



From The President's Desk

Greeting Mississippi Writers Guild (MWG) members, I am anxious to give y'all a report on this years MWG conference. We kicked it off with our mingle Friday night. C. Hope Clark was our opening speaker. Her new book, *A Lowcountry Bribe*, the first of the new Palmetto State Mystery Series published by Bell Bridge Books out of Memphis. She gave a warm and personal oratory of her life on the bank of Lake Murray near Chapin, S.C. where she pens her mysteries and manages FundsforWriters.com. Many of our attendees brought material to read in our Literary Arts on Stage (LAOS). We had plenty of delicious snacks and drinks to keep everyone's appetite satisfied. After three hours of joy and merriment everyone seemed to be full and ready for a good night's sleep.

Saturday morning started out with a continental breakfast and lots of coffee. Our key note speaker was Mandi Stanley, with more than 16 years of experience on the seminar circuit as a Certified Speaking Professional. She gave everyone excellent do's and don'ts information on how to speak to a crowd. Mandi was designated a Certified Speaking Professional by the National Speakers Association. Few than 9 percent of all worldwide speakers have earned this designation and Mandi is the first Mississippian to receive this honor. The MWG bookstore had book to sell from all of our presenters and our attendees who had their self published book on display. All the sellers appeared to be happy with their sale tally. I have to say this years conference was a success. I can't wait to see what presenters Richelle Putam will choose for next year's conference.

President, Robert J. Ray





Memoir Writing by Virginia Dawkins

Memoir comes from the French word *memoire*, which means the study of memory. Writing a memoir can be less daunting than writing an autobiography with countless facts about your entire life. A memoir is more like a window into a portion of your life.

Ideally, a memoir will read like fiction and show emotions that cause the reader to personally relate to it. When I read best selling author Beverly Cleary's memoir, I remembered my own low self-esteem as she told how stupid she felt when her teacher put her in the low reading group. I could feel the sting of rejection when the teacher wrapped Beverly's fingers with a ruler, and I chuckled when she said, "I went home and told my mother I was going to quit school."

Using the five senses and expressing those details will paint a picture for your readers. For instance, describe the way your grandmother's pound cake smelled, the sound of the school bell ringing, or the feel of your newborn baby's cheek.

In *One Writer's Beginnings*, Eudora Welty began with her memory of sound:

We grew up to the striking of clocks. There was a mission-style oak grandfather clock standing in the hall, which sent its gong-like strokes through the living room, dining room, kitchen, and pantry, and up the sounding board of the stairwell. Through the night, it could find its way into our ears; sometimes even on the sleeping porch, midnight could wake us up.

When Frank McCourt wrote about the poverty of his childhood in *Angela's Ashes*, he didn't simply say, "We had holes in our socks," but he described in detail how it felt:

It's a terrible thing to walk through the world with skin showing through holes in our stockings. When we wear them week after week the holes grow so big we have to pull the stocking forward under the toes so that the hole in the back is hidden in the shoe. On rainy days the stockings are soggy and we have to hang them before the fire at night and hope they'll dry by morning.

The people in our lives are a major ingredient for memoirs; the men, women, and children who have crossed our lives make up the cast of characters for our stories. Remember how your first grade teacher looked and dressed. Can you describe her body language? What was it that made her so memorable?

In his classic book, *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser reminds us to think small:

Don't rummage around in your past, or your family's past to find episodes that you think are important. 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.

In *Old Friend from Far Away*, Natalie Goldberg explains, "Memoir is not a declaration of the American success story. Whatever your life, it is urging you to record it. We want the emotional truths under the surface that drove our life."

William Zinsser suggests a simple way to create a memoir:

On Monday morning write about an event that is vivid in your memory. (It should, of course, have a beginning, a middle, and an end.) Put it in a folder and put away. Tuesday's episode doesn't have to be connected to Monday's take whatever memory comes. Your subconscious mind has been put to work; it will begin delivering your past.

Keep this up for two or three months. Then one day take all the entries out of the folder and spread them on the floor. Read them through and see what patterns emerge. See what's interesting and what's not. You'll begin to glimpse your memoir.

If you have an "episode" or a personal experience story that would make readers laugh, cry, or suffer goose bumps, check these possibilities for publication:

www.chickensoup.com.

submissions@guideposts.com

www.csmonitor.com

myturn@newsweek.com

Favorite Memoirs:

My Cat Spit McGee – Willie Morris

The Diary of a Young Girl – Anne Frank

Angela's Ashes – Frank McCourt

Teacher Man – Frank McCourt

My Reading Life – Pat Conroy

From the Heart – Robin Roberts

In the Sanctuary of Outcasts – Neil White



One More Block by Lydia Dell

"Where are you going?" "You're going the wrong way." "Slow down." "Turn here." "Watch out!" We have all been in the company of backseat drivers at one point or another, or played the role ourselves, blurting out commands as if the driver is totally incompetent, or doesn't have a clue where he or she is going. Or maybe you are one who chooses to close your eyes tightly, biting your tongue as you keep pushing your foot through the passenger side floorboard, trying to make the car stop the way you want it to. Control is a powerful thing, a force, at times, a presence, hard to keep up with, but harder to let go. It's amazing how quickly control

can override trust, trust in others, and especially trust in our own self.

I receive a newsletter periodically with a section dedicated to asking various writers how they overcome writers block. I am always relieved, bordering on elated, when they interview a writer who is honest enough to say he or she doesn't really believe it exists, except in our mind. We all hear people complain about writers block, how they sit and stare at a blank page for hours, it seems, waiting. I often wonder what they are waiting for, inspiration, divine intervention, or perhaps someone to come and do the work for them. Mostly, I wonder how in the world they ignore all those thoughts floating around in their mind that are just dying to be explored. Perhaps it is the backseat driver they hear instead, drowning out and dismissing all those extraordinary ideas. Or maybe it is the necessary solitude that comes with writing that creates a fear we are not always prepared to look so closely in the eye. It is handy to have another name for procrastinating, perfectionism, yes, control, or just not writing, but in the end, we may actually be the only true block we face in watching our work unfold, the only one stopping us before we start as we stare at a blank page. "Stop!" "That's not right." "That's dumb." "No, wait!"

Several years ago, I developed problems with my eyes. As a result, my vision became distorted and left me with a very limited area in which I felt comfortable driving. As my vision continued to decline, I became more and more dependent on others to drive me outside of my dwindling comfort zone. I still wanted to drive. I still wanted to decide where and when to go and how to get there as I always had before. I still wanted to create and follow my own path without the approval or direction of someone else. Yet, I had become a passenger, along for the ride, demoted to a position of silence and submission in terms of the choices we so often take for granted – I think I'll go to the store. I think I will take this street today. I wonder where this road goes. At least that is how I felt. Learning to be a passenger was a challenge I was not prepared to face.

The collective loss of freedom and independence that came with driving, gradual as it may have been, was far deeper than anything I could have anticipated. It wasn't that being a passenger was new. It was the lack of choice, and yes, the lack of control. No matter how much I loved and valued those willing to drive me around, or even the journeys we would take, this just was not part of the plan. This wasn't even close to a future I could have imagined for myself, but here I am. Knowing how to drive, knowing the rules of the road is one thing. Losing the ability to use that knowledge is an entirely different story. The illusion of control was exhausting, but relying on others to do what I could no longer do for myself required an enormous amount of energy, and a lot of time to rethink what I thought I knew about myself.

There is something magical about driving, especially alone at night with the stereo playing any number of my favorite songs. Music always sounds better driving at night, has more clarity, more intensity, and hits places deep inside that daylight covers as it conceals a world of possibilities. Writing whatever passes through our mind with no specific goal in mind, capturing one thought after another to explore in whatever depth we choose, is a lot like driving alone in the dark, listening to music we know and treasure, while discovering new songs we never imagined we would come to love so deeply. There can be an irresistible sense of comfort in familiar sounds, familiar thoughts and memories. There can also be a breathtaking sense of discovery in experiencing clarity and intensity through things that are new and unfamiliar.

I have spent my share of time missing the special moments that come with driving, missing the luxury of certain choices I never gave much thought before they were gone. In my new role as passenger, I had to stray from what had always been so familiar I often acted without even thinking. I had to learn to see through different eyes. Even though I was frequently traveling the same roads I would take when I drove myself, everything changed. Like trying to write with your other hand, even the familiar can become foreign, even things you know how to do suddenly require more effort, more thought, more forgiveness. Maybe it is true, when one of our senses declines, other senses grow stronger, stepping up to compensate for the loss. The desire to choose may not be a characteristic sense, like sight or hearing, but I like to believe the recognition of its inherent value became stronger with each passing day, a recognition that may have gone unnoticed without the preceding loss.

We have all spent our share of time staring at a blank screen, assuming the role of an unwilling passenger. We sit and stare as if waiting long enough will miraculously produce something beyond belief. We wait for the perfect first sentence, or paragraph to suddenly appear with little, if any effort or our part. And what about all those nights afraid to write a single word, as if someone were looking over our shoulder, waiting to criticize every word the minute we put it to paper? Excuses and justifications soon give way to doubt and insecurities, along with questions of skill, talent, and eventually self-worth. As writers, we make choices every day, some we recognize and struggle with time and again, others occur without much thought. We crave new scenery, new ideas, but dismiss one thought after another because we don't know where it is going, don't know where it will end up. We cripple ourselves before we start, trying desperately to control something that, in the beginning, has no business being controlled.

Whether we are driving, riding, or writing, the challenge is the same, learning to see through different eyes. Like that ordinary road we find and can't wait to discover where it will lead us, the exploration of our thoughts, silly, ordinary, or time consuming as they may first appear, is just the beginning of the trip, another step toward understanding. Knowing how to write, knowing the rules of the game, is a great beginning, but sooner or later we have to enter the picture. We have to trust enough to find a direction of our own, setting aside plans and instructions long enough to trust our own instincts, our own skill, and our ability to transform the most intimate thoughts into something beyond belief. I know where my house is, I know where the store is, but what about all the space in between? What if I avoid the traffic and explore just one more block on this path I've never seen? What if I dismiss my plans, instead of my ideas, and sit back and enjoy the ride? What if I forget about getting lost, or ignore my backseat driver that reminds me how much time I might be wasting? What if I just drive? What if I just write?





Writing as Tool For Healing By Dr. Rachell N. Anderson

You may write a poem, a story, keep a journal or write a novel; (I prefer short stories and common ballad poetry) no matter, writing heals. There is, in fact, no better free therapy than writing. Writing can bring about insight, illuminate foggy issues and bring a smile to the hearts of people experiencing anger, loneliness, anxiety and depression, and help overcome a number of other diagnosable mental and physical disorders.

Human beings tell stories. We do this naturally to help us remember, to entertain ourselves, to teach others, to pass on wisdom, to try out new ideas or new ways of thinking, and we can do it to heal our lives. Everyone has a story and everyone has issues. Right? Many people try to hide their feelings and emotional difficulties only to find that they grow, turn sour and fester.

We fear unnecessarily (usually) judged harshly and criticized by others. Writing about it helps to heal that emotional and psychological pain and develops a history for future consideration.

Research by Dr. James Pennebaker, Professor, University of Texas at Austin, has been studying the effects of writing and people's health and well-being for more 20 years and found that when people are given the opportunity to write about emotional upheavals, they often experienced improved health. According to Pennebaker, "Through writing they become active creators of their life stories. They are not simply people something bad or painful has happened to. They left with a new sense of the power of words," "They actually got access to using language as a healing tool in a way they had never used it before."

Pennebaker has also found that the ability to change perspectives during the course of writing is a potent indicator of how well the act of writing will benefit an individual. "People who are able to construct a story, to build some kind of narrative over the course of their writing seem to benefit more than those who don't," Pennebaker says.

Writing allows you to express your anger, fears, pain and other emotions without fear of being misheard or misunderstood. You can write until your fears are relieved. Once the negative emotions have dissipated, there is room inside for more productive material that can set you free.

I have often used poetry in Psychotherapy and found that the writing helped me, the psychologist, and sharing helped the patients. Here's one such story.

During a particular period, I was troubled from working with 3 women who were being physically and emotionally abused by their husbands. The stories of their plight was painful for me to hear. From a story I read, I decided to write this poem in common ballad form.

Boiling Point

They had an expensive Italian wedding.
Before the month ended, the beatings started.
She was angry, bewildered and helpless.
Their religion would not have then parted.

Her mother said "Be kinder, he'll stop it.
Her sister's husband beat her too.
She rang her hands and tried much harder
To do whatever he wanted her to.

Her compliance and attention made no difference.
He drank and beat her every Friday night.
He'd apologize and make up on Saturday.
She saw her life as a terrible plight.

She realized she'd remain unaided.
She simply would have to take a stand
Or live her lifetime plagued with beatings
From him or some other man.

So that night, just like clockwork
He came home, beat her, and went to bed.
She filled a spaghetti pot with boiling water
And held it over his sleeping head.

She woke him gently, without much movement.
But there was fire in her soul.
Her blood boiled hotter than the boiling water.
He awoke and, watched her rage unfold.

With that, she moved away the water.
Not one drop touched his head.
She spoke, "Go back honey, sorry I woke you.
You must be exhausted and nearly dead".

That night, while she slept he sat thinking.
From that day on, he was kind
He never again raised a hand to her.
Their life became peaceful, sublime.

Tonight, they're celebrating their fiftieth.
Their children and grand children will all be there
And a priest to renew the vows
Symbolic of the love they share.

So, I ask you, what's the secret
To their everlasting truce?
Tell it to every woman
Who's had to live with abuse.
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While writing the poem, I was able to feel the pain, visualize the actions, and see a solution while keeping my values for non violence intact. I no longer felt the intense pain and helplessness in the face of their stories. I experienced a tremendous amount of power and felt that I could help them find relief for their lives.

I decided to share the poem with each of the women. Each created her own direct way for ending the violence. I realize this is not the solution for everyone, but it may get them to think differently about the problem.

We are defined by the stories we tell ourselves and the ones we don't tell. We are also healed by the stories we share. If your life isn't quite as you want it and you feel stuck, you may see a psychologist, or you can use writing as a tool for healing it.

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2012 Scribbler Gems

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http://www.lib.unc.edu/reference/data_services/census/newaffwkbk.pdf

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'Tis the Season by Lydia Dell

The holidays aren't just coming, they are here. In my world, the holiday season begins around Halloween and lasts well into the spring with the arrival of St. Patrick's Day, my personal favorite holiday of the year. Yes, I float in and out of holiday bliss for months, but I just adore this time of year and all the promise it has to offer. The fall and winter weather adds another dimension, breathing renewed depths of life the smoldering summer months burn right out of me. The absence of daylight savings time creates an imaginary curfew, bringing me home earlier and earlier, providing subtle permission to slow down and restore my strength in the comfort of my own home. Worries melt away as the smell of the first fire of the season fills my home and within a matter of days, the Salvation Army bell will be ringing from one end of the country to the other, reminding us all of far greater needs outside of our own.

Writing isn't always on my mind during the holidays but I really think I write more this time of year. Maybe words begin to come from a different place, or maybe the extended darkness just provides more consistent time to write from one evening to the next. It's an illusion, I know, this comfort of darkness, but it embraces my thoughts and urges me to feel before I write, to experience before I share. What inspires you to write this time of year? Or maybe I should ask, what moves you from thinking about writing to actually putting words on paper? Could it be the thought of family, present or not, that drives you to record precious stories you thought you had forgotten? Or perhaps it is the prolonged exposure to family that insists you find a place to scream where no one else can hear? Or like many of us, maybe it is the solitude of the season that creates room for our most valuable thoughts to rise to the top.

Most of us go through phases when it is more important to read, think, listen, or process than to write, but sometimes it's hard to see these phases coming. Recharging is an essential part of writing. We spend so much time reminding ourselves to write in the silent moments between activities, but it is easy to forget how necessary it is to set our pen aside from time to time and fill our own reserve. We forget to take time to actually feel so much of what we hope to portray in our work, to enjoy an increasing range of emotions without planning to manipulate, analyze, or narrate in one way or another. No matter how good we think we are at overlapping tasks, sometimes it is more important to do one thing at a time, to explore other avenues, to exercise our ability to be still and observe. Growth comes in different ways at different times. What better time than a prolonged season of joyful holidays to remind us to stop and breathe? Sometimes this road to creativity is right in front of us, other times we stumble across the most unexpected surprises, but if we are too busy to be still, will we see the wonder? Will we recognize the beauty that is right in front of us?

As always, I look forward to seeing you soon,

Lydia Dell

Jackson Chapter, MWG

