

# A LIGHT IN THE MIST

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Writing one's life story may seem an intimidating undertaking. Taken one step at a time, one story at a time, however, a path can be found to lay the foundation for a memoir, a personal testament to the gift of life.

# A LETTER

by Kate Strasburg

When I told my good friend Barbara that we were working on a memoir issue, she shared a special treasure with me. Her mother, Florence Vancza, has written a 16 page book for her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Entitled *Hello Spirit* and illustrated with small watercolors, it chronicles key memories of her childhood. But it does far more. With these sixteen simply told stories, Florence has managed to share not only her heart but also her soul. She has given her family the gift of *her* spirit to guide them and be with them always.

In this issue of *A Light in the Mist* we urge *all* of you to undertake some form of memoir. You may use the accompanying workbook as a guide or as a timeless heirloom for friends and family. For those of you in good health, it may serve as a form of life review. Or you may prefer to choose another form all together: video, scrapbook, or CD-ROM.

What is important is that in some shape or form, you document for yourself and others, the gift of your life—what it has taught you and what you wish to bequeath to your loved ones.

## EXCERPTS FROM FLORENCE VANCZA'S *HELLO SPIRIT*

Hello Spirit!

I'm so busy, years pass. Could we walk together? —Something occurs to me of our relationship these many, many years. You were always with me, waiting to be called, you comforted me, you made me so happy—but never, never did you promise me a cure for anything, nor a quick solution to any problems. Instead I did hear you loud and clear say “You can handle it! You can handle it!”

How time has flown. I am now in the twilight of my life. Oh Spirit, I have loved you so much—You have given me comfort, courage and faith. Never, Never have I been lonely. What joy! Spirit—May I ask just one thing?

Could we walk just a *little slower*?

*Good bye!*

*Good bye!*

To all my precious children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and all the precious children all over the world—find a special, quiet place for your very own, the gazebo, the room in the house where you can sit quietly, by the babbling brook, or in the shade of a tree—go there, listen to your inner little voice—It will be your Spirit calling!!

With all my love,

Mother, Grandmother,  
Great Grandmother

# A REVIEW OF *OLD FRIEND FROM FAR AWAY*

by Traci Teraoka

Isn't that what we want with memoir? To bring the picture we carry inside to the other person, and for us to experience it and for the person who reads to experience our memories intimately; to have that old friend from far away suddenly right here in front of us so we can smell them, taste them, feel them, see them so nothing goes away forever. —Natalie Goldberg

Natalie Goldberg's *Old Friend from Far Away: How to Write a Memoir* is an excellent source of inspiration for anyone interested in learning to write your own story. I listened to her two CD narrative that was as pleasing to the ear as a story itself. It is full of inspiration; through the exercises and examples that Goldberg explains, she lays out a foundation of how to get in touch with our own stories.

Ms. Goldberg, a renowned writer and Zen student of 25 years, gently teaches us what our memories hold—luring the storyteller in our heart out. Following her easy-going voice, she speaks as a close friend would. She teaches us through example—through her personal examples and the writings of both her students and other famous writers. Whether the stories are beautiful, harrowing, funny or kind-hearted—as we listen, we realize that the path is safe to express what our own memory holds and that these recollections can be told in our own voice and will instantly hold a tiny portrait of who we are and the experiences that have shaped us.

We discount our biographies because we think we haven't done enough or that we aren't old enough or interesting enough. Goldberg talks of the intimacy with ourselves that we conjure when we retell stories—especially through the details and

the way in which we attach language to our most poignant moments. She tells us to pay attention to our deepest self, and beyond listening—to express it. Awakening to our freshest perspective, and remembering, finding the right words to describe, to communicate this will begin to train our minds to be more curious.

What I think is particularly wonderful about this CD is that you can listen to the examples that Ms. Goldberg uses to coach us to write: the real, the imagined, the way we remember things. She massages the details, helping us to realize the importance of how our most minute details add depth to the seemingly unimportant.

She encourages our writing with exercises such as the following:

- Write for 10 minutes about what is in front of your face.
- Go to a funky place—write about the place for 10 minutes—then write about what is in your mind.
- Make a list of your best friends in the first ten years of your life.
- Make a list of the rivers you know.

What you want to communicate with the details is the truth—accuracy of minute details may not be as accessible as you wish—the storytelling will reveal a deeper truth of the structure of our lives.

Maybe you ask, “So, where do I start? From the beginning? What a long overwhelming task this will be. Already I feel tired.” Ms. Goldberg reveals a way of looking at our

obsessions and finding an angle, or a way of building structure around our memoir. She points out that obsessions have energy—energy that might fuel our writing and, again, help us to get in touch with that which has shaped our life. “When we write we turn our obsessions into our passions. Passion doesn't diminish us—it brings us forward into our life.”

“Rather than choosing to be an artist—instead dedicate yourself to art and learn from the truth of your life—and be true to it.”

Here are four very simple, very Zen keys to writing your memoir:

1. Continue under all circumstances.
2. Don't be lured away.
3. Make positive effort for the good.
4. Write for two years.

I want to practice Natalie's exercises. I enjoyed listening to her and the stories so much—I wish to listen to the CD a second time. I also want to share these exercises with good friends and family—so perhaps they, too, will practice their own storytelling into memoir. I think this would make an excellent resource as a personal tool (please add this to your resource library!) and as a group tool. It could be listened to in parts and practiced as a group. And perhaps this will awaken you to your own writing practice and your gift of memoir.

## HEY, NO BODY'S PERFECT

by Lila Keary

I swim lean, vigorous strokes through an alexandrite blue ocean. I laugh and dive and let the sun wash over my face. I sprint and swoop and ride the waves. And then I wake up.

My bedroom develops like a Polaroid, getting sharper as it comes slowly into focus. There on the night table are nine different pills and a syringe I've set out for the morning. Beside them are the sterile gauze and Betadine I use to clean the catheter that's sewn into my chest. The bottle of Betadine not only disinfects, it also serves as a paperweight for the dozen insurance forms that need to be filled out and mailed before the weekend. On the other side of my bed hangs an IV drip for nutrition and hydration. What doesn't kill me sure does keep me from riding many waves.

I've had cancer for a third of my life. I've watched people get well and I've watched people die while I scramble from standard drug to new procedure to experimental protocol, buying time till the next big breakthrough. These treatments chip at my body bit by bit. They've screwed up both of my kidneys and damaged my heart. They've made the soles of my feet burn and my fingertips numb with neuropathy. There's no vision in my left eye; my digestive system is shot; I've become severely anemic, prone to depression, unable to have a baby or a frozen margarita or any long-range plans. What's that old joke about the ad for a lost dog? "Blind, incontinent, no teeth,

missing right leg, tail, and part of an ear. Answers to the name Lucky."

I'd love to say that you've caught me at an off moment, but the fact is I whine a lot. (A fellow patient once told me he'd never heard anyone complain so much—and he'd spent 19 months in the Hanoi Hilton.) It seems one of the unspoken side effects of cancer (at least for me) is extreme crankiness. My body has betrayed me and I'm mad as hell. But wallowing in righteous indignation only gets a girl so far. So these days I'm focusing on what this decidedly soft, slightly used, utterly ridiculous 41-year-old body *can* do. This body, after all, is me.

And what I can do is make the best kid I know laugh hysterically simply by feigning shock and revulsion at the sight of a plastic tarantula. I can pitch a baseball, though word on the street is that I throw like a girl—or worse, like Chuck Knoblauch. I can cook a chicken Marbella that makes people from Marbella (okay, Brooklyn) beg for the recipe. Furthermore, I have what can only be described as a superhuman gift for picking ripe pineapples. I can listen closely to my friends, my instincts, and Glenn Gould playing the "Goldberg Variations"—which I'm told Bach wrote for a Russian count with severe insomnia. On my better days, I can do laundry, dishes, and all things sexual. I can hold down a full-time job, hold up my end of the conversation, and shop with the kind of abandon seldom seen outside of Times Square on

New Year's Eve. The time will come when I can't do all these things, but what I know for certain is that I will maintain my identity, which is still rooted in my body—imperfect though it may be.

Control isn't always possible, but feeling and imagination and a touch of transcendence are. I've taken to grabbing a cup of tea and heading for the roof of my Lower East Side apartment building on mornings when sleep doesn't seem to be an option. Last Thursday at 6:40 A.M., it was pouring. The drops of rain pelting against tin flowerpots sounded like bacon frying. The air smelled like geraniums and lasagna—the old Italian restaurant on the ground floor was already prepping for the lunch crowd. My sweatpants were soaked, my hair was dripping, one of my slippers was floating away, but lights were starting to switch on all over the neighborhood. Oyster-colored trench coats and black umbrellas were beginning to make their way down Second Avenue. Here were people and puddles and pigeons and trees and taxis, and I got to experience every deliciously drenched inch of it.

I have cancer but I also have windy summer mornings in the rain and an active sense of awe at all that I can still touch and taste and see and hear and breathe in at any given moment. I have the crystal-clear understanding that recovery is worth only as much as the life you're recovering.

## MEMORY BOOK PRESERVES LEGACIES

by Jennifer Booth Reed

**M**ildred Bruhn met her first great-grandbaby last week, a beautiful 10-month-old named Alice...

Ah, the stories Bruhn could share with this child—about fishing northern Minnesota’s lakes or playing high school softball or taking long road trips with husband Ralph—the two drove through every state in the continental United States except for Washington and Oregon.

But Bruhn, 84, is deathly ill. Cancerous tumors press on her brain, and a seizure felled her on Thanksgiving Day. She arrived at Hope Hospice earlier this month.

Hospice staff members don’t want Bruhn’s life to go uncelebrated and her stories to go untold.

That is why 16-year-old Victoria Neubert settled into a chair beside Bruhn one morning earlier this week and peppered her with questions about her life. Neubert will take the stories and photos Bruhn and her family shares and, with Bruhn’s help, create a memory book for all of the generations of Bruhn’s family to come.

Hope Hospice started the memory book program about a year ago as a way for patients to leave their legacies, said Julie Shera, the agency’s vice president for community development. About 46 teenagers work year-round with patients who are interested in sharing their stories.

Neubert, a Fort Myers High School junior who wants to become a teacher, learned about the program through her Girl Scout troop. She’s done community service work before, but this is her first long-term project.

“Do you have children?” Neubert asked Bruhn.

“We had three daughters and one son,” Bruhn replied.

Son David died during childbirth. Bruhn and Ralph raised daughters Deanne, Darlene and Delores, who goes by “Dede.”

“The Three D’s,” Bruhn calls her girls.

As the conversation between the young woman and the older woman continued, a picture of Bruhn’s life emerged. Bruhn’s husband, and daughter Dede Ouren, who was visiting from Minnesota, helped fill in the blanks.

...

Neubert looked through family photos that chronicled life’s biggest events—grinning brides in long dresses, a portrait of her and her husband on their own wedding day, a snapshot of herself, Ouren, Ouren’s daughter and baby Alice—the family’s first four-generation photograph.

...

There is one lesson Bruhn, a devout Lutheran, wanted to pass on to her family:

“We cannot do everything by ourselves,” she said. “It may get ever so rough, but there are always better days to come.”

Tears welled in her husband’s and daughter’s eyes, but they dried them and moved to happier thoughts—good times that they related to Neubert who jotted notes on a stenographer’s pad.

Neubert promised to return within the next few days and begin putting Bruhn’s memories on paper.

Neubert said she had been nervous when she first started volunteering a few months ago.

“I didn’t know what it would be like,” she said.

But she’s eased into her role.

“It is just like talking to your grandparents and hearing their stories,” Neubert said.

# ETHICAL WILLS

by Barry K. Baines, M.D.

When the preparation of this issue was well under way, Sam spoke with a friend who introduced him to the concept of ethical wills. Unlike their legal counterparts, ethical wills are meant to pass values—the most valuable inheritance of all—on to loved ones.

The following are excerpts from Dr. Baines' website. We have included two examples of ethical wills that may inspire the writing of your own.

—KS

## WHY CREATE AN ETHICAL WILL?

There are many personal reasons for writing an Ethical Will. Here is a partial list:

- We all want to be remembered, and we all will leave something behind
- It helps you identify what you value most and what you stand for
- By articulating what we value now we can take steps to insure the continuation of those values for future generations
- When you write an ethical will, you learn a lot about yourself
- If we don't tell our stories and the stories from which we come, no one else will and they will be lost forever
- It helps coming to terms with our mortality by creating something of meaning that will live on after we are gone
- It provides a sense of completion in our lives

## WHEN MIGHT YOU WRITE AN ETHICAL WILL?

Here are some people who could consider writing an Ethical Will:

- Betrothed couples: for establishing a common base of values
- Expectant and new parents: to provide a framework for child-rearing
- Growing families: for teaching values to our children
- Middle age and beyond: converting life experience into wisdom and passing this on to future generations
- End of life: adds the transcendent dimension to our lives

## BEATRICE TAISHOFF'S ETHICAL WILL

(WRITTEN AS SHE APPROACHED HER 100TH BIRTHDAY)

My name is Beatrice Taishoff and, as I approach my 100th year, I am, to the best of my knowledge, the only living member of my generation. I would like to be remembered long after I am gone from this world for how I was able to cope with circumstances of life, which made me a stronger person....

...

I want to leave you, my dear family, with some thoughts. Goals are essential to develop a person's regard for himself and his place both in his home and the community. One must creatively shape one's life so that it is productive and satisfying. In a country like the United States, there are so many opportunities to develop beyond what your forebearers were able to do because of the educational opportunities available. Education fostered my interest in world affairs, travel and contact with others that elevated me beyond anything I thought was possible. I traveled widely, even though I had limited resources. I've been to Europe, Africa, South and Central America, Japan. Once in a typhoon in the Sea of Japan, I thought I would lose my life. It made me think about its purpose. You can just plod along or you can strive to be more. Always remember: the availability of resources is always possible, but the effort has to be yours. Please remember that without family you have neither security nor the spiritual values that give life meaning. I have always felt my family came first—my grandparents, my mother and my children and grandchildren. Life, no matter what the struggles, the perplexities, always has a value if you value who you are as a human being.

As you see I have a great need to leave something of myself, as I don't believe I will completely die. The driving spirit that everlastingly pumps joy into this

# ETHICAL WILLS

by Barry K. Baines, M.D.

old body at this time will continue forever as my blood courses through you. I hope you will always feel my love and comfort and my embrace. Despite all that sadness and difficulties of life that are inevitable, we must always embrace the challenges and keep striving. Don't let life ever defeat you. You have the innate ability to charter your course so that it not only satisfies you, but all those you love. I knew my father for a mere 5 years, yet his great desire for me to get a good education and be all that I could be influenced me all my life. My Hebrew name "Bracha" means blessing. And I believe that I have been that to honor my father's memory. I want to live in your thoughts lovingly as a guide so you will make more out of your lives than I. In this respect you are keeping my memory alive. Living in memory with love is living forever.

## BETTINA BRICKELL'S ETHICAL WILL

(READ AT HER MEMORIAL SERVICE—SHE DIED AT 29)

Dear Friends and Loved Ones,

As I contemplated this memorial service, I felt great gratitude in my heart that each of you would be here to say good-bye to me. Many of you have shared your warmth, kindness and love with me during these last months. I want to say thank you and good-bye and share with you the lessons I've learned through my dying.

I have profoundly experienced that love is all that matters. Like many people, I occasionally got caught in my pettiness and separation, thinking I knew the right answer. I judged others and I have judged myself even more harshly. But I have learned that we carry within ourselves the abundant wisdom and love to heal our weary heart and judgmental mind.

During the time of my illness, I have loved more deeply. My heart feels as if it has exploded. I do not carry anger. I feel we are all doing the best we can. Judging others closes the heart and when one is dying, that is a waste of precious sharing. Life is how we stand in relationship to both ourselves and to others. Loving and helping

each other are all that is important.

We are in the fall season. I feel privileged to die as the leaves fall from the trees. There is a naturalness to the cycle of life and death and for whatever reason, it is my time to die, even though I am young. It is OK. It is right and natural. Life is not about how long we live, but about how we live, and I have had a good life. I accept my dying as part of the wondrous process of life.

My sadness is in leaving you. I'll miss the deep comfort and love of gently waking up in (my husband) Peter's arms, giving up our dreams of future years together. I'll miss the sunny days of fishing with my dad, of sharing with my mom her love of life and cosmopolitan savoir-faire. I'll miss giggling with my sister, Maria, over life's impasses. How appreciative I feel when I think of my brother Michael's faith and encouragement of me...

As I lay dying, I think of all of you, each special in your own way, that I have loved and shared this life with. I reluctantly give up walking on this beautiful planet, where every step is a prayer. The glistening sun on the trees, the sound of a brook as it makes its way down the mountain, the serenity and beauty of a gentle snowfall, sitting at the rim of a Utah canyon and catching a glimpse of eternity—these are the things I have loved.

Please do not think I have lost a battle with cancer, for I have won the challenge of life. I have shared unconditional love. I have opened to the mystery of Spirit and feel that divinity is all around us every day and provides us with a path on which our spirit may take flight.

Chief Crazy Horse said upon his final battle, "It is a good day to die because all the things of my life are present." That is how I feel as I think of the abundance, adventure, opportunity and love in my life.

When you think of me, know that my spirit has taken flight and that I loved you.

With my love, Bettina

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*Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*, by Judith Barrington

*Writing Your Life: Putting Your Past on Paper*, by Lou Willett Stanek, Ph.D.

### BOOKLETS AND WORKBOOKS

*The Ethical Will Writing Guide Workbook and The Ethical Will Resource Kit*. by Barry K. Baines, M.D. Order from Brochin's Book and Gift Shop (MN). Call 952-926-2011 or toll-free: 1-877-827-7323 or Amazon.com.

### AUDIO CDs

*Old Friend from Far Away: How to Write a Memoir*, by Natalie Goldberg

### INTERNET RESOURCES

[www.ethicalwill.com](http://www.ethicalwill.com)

The only web site devoted exclusively to the topic of ethical wills. More than twenty modern ethical wills are posted on this site.

[www.creativememories.com](http://www.creativememories.com)

### SOFTWARE RESOURCES

*Putting Your Values on Paper: The Ethical Will Writing Guide*, by Barry K. Baines, M.D. and Wm. Bradley Rouse. Computer software to help you complete a draft copy of an ethical will. Available directly from [www.ethicalwill.com](http://www.ethicalwill.com).



Someone said that  
God gave us memory  
so that we might have  
roses in December.

—*J.M. Barrie*

Who am I?

Gone to the fields  
to be lovely. Be back  
when I'm through  
with blooming.

—Lynn Ungar



# A few of my favorite things



Dis-moi que t'aime  
et je te dirai qui tu es.  
(Tell me what you love  
and I'll tell you who  
you are.)

—a creative twist on  
an old Creole proverb

















# Precious Pictures



That great cathedral space  
which was childhood.

—Virginia Woolf



# Precious Pictures

A photograph is a secret  
about a secret. The more it  
tells you the less you know.

—Diane Arbus













# Love letters



...the stars through  
the window pane  
are my children.

—*John Keats*







1931  
1945

MY LIFELINE

1968  
1989  
2000

M Y L I F E L I N E

0 / 1

1 / 2

2 / 3

3 / 4

4 / 5

5 / 6

6 / 7

7 / 8

8 / 9

9 / 10

T O S U M M A R I Z E

There is always one moment in  
 childhood when the door opens  
 and lets the future in.  
 —Graham Greene

T O S U M M A R I Z E

1 0 / 1 1

1 1 / 1 2

1 2 / 1 3

1 3 / 1 4

1 4 / 1 5

1 5 / 1 6

1 6 / 1 7

1 7 / 1 8

1 8 / 1 9

1 9 / 2 0

T O S U M M A R I Z E

T O S U M M A R I Z E

I suppose if you had to choose just one quality to have that would be it: vitality.

—John F. Kennedy

2 0 / 2 1

2 1 / 2 2

2 2 / 2 3

2 3 / 2 4

2 4 / 2 5

2 5 / 2 6

2 6 / 2 7

2 7 / 2 8

2 8 / 2 9

2 9 / 3 0

T O S U M M A R I Z E

T O S U M M A R I Z E

What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon? And the day after that, and the next thirty years?

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

3 0 / 3 1

3 1 / 3 2

3 2 / 3 3

3 3 / 3 4

3 4 / 3 5

3 5 / 3 6

3 6 / 3 7

3 7 / 3 8

3 8 / 3 9

3 9 / 4 0

T O S U M M A R I Z E

T O S U M M A R I Z E

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
 With your one wild and precious life?  
 —Mary Oliver

4 0 / 4 1

4 1 / 4 2

4 2 / 4 3

4 3 / 4 4

4 4 / 4 5

4 5 / 4 6

4 6 / 4 7

4 7 / 4 8

4 8 / 4 9

4 9 / 5 0

T O S U M M A R I Z E

One never reaches home,  
but wherever friendly paths  
intersect the whole world  
looks like home for a time.

—Herman Hesse

T O S U M M A R I Z E

5 0 / 5 1

5 1 / 5 2

5 2 / 5 3

5 3 / 5 4

5 4 / 5 5

5 5 / 5 6

5 6 / 5 7

5 7 / 5 8

5 8 / 5 9

5 9 / 6 0

T O S U M M A R I Z E

T O S U M M A R I Z E

Non! Rien de rien...

Non! Je ne regrette rien...

(No! Nothing of nothing...

No! I regret nothing...)

—Edith Piaf

6 0 / 6 1

6 1 / 6 2

6 2 / 6 3

6 3 / 6 4

6 4 / 6 5

6 5 / 6 6

6 6 / 6 7

6 7 / 6 8

6 8 / 6 9

6 9 / 7 0

T O S U M M A R I Z E

T O S U M M A R I Z E

A faithful friend is  
the medicine of life.  
—Ecclesiastes 6:16

7 0 / 7 1

7 1 / 7 2

7 2 / 7 3

7 3 / 7 4

7 4 / 7 5

7 5 / 7 6

7 6 / 7 7

7 7 / 7 8

7 8 / 7 9

7 9 / 8 0

T O S U M M A R I Z E

T O S U M M A R I Z E

That translucent alabaster of memories.

—*Marcel Proust*

8 0 / 8 1

8 1 / 8 2

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8 3 / 8 4

8 4 / 8 5

8 5 / 8 6

8 6 / 8 7

8 7 / 8 8

8 8 / 8 9

8 9 / 9 0

T O S U M M A R I Z E

You need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done, which may take some time, you are fierce with reality.

—Florida Scott Maxwell

T O S U M M A R I Z E

9 0 / 9 1

9 1 / 9 2

9 2 / 9 3

9 3 / 9 4

9 4 / 9 5

9 5 / 9 6

9 6 / 9 7

9 7 / 9 8

9 8 / 9 9

9 9 / 1 0 0

T O S U M M A R I Z E

In this life we face a tapestry hung  
with the wrong side always towards  
us—yet those threads, the hints of  
pattern, tantalising, blurred are the  
loose ends of paradise.

—*Harry Guest*

T O S U M M A R I Z E





Love Sonnet LXXXIX

When I die, I want your hands on my eyes:  
I want the light and the wheat of your beloved hands  
to pass their freshness over me once more:  
I want to feel the softness that changed my destiny.

I want you to live while I wait for you, asleep.  
I want your ears still to hear the wind, I want you  
to sniff the sea's aroma that we love together,  
to continue to walk on the sand we walk on.

I want what I love to continue to live,  
and you whom I love and sang above everything else  
to continue to flourish, full-flowered:

so that you can reach everything my love directs you to,  
so that my shadow can travel along in your hair,  
so that everything can learn the reason for my song.

—*Pablo Neruda*

*from the collection* 100 LOVE SONNETS