WHY WRITE A MEMOIR?

For your spiritual writing to hit home with readers, it must touch six specific bases.

By Paul Balzer

I can still remember the day that I first fell in love with a memoir. It was on a day much like today in fact—a cold day, relentless with rain. I had been living in New York City for about a year, had my first post-college job, and was living in a tiny studio apartment that I adored despite its many pitfalls. While I was lucky to be gainfully employed (somewhat gainfully anyway) and to have found a semi-decent place to live, I still hadn’t been here long enough to fully integrate myself into my new hometown. New York was exciting yes, but tough going at times. It was lonely, and I often felt like I was the only person in an entire city of six million who didn’t have a few friends she could call up to have brunch or make plans to see a movie. So, books were my solace, and I tore through them like crazy that first year. Stocking up on a few novels on Sunday afternoons became a ritual, and it was during a visit to Brooklyn’s BookCourt that I happened upon Mary Cantwell’s Manhattan, When I Was Young. While I can’t honestly say it was the first memoir I had read, I know it’s the first one that made a lasting impression. I immediately connected with Cantwell’s story of moving to New York City to work in publishing, even though her affair with the city started a good forty years before mine did. I felt an instant kinship with her narrative that was unlike anything I had felt when reading fiction. Like all book lovers, I have my favorite characters, and have found myself closely relating to Beverly Cleary’s charming, though undeniably awkward, Ramona Quimby since the age of eight. On a good day, I might feel a bit like Harper Lee’s formidable Scout—or after a day of too much online shopping, I might relate to Edith Wharton’s classic spendthrift, Lily Bart a bit more closely than I would like to. And during most of my twenties, Bridget Jones was my personal hero. But there was something about reading a real account of a young woman’s early years in New York City that spoke directly to me. I understood the thrill that a new city brings, even if being lost on the subway or sharing your apartment with large flying insects are part of the equation. Cantwell writes of her first New York City apartment with an elegance that has made her
memoir a classic:

“The furniture—two studio couches, a big table, a couple of hard chairs, and a pier glass leaning against the fireplace—belongs to the landlord. We have our reading lamps from college, though, and Allies’s phonograph, and ironing board and iron from S. Klein’s on Union Square, some pots and pans, a small bottle of vermouth, and a fifth of Dixie Belle Gin. We have, in short, everything we need, anyway. There are nights when, cross-legged on my studio couch, Vivaldi’s Four Seasons on the phonograph and stray cats scrabbling in the weeds outside the kitchen window, I can feel joy exploding in my chest.”

That paragraph perfectly captures the promise of adventure, a woman’s life unfolding—something big starting from almost nothing, and in a way, this is really what writing a memoir is all about. There are too many memoirs to count that have started from small stories—a child ignored but somehow growing up strong and successful; a woman losing herself in her marriage but choosing to cast her grief aside and take a long, healing trip; a boy in the projects of Red Hook who believed God was “the color of water.” And another boy, this one in Ireland, whose house was flooded—but never mind, his family just pretended they lived in Venice. Could the authors of The Glass Castle; Eat, Pray, Love; The Color of Water; and Angela’s Ashes ever imagined that these singular details of their lives would eventually be turned into stories that would be read by millions of people around the world? And while the aforementioned memoirs are wonderful, there are many memoirs that are equally riveting but aren’t exactly household names. I sincerely hope that this book will inspire you to experiment and read a few that you might not be familiar with.

Since reading Mary Cantwell’s story, I’ve been delighted to learn that the world is full of wonderful storytellers—and as you probably know, there is a memoir to be found on almost every topic. Since most of us can’t just go off to Italy or India for a year, or easily quit our jobs to try culinary school, sometimes reading a good memoir on the topic is the next best thing. And while I’ve always been curious about the goings-on in restaurant kitchens and culinary school greatly interests me, I know I’m much better off—and a lot safer—cooking in my own kitchen, so memoirs are the perfect stand-in. Then there are the memoirs where I’m so incredibly grateful I haven’t had the same experience—The Glass Castle, Angela’s Ashes, Blackbird—these are the memoirs that make me hug my family closer at night and nearly burst with gratitude over having something as simple as a hug from my young daughter. Memoirs are powerful and full of feeling, and they stick with you unlike books from any other
genre.

So what is the story you want to tell? Are you just a natural story-teller who can put an amusing spin on any tale and can keep everyone on the edge of their seats? Have you led an unusually challenging or extraordinary life and need some help getting it down on paper? Do you want to preserve your memories for generations to come? Are you planning to spend a year trekking through the rainforest and want to chronicle the experience? Whatever your story, the good news is that, while memoir writing can be incredibly challenging and daunting, it is possible to make the process a little easier with some proper planning. Setting out to write a memoir is hard work, but by committing to it, you’ll come out with a piece of writing you’ll be proud of, and that will preserve the story you want to tell for generations to come.