosopher; Jefferson (1743–1826), third U.S. president, 1801–9; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), German philosopher.

QUESTIONS

1. *The last paragraphs of Ngugi's essay contain the names of many classic and contemporary European writers. Why do you think he chose to include them? Can you relate their inclusion to the way Ngugi chooses to present himself in this essay?*
2. *What literary writers did you read in secondary school? Was there any theme or purpose behind that selection? (You may find some help in Pollitt's essay on a literary canon, p. 1047.)*
3. *Write a paper characterizing the writers Ngugi was assigned when he was at the British school. What do they have in common? Who is left out? Then speculate on why such writers were chosen.*

How to Write a Memoir

Be yourself, speak freely, and think small

By William Zinsser

William Zinsser, a longtime SCHOLAR *contributor and dear friend of the magazine, died earlier today. He was 92. Zinsser was an extraordinary writer and teacher, whose popular blog on our website, "Zinsser on Friday," won a National Magazine Award in 2012. We encourage you to read one of our favorites of the many pieces he published with us over the years.*

One of the saddest sentences I know is "I wish I had asked my mother about that." Or my father. Or my grandmother. Or my grandfather. As every parent knows, our children are not as fascinated by our fascinating lives as we are. Only when they have children of their own—and feel the first twinges of their own advancing age—do they suddenly want to know more about their family heritage and all its accretions of anecdote and lore. "What exactly were those stories my dad used to tell about coming to America?" "Where exactly was that farm in the Midwest where my mother grew up?"

Writers are the custodians of memory, and that's what you must become if you want to leave some kind of record of your life and of the family you were born into. That record can take many shapes. It can be a formal memoir—a careful act of literary construction. Or it can be an informal family history, written to tell your children and your grandchildren about the family they were born into. It can be the oral history that you extract by tape recorder from a parent or a grandparent too old or too sick to do any writing. Or it can be anything else you want it to be: some hybrid mixture of history and reminiscence. Whatever it is, it's an important kind of writing. Too often memories die with their owner, and too often time surprises us by running out.

My father, a businessman with no literary pretensions, wrote two family histories in his old age. It was the perfect task for a man with few gifts for self-amusement. Sitting in his favorite green leather armchair in an apartment high above Park Avenue in New York, he wrote a history of his side of the family—the Zinssers and the Scharmanns—going back to 19th century Germany. Then he wrote a history of the family shellac business on West 59th Street, William Zinsser & Co., that his grandfather founded in 1849. He wrote with a pencil on a yellow legal pad, never pausing—then or ever again—to rewrite. He had no patience with any enterprise that obliged him to reexamine or slow down. On the golf course, walking

toward his ball, he would assess the situation, pick a club out of the bag, and swing at the ball as he approached it, hardly breaking stride.

When my father finished writing his histories he had them typed, mimeographed, and bound in a plastic cover. He gave a copy, personally inscribed, to each of his three daughters, to their husbands, to me, to my wife, and to his 15 grandchildren, some of whom couldn't yet read. I like the fact that they all got their own copy; it recognized each of them as an equal partner in the family saga. How many of those grandchildren spent any time with the histories I have no idea. But I'll bet some of them did, and I like to think that those 15 copies are now squirreled away somewhere in their houses from Maine to California, waiting for the next generation.

What my father did strikes me as a model for a family history that doesn't aspire to be anything more; the idea of having it published wouldn't have occurred to him. There are many good reasons for writing that have nothing to do with being published. Writing is a powerful search mechanism, and one of its satisfactions is that it allows you to come to terms with your life narrative. It also allows you to work through some of life's hardest knocks—loss, grief, illness, addiction, disappointment, failure—and to find understanding and solace.

My father's two histories have steadily grown on me. At first I don't think I was as generous toward them as I should have been; probably I condescended to the ease with which he brought off a process I found so hard. But over the years I've often found myself dipping into them to remind myself of some long-lost relative, or to check some long-lost fact of New York geography, and with every reading I admire the writing more.

Above all, there's the matter of voice. Not being a writer, my father never worried about finding his "style." He just wrote the way he talked, and now, when I read his sentences, I hear his personality and his humor, his idioms and his usages, many of them an echo of his college years in the early 1900s. I also hear his honesty. He wasn't sentimental about blood ties, and I smile at his terse appraisals of Uncle X, "a second-rater," or Cousin Y, who "never amounted to much."

When you write your own family history, don't try to be a "writer." It now occurs to me that my father, who didn't try to be a writer, was a more natural writer than I am, with my constant fiddling and fussing. Be yourself and your readers will follow you anywhere. Try to commit an act of writing and your readers will jump overboard to get away. Your product is you. The crucial transaction in memoir and personal history is the transaction between you and your remembered experiences and emotions.

In my father's family history he didn't dodge the central trauma of his childhood: the abrupt end of his parents' marriage when he and his brother Rudolph were still small boys. Their mother was the daughter of a self-made German immigrant, H. B. Scharmann, who went to California as a teenager in a covered wagon with the forty-niners and lost both his mother and his sister on the journey. Frida Scharmann inherited his fierce pride and ambition, and when she married William Zinsser, a promising young man in her circle of German-American friends, she saw him as the answer to her cultural aspirations. They would spend their evenings going to concerts and to the opera and holding musical salons. But the promising husband evidently turned out to have no such yearnings. Home was for falling asleep in his chair after dinner.

How bitterly his lassitude must have dawned on the young Frida Zinsser I can imagine from knowing her as an older woman, endlessly pushing herself to Carnegie Hall, playing Beethoven and Brahms on the piano, traveling to Europe and learning foreign languages, prodding my father and my sisters and me to cultural self-improvement. Her drive to fulfill the broken dreams of her marriage never faltered. But she had the German penchant for telling people off, and she died alone at 81, having scolded away all her friends.

I wrote about her once, many years ago, in a memoir for a book called Five Boyhoods. Describing the grandmother I knew as a boy, I praised her strength but also noted that she was a difficult presence in our lives. After the book came out, my mother defended the mother-in-law who had made her own life far from easy. "Grandma was really quite shy," she said, "and she wanted to be liked." Maybe so; the truth is somewhere between my mother's version and mine. But she was like that to me. That was my remembered truth, and that's how I wrote it.

I mention this because one of the questions often asked by memoir writers is: should I write from the point of view of the child I once was, or of the adult I am now? The strongest memoirs, I think, are those that preserve the unity of a remembered time and place: books like Russell Baker's *Growing Up*, or V. S. Pritchett's *A Cab at the Door*, or Jill Ker Conway's *The Road from Coorain*, which recall what it was like to be a child or an adolescent in a world of adults contending with life's adversities.

But if you prefer the other route—to write about your younger years from the wiser perspective of your older years—that memoir will have its own integrity. One good example is *Poets in Their Youth*, in which Eileen Simpson recalls her life with her first husband, John Berryman, and his famously self-destructive fellow poets, including Robert Lowell and Delmore Schwartz, whose demons she was too young as a bride to understand. When she revisited that period as an older woman in her memoir she had become a writer and a practicing psychotherapist, and she used that clinical knowledge to create an invaluable portrait of a major school of American poetry at the high tide of its creativity. But these are two different kinds of writing. Choose one.

My father's family history told me details about his mother's marriage that I didn't have when I wrote my memoir. Now, knowing the facts, I can understand the disappointments that made her the woman she became, and if I were to take another shot at the family saga today I would bring to it a lifetime of trying to fathom its Germanic storms and stresses. (My mother's family of New England Yankees—Knowltons and Joyces—managed to get through life without emotional melodrama.) I would also bring to it a lifetime of regret over the tremendous hole at the center of my father's story. In his two histories his father gets scant mention and no forgiveness; all sympathy goes to the aggrieved young divorcée and her lifelong grit.

Yet some of my father's most attractive qualities—the charm, the humor, the lightness, the bluest of blue eyes—must have come from the Zinsser side, not from the brooding, brown-eyed Scharmanns. I've always felt deprived of knowing more about that missing grandfather. Whenever I asked my father about him, he changed the subject and had no stories to tell. When you write your family history, be a recording angel and record everything your descendants might want to know.

This brings me to another question that memoir writers often ask: What about the privacy of the people I

write about? Should I leave out things that might offend or hurt my relatives? What will my sister think?

Don't worry about that problem in advance. Your first job is to get your story down as you remember it—now. Don't look over your shoulder to see what relatives are perched there. Say what you want to say, freely and honestly, and finish the job. Then take up the privacy issue. If you wrote your family history only for your family, there's no legal or ethical need to show it to anyone else. But if you have in mind a broader audience— a mailing to friends or a possible book—you may want to show your relatives the pages in which they are mentioned. That's a basic courtesy; nobody wants to be surprised in print. It also gives them their moment to ask you to take certain passages out—which you may or may not agree to do.

Finally, it's your story. You're the one who has done all the work. If your sister has a problem with your memoir, she can write her own memoir, and it will be just as valid as yours; nobody has a monopoly on the shared past. Some of your relatives will wish you hadn't said some of the things you said, especially if you reveal various family traits that are less than lovable. But I believe that at some level most families want to have a record left of their effort to be a family, however flawed that effort was, and they will give you their blessing and will thank you for taking on the job—if you do it honestly and not for the wrong reasons.

What are the wrong reasons? Let me take you back to the memoir-crazed 1990s. Until that decade, memoir writers drew a veil over their most shameful experiences and thoughts; certain civilities were still agreed on by society. Then talk shows came into their own and shame went out the window. Suddenly no remembered episode was too squalid, no family too dysfunctional, to be trotted out for the titillation of the masses on cable TV and in magazines and books. The result was an avalanche of memoirs that were little more than therapy, their authors using the form to wallow in self-revelation and self-pity and to bash everyone who had ever done them wrong. Writing was out and whining was in.

But nobody remembers those books today—readers won't connect with whining. Don't use your memoir to air old grievances and to settle old scores; get rid of that anger somewhere else. The memoirs that we do remember from the 1990s are the ones that were written with love and forgiveness, like Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*, and Pete Hamill's *A Drinking Life*. Although the childhoods they describe were painful, the writers are as hard on their younger selves as they are on their elders. We are not victims, they want us to know. We come from a tribe of fallible people and we have survived without resentment to get on with our lives. For them, writing a memoir became an act of healing.

It can also be an act of healing for you. If you make an honest transaction with your own humanity and with the humanity of the people who crossed your life, no matter how much pain they caused you or you caused them, readers will connect with your journey.

Now comes the hard part: how to organize the damn thing. Most people embarking on a memoir are paralyzed by the size of the task. What to put in? What to leave out? Where to start? Where to stop? How to shape the story? The past looms over them in a thousand fragments, defying them to impose on it some kind of order. Because of that anxiety, many memoirs linger for years half written, or never get written at all.

What can be done?

You must make a series of reducing decisions. For example: in a family history, one big decision would be to write about only one branch of the family. Families are complex organisms, especially if you trace them back several generations. Decide to write about your mother's side of the family or your father's side, but not both. Return to the other one later and make it a separate project.

Remember that you are the protagonist in your own memoir, the tour guide. You must find a narrative trajectory for the story you want to tell and never relinquish control. This means leaving out of your memoir many people who don't need to be there. Like siblings.

One of my students in a memoir class was a woman who wanted to write about the house in Michigan where she grew up. Her mother had died, the house had been sold, and she and her father and her 10 sisters and brothers were about to meet at the house to dispose of its contents. Writing about that task, she thought, would help her to understand her childhood in that large Catholic family. I agreed—it was a perfect framework for a memoir—and I asked her how she was going to proceed.

She said she was going to start by interviewing her father and all her brothers and sisters to find out how they remembered the house. I asked her if the story she wanted to write was their story. No, she said, it was her story. In that case, I said, interviewing all those siblings would be an almost complete waste of her time and energy. Only then did she begin to glimpse the proper shape of her story and to prepare her mind for confronting the house and its memories. I saved her hundreds of hours of interviewing and transcribing and trying to fit what she transcribed into her memoir, where it didn't belong. Remember: it's your story. You only need to interview family members who have a unique insight into a family situation, or an anecdote that unlocks a puzzle you were unable to solve.

Here's another story from another class. A young Jewish woman named Helen Blatt was very eager to write about her father's experience as a survivor of the Holocaust. He had escaped from his village in Poland at the age of 14—one of the few Jews to get away—and had made his way to Italy, to New Orleans and, finally, to New York. Now he was 80, and his daughter asked him to go back with her to that Polish village so she could hear about his early life and write his story. But he begged off; he was too frail and the past was too painful.

So she made the trip on her own in 2004. She took notes and photographs and talked with people in the village. But she couldn't find enough facts to enable her to do justice to her father's story, and she was deeply upset about that. Her despair hung over the class.

For a few moments I couldn't think of anything to tell her. Finally I said, "It's not your father's story."

She gave me a look that I still remember as it dawned on her what I was saying.

"It's your story," I told her. I pointed out that nobody has enough facts— not even scholars of the Holocaust—to reconstruct her father's early life; too much of the Jewish past in Europe has been obliterated. "If you write about your own search for your father's past," I said, "you'll also tell the story of

his life and his heritage."

I saw a heavy weight drop off her shoulders. She smiled a smile that none of us had seen before and said she would get started on the story right away.

The course ended, and no paper was handed in. I called her and she said she was still writing and needed more time. Then, one day, a 24-page manuscript arrived in the mail. It was called "Returning Home," and it described Helen Blatt's pilgrimage to Plesna, a small rural town in southeastern Poland that wasn't even on the map. "Sixty-five years later," she wrote, "I was the first member of the Blatt family the town had seen since 1939." Gradually making herself known to the townspeople, she found that many of her father's relatives—grandparents and uncles and aunts— were still remembered. When one old man said, "You look just like your grandmother Helen," she felt "an overwhelming sense of safety and peacefulness."

This is how her story ends:

After I returned home my father and I spent three straight days together. He watched every minute of the four-hour video I made as if it were a masterpiece. He wanted to hear every detail of my trip: who I met, where I went, what I saw, what foods I liked and disliked, and how I was treated. I assured him that I was welcomed with open arms. Although I still have no photos of my family telling me what their faces looked like, I now have a mental picture of their character. The fact that I was treated so well by complete strangers is a reflection of the respect my grandparents earned from the community. I gave my father boxes of letters and gifts from his old friends: Polish vodka and maps and framed photos and drawings of Plesna.

As I told him my stories he looked like an excited child waiting to open his birthday present. The sadness in his eyes also disappeared; he looked jubilant and giddy. When he saw his family's property on my video I expected to see him cry, and he did, but they were tears of joy. He seemed so proud, and I asked him, "Daddy, what are you looking at with such pride? Is it your house?" He said, "No, it's you! You have become my eyes and ears and legs. Thank you for taking this trip. It makes me feel as if I've gone there myself."

My final reducing advice can be summed up in two words: think small. Don't rummage around in your past—or your family's past—to find episodes that you think are "important" enough to be worthy of including in your memoir. Look for small self-contained incidents that are still vivid in your memory. If you still remember them it's because they contain a universal truth that your readers will recognize from their own life.

That turned out to be the main lesson I learned by writing a book in 2004 called *Writing About Your Life*. It's a memoir of my own life, but it's also a teaching book—along the way I explain the reducing and organizing decisions I made. I never felt that my memoir had to include all the important things that ever happened to me—a common temptation when old people sit down to summarize their life journey. On the contrary, many of the chapters in my book are about small episodes that were not objectively "important" but that were important to me. Because they were important to me they also struck an emotional chord with readers, touching a universal truth that was important to them.

One chapter is about serving in the army in World War II. Like most men of my generation, I recall that war as the pivotal experience of my life. But in my memoir I don't write anything about the war itself. I just tell one story about one trip I took across North Africa after our troopship landed at Casablanca. My fellow GIs and I were put on a train consisting of decrepit wooden boxcars called "forty-and-eights," so named because they were first used by the French in World War I to transport forty men or eight horses. The words QUARANTE HOMMES OU HUIT CHEVAUX were still stenciled on them. For six days I sat in the open door of that boxcar with my feet hanging out over Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. It was the most uncomfortable ride I ever took—and the best. I couldn't believe I was in North Africa. I was the sheltered son of Northeastern WASPs; nobody in my upbringing or my education had ever mentioned the Arabs. Now, suddenly, I was in a landscape where everything was new—every sight and sound and smell.

The eight months I spent in that exotic land were the start of a romance that has never cooled. They would make me a lifelong traveler to Africa and Asia and other remote cultures and would forever change how I thought about the world. Remember: Your biggest stories will often have less to do with their subject than with their significance—not what you did in a certain situation, but how that situation affected you and shaped the person you became.

As for how to actually organize your memoir, my final advice is, again, think small. Tackle your life in easily manageable chunks. Don't visualize the finished product, the grand edifice you have vowed to construct. That will only make you anxious.

Here's what I suggest.

Go to your desk on Monday morning and write about some event that's still vivid in your memory. What you write doesn't have to be long—three pages, five pages—but it should have a beginning and an end. Put that episode in a folder and get on with your life. On Tuesday morning, do the same thing. Tuesday's episode doesn't have to be related to Monday's episode. Take whatever memory comes calling; your subconscious mind, having been put to work, will start delivering your past.

Keep this up for two months, or three months, or six months. Don't be impatient to start writing your "memoir," the one you had in mind before you began. Then, one day, take all your entries out of their folder and spread them on the floor. (The floor is often a writer's best friend.) Read them through and see what they tell you and what patterns emerge. They will tell you what your memoir is about and what it's not about. They will tell you what's primary and what's secondary, what's interesting and what's not, what's emotional, what's important, what's funny, what's unusual, what's worth pursing and expanding. You'll begin to glimpse your story's narrative shape and the road you want to take.

Then all you have to do is put the pieces together.

Read our tribute to William Zinsser and his long years of work, both at the SCHOLAR and elsewhere, *here*