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How I Became a Storyteller

Everything I teach students about memoir is rooted in discoveries that go all the way back to my childhood.

I grew up in a big white house in Durham, New Hampshire that my family had nicknamed Maynard Hall. It sat behind the only picket fence in our university town like a castle behind a moat. We thought of our fence as an emblem of distinction, but what it really signified was a towering sense of difference that separated the Maynards from the rest of the world. My parents, both Canadians, didn't even have a vote, let alone a station wagon or wall-to-wall broadloom. My father painted; my mother wrote. Neither played bridge. Other kids thought we "talked funny."

The strangeness in our house cut deeper than they knew. Something was wrong with my father, and I didn't dare ask what it was. He had two faces—one gentle and loving, the other twisted with despair. I could never be sure which father would show up at our dining room table, or when he'd fly into one of his terrifying rages. "He's a brilliant, original man," my mother would say, as if I should feel lucky to be his daughter.

My father would retreat for hours at a time behind the closed door of the dust-covered study where he wrote his lecture notes on 18th-century literature and took naps that kept the rest of us on tiptoe for fear of setting him off. The study never saw a vacuum cleaner. On the bookshelf, with William Blake and Boswell's biography of Johnson, sat a mayonnaise jar that contained a yellow liquid. The very thought of that jar made me shudder. I couldn't have told you what it contained. I didn't want to know. And yet, at some level, I knew all along. My father was an alcoholic. He was peeing in a jar so he wouldn't have to reel down the hall to the bathroom.

Fantasy became my escape from my family's secret affliction. I would lie on my green satin bedspread and tell myself stories of a world that I ruled—a world of magic, intrigue and adventure. If my heroine wasn't doing battle with dragons, she was being rescued from a burning wagon train by a stout-hearted Indian prince. While plotting the next chapter, I forgot about the strangeness at Maynard Hall.

At school my stories were the closest thing I had to social standing. So what if I couldn't hit a softball or land invitations to the best birthday parties? I could tell stories that mesmerized my

classmates—even bigger girls who liked to pick on loners like me. They took to encircling me daily on the playground, fixing me with cold stares as if I were a beetle under a microscope. They delighted in posing questions like “Why don’t you have any friends?” In defense, I told them stories that made their mouths drop open. Sometimes they’d laugh as if I were their most captivating friend. At recess I began to wait for these girls who had been my tormentors. Then one day I waited and they didn’t show up. They had found some other kid to pester. They’d been right all along: I didn’t have friends. That awareness hurt more than the bullying did.

Here’s what I missed at the time. The stories I’d been telling held no meaning for the bullies. They were all about my private world. They did not reflect the world where other kids faced their own pleasures and challenges—where they played with their dogs, were chewed out by teachers or jockeyed for position with siblings. (I’m sure at least one of those girls went home to an alcoholic parent.) My stories didn’t leave anyone thinking, “Me, too.” What caught their attention was the sheer bravado of my performance—a brave but ultimately clueless show of my superior powers in the realm of the word. I had yet to learn what all great storytellers know, from the Beowulf poet to Stephen King: it’s recognition that keeps the audience engaged. Recognition gives stories their connective power. But instead of making a connection, my stories were erecting a barrier, just like the picket fence at Maynard Hall. They underscored my shameful sense of difference.

Unlike other kids’ parents, mine prized achievement in the arts. They were elated when, at 12, I won the first of many national writing awards. Had I come from another family, I might have shared their excitement. As it was, I felt the pressure to win year after year. My parents edited my submissions with Olympian relentlessness until every word met their standards. What they taught me about economy, structure and precision still shapes everything I write.

They didn’t teach me what storytelling is at its heart—a connection between the one who shapes the narrative and the one who reads or listens, always with one question first and foremost: “Why should I care about this story?” Stories with connective power are not about the writer, even when they’re told in the first person. To some degree they are always about the audience. This is what journalism taught me.

In my early days as a magazine freelancer, I interviewed a lawyer who radiated confidence and style. I’ll call her Diana. She crisply dispatched my topic—the range of career paths open to lawyers—and then got around to her life. An immigrant from a Caribbean island, she had married young and poured her energy into making a home. Then, with a teenage daughter, she was forced to start over when her husband left her for another woman. What to do? Diana set her sights on law school. Within weeks of her acceptance, she faced another blow: a diagnosis of ovarian cancer. First term would coincide with radiation treatments.

I knew that when it comes to survival rates, ovarian cancer is among the meanest cancers around. Yet there was Diana, looking glorious in a white sheath dress that set off her black skin.

I asked the obvious questions. How had she marshaled the energy for law school? Did it never cross her mind that she might not live to be a lawyer?

“Of course it did,” she said. “But I decided that if I had to die, I wanted to die in law school.”

While I mulled that over, she challenged me to guess her age. “Thirty-seven,” I said, thinking she might be 40, tops. I’ll never forget her triumphant smile as she answered, “Fifty-three!” It wasn’t me she’d outwitted; it was death and discouragement.

None of this appeared in the article I wrote. It wasn’t what my editor wanted. But it was what I needed to hear. When I met Diana, I was struggling with depression. That night before I fell asleep, I pictured her, as I have many times since. I told myself, “If she could find meaning and purpose in her life despite the worst kind of medical news, then surely I can follow her example.”

Although she couldn’t possibly have known it, Diana had become my mentor. She was guiding me across the moat that had separated me from the world since my childhood at Maynard Hall. She showed me that ordinary life is full of stories worth telling—stories that can change a life or even save it. Journalism was my chance to capture those stories so that readers treasure them as I did. But there was one story I didn’t dare tell. That story was my own.

Then an old friend and mentor, Keitha McLean, became Editor of an innovative little magazine called *Pathways*. Its readers were “working on themselves,” as Keitha put it, her smile both wry and sympathetic. They were mostly recovering addicts, like Keitha (whose alcoholism had nearly derailed her journalism career) or family members of addicts, like me (daughter of an addict and sometime member of a 12-step group). They were looking for inspiration, and Keitha chose me to provide it in a first-person column. When I doubted that anyone would care about the details of my life, she gently urged me forward. She would say, “I can’t wait to read what you’re going to say next.”

Pathways died too soon. So did Keitha, of cancer, not long after my appointment to edit *Chatelaine*. When I sat down to write my monthly editorial and found myself groping for words, I would hear her voice in my head. She was with me when I shared my history of depression with my readers. She was with me when I told them about growing up at Maynard Hall, and having an honest conversation with my father not long before he died. She was with me every time I tackled a story that at first seemed too embarrassing or isolating to tell. I discovered there was no such thing. It was often the toughest stories that drew the most heartfelt response from readers. “Your story sounds a lot like mine,” they would say.

When I left *Chatelaine*, I still hadn’t written about the jar of pee. That came later, in my memoir, *My Mother’s Daughter*. As I sat down to write those lines, I felt my chest constrict as if breaking the family code of silence meant risking a heart attack. But when the book was published, not one reader accused me of betraying my family. Readers saw both sides of my father—the gentle one who recited Blake to me as well as the tormented one, cursing his fate. More than one reader pointed out, “You could have called this book *My Father’s Daughter*.” To

my amazement, but they were right—a heartening discovery that brought me closer to my father and showed me how far I had come since Maynard Hall.

Today I'm proud to do for other writers what Diana and Keitha did for me. In a memoir workshop, I give students what writers need most—permission to speak their truth. I don't spend much time correcting grammar but I ask a lot of questions about what's hovering unsaid between the lines. "If what you're writing is making you anxious, you're on the right track," I say. "You're closing in on something that needs to be said, and you're not the only one who'll be glad to see it on the page."

Our stories are rivers flowing to the same ocean. And we're all on those waters together.

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