



REIGNITE YOUR INSPIRATION

Class 2 – Memory



BW: Welcome to Memory, Class #2. Hi, Linda Joy.

LJM: Hi, Brooke. Memory is of my favorite subjects.

BW: I know it is. Hello, everyone. We're excited to be back and welcoming you to *Strategies for how to remember and knowing which memories matter*. It's a big topic and an important one, and we'll be eager to get to the teaching and also to the writing, which we heard from a lot of you was really fruitful, so that makes us super happy.

LJM: We wanted to help you all write some more, so we heard on Friday that some people were, like, "Yeah, I've been writing." "I'm writing." That's great.

BW: Let's set a little context here.

LJM: I love this quote: "Memory is the diary that we all carry about with us." Many of us have many parts to our diary, and that's wonderful. Generally, the memories are good. Sometimes we have memories in that diary that aren't so good, but what we see is that so many people are—and I was also—overwhelmed by how many memories. How could I figure them out, and where do they go, and do they belong in the story. We're going to cover all that today. People wonder about trusting their memory, and Brooke is going to go into that.

But you have to jump into the pool of sorting through memories and examining them and dealing with them even in your early draft, knowing that it will change. Maybe you'll take out things and add other things. We want to help you today to be inspired to encounter memory and figure out how to deal with writing some of it down and sorting through it.

Some of these strategies, Brooke and I have done them all, and we've taught people needing to cope with their memories in some way or another. A really great one is to use photos, photos that you have or that family members have, photos that maybe you took, or you inherited some photos. Use the photo as a little stage that you walk out onto, and you go into the photo and



really look at specific details, who was there, and other details and write as you're looking. This is like a free write, too: Who's there, who's in it, what year do you think it is, what is going on in the photo, where is the photo – in front of a car, in front of a house, in front of a certain landscape and a certain location, if you can remember or find it.

The background of the photo is also the context of the specific event. When you go deeper into it, do a five-minute write about what you think is going on in the photo, who was there, all these things I'm talking about. Just let it be; do it in your journal because it opens the door to memories. Then, what almost always happens is once we start opening the door and writing a little bit of this and a little bit of that, then we go, "Yeah, and then this happened. Oh, yeah, now I remember it." Your memory starts to allow more writing, and more memories come.

The other thing is you can use research, and nowadays you can research all kinds of things through the internet, including where your house was, or where your grandparents' house was. You can drive down the street of your house on Google Earth. You can look down from above. I've worked with people who were looking at photos and going, "Oh, I remember that." Or they'll see it on Google Earth and they're looking down and go, "This must have been taken at such and such a time because the car that we kept in the back isn't there, but this other detail in the photograph is there, so it must have been this time frame," things like that. And it's also very evocative to think about how the house looked. In a workshop I used to do, I would have people draw on a big piece of paper the house they grew up in, or a house that had a special meaning to them. It was wonderful to see all those drawings, and there were so many details in the drawings that people began to discover. "Then I began to remember this, and I began to remember that." So if you want to, draw your house.

One woman that I remember, she and her sister had lived in their car for a while, so she drew the car, and then she wrote about that time, and what came out surprised her. There are all kinds of things you can do with this research, including newspaper articles about what was going on in the town you lived in at certain times. Now, so many things are available to us.

Diaries, journals and interviews: Interviews can help if you are interviewing family members for information. Some people want to do that, but if people are not in your life, you can't. But if you have that resource, you can play the interview, hear the voices. You can free write from that, too. It might bring up other memories that weren't directly in the interview. Diaries and journals: For some people it's very helpful; for others, it's so much detail that it overwhelms them more. I was that second person.

When I wrote my first memoir, *Don't Call Me Mother*, I wanted to remember from where I am now, whenever it was when I was writing, and I didn't want to be bogged down by details because my mind was already too full of things.



Now, I want to address the people who say, “But I don’t remember that much.” What you can do is try some of these exercises and see if they’re helpful. Let’s look at what we can do with all this stuff.

Track what matters. It’s so great that Brooke mentioned Denis Ledoux here because he has a tool called a “Memory List”. Denis Ledoux is a guy who teaches memoir and has been doing that for thirty years. I first met him when I began to teach memoir, and we had him present at the NAMW every year. He talked about the need for us to pin down these memories in time and place and meaning. That’s something that Brooke and I also teach. We call them “Turning Points,” which helps identify the when and the where and the what and the meaning of the memory. We suggest a very, very simple list. It’s not even officially an outline. In case some of you are not outliners, you don’t have to worry. This is a list.

List the place, the year, and how old you were in that moment. What is that significant moment? *The day that my dad arrived from the army. The day that we moved to Florida;* things like that. The meaning of that moment: you can get into *one of the happiest days of my life*, or *oh, my gosh, there are so many stories from this, I’m going to write this one and this one*. Boil it down if you have more than one thing. Boil it down because the point of this is to keep things simple. You can track them online on a document that you save. You can write the moments down in your journal, which is what I did. I just threw away a whole bunch of old journals, and all of them had these Turning Point lists from my first book, *Don’t Call Me Mother*.

Or use a white board, or a big slice of butcher paper. You might even do a timeline on that butcher paper and track these moments on there, divide it into years or decades. Make it visual because you’re going to want to see it and write from it. I did the butcher paper version in a lot of workshops that I taught, and people ended up remembering new memories. Once they saw the events visually, they thought of a whole bunch of things.

BW: I love the visual stuff. And when people get into it, you can put photographs on there, you can add songs, you can put timelines. We’ve seen some really fun ones, and I’ve also seen a couple of my clients over the years use sticky notes on top of the butcher paper, adding things, and it can be a real project if you’re that kind of a visual thinker, which many of you are.

We’re going to get a little bit deeper into the unreliability of memoir writing and memory in general, which is something that causes people a lot of angst because you think, okay, I’m sitting down to write my memoir and, therefore, it should be the true account of everything that happened to me. And, of course, truth is subjective, and memory falters, and there are many, many things that you will not remember. You might remember a moment that you have to build upon.



The great Mary Karr says, “Memoir is not an act of history but an act of memory, which is innately corrupt.” We share that to be freeing, to give you a little bit of freedom and permission around the very fact, as Linda Joy and I talk a lot about in our longer classes, you did not walk around your entire life with a tape recorder strapped to your hip. Many of you have never kept diaries. Some of you have; some of you have journals and diaries, but plenty of you don’t have any that you’re drawing from.

So, there are going to be lots and lots of gaps in your memory, and memoir is a lot about what happened, but it’s also a flavor of reconstructing the past and making sense of what happened, and versions of things and recreated strategies. In that way, memoir is inherently creative. It is creative nonfiction.

Linda Joy, do you want to add something?

LJM: No, you’re going to cover a lot of what’s on this slide: *How do I deal with even the thought of creating, how do I shape and create, and I can I really get permission*, so here we go with that.

BW: Exactly. That brings us to the beginning of talking about choosing because you’re going to be choosing things that happened, and for many of you, again, those might be little, tiny moments: *I went somewhere. I remember the moment I attended a wedding, but I don’t remember who was there; I don’t remember where it was; I don’t remember all that happened.* But you know who it was for, and you can reconstruct, “Oh, my parents were there, and I might have been wearing this kind of outfit. It was this era. There would have been this kind of music.”

That’s what we’re talking about with the ethereality of some of the memories. There are things that you could imagine would have been, and there are things that are very concrete that you absolutely know. We’re trying to think about this today as we’re talking about really thinking about memory and the elusiveness of it sometimes.

The first note here is to:

- Measure what matters by figuring out your scope and theme/s. This one is a big one for me. We teach about theme in a lot of our classes, the scope. Many of you will be coming to memoir with a scope that is far too big. A lot of people come in thinking they’re going to write the story of their entire lives, and then soon find out that they need to whittle that down into something much more manageable. Sometimes you can do so by thinking about themes.
- Maybe you’re going to write a story of the greatest love of your life, or maybe the theme is motherhood, or maybe the theme is an addiction that you survived, whatever that may be. That’s a way to do a slice of life, which is helpful in memoir and it will also help you hone in on which memories you want to capture.



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- We also encourage you to write out “what happened.” An early draft would be what we call a “what happened” draft. Annie Lamott famously calls it a “shitty first draft.” I like that, and I think it’s funny, but really what you’re trying to get out is what happened. Sometimes it’s not shitty, actually; sometimes it’s pretty decent. The point is to put it all on the page and not worry so much about crafting a gorgeous prose, but rather to get yourself into the vibe of okay, *this is the story. This is what I have to tell*. I recommend later or during, giving yourself a grading system. Which ones are exciting to you? Which ones have the most juice, and we’re talking about the scenes or the Turning Points or the “what happened,” like, ooh, this is so important to my story. This one, not so much.
- Then you start to develop a little bit of a discernment system, and not everything that you write necessarily has to go in your book. I think that’s another important piece about think about your writing, which is not getting too precious about the scenes out of the gate; that you can write what happened knowing that this is going to be something that will be finessed over time; there will be multiple revisions, and that also can make it a little less charged.
- When I say to write the scary scenes regardless, if you know that they don’t absolutely have to be in your book, then you can take the charge out of them a little bit. You can write them, and you can see what happens, and amazingly, as many of you know, the more you write, the more you remember. When you immerse yourself into these scenes, sometimes those tangents that you take lead you into something like, *oh, my gosh, I completely forgot that*. It’s a portal. The mind is amazing that way, and you might dream something that you didn’t remember for the last thirty years. Really freely be in this space, and the arrows pointing every which direction in the slide are purposeful. It is wild out there. It’s a world unto its own, and you get to explore it and relive it in a way, reclaim it, and be with your process, which in part is about grabbing memories, reclaiming memories, building upon memories. So this really is a process.
- The final point here, as I said, is even if you only loosely remember, or have scenes that will need to be composed, give yourself permission for that. Write what you do remember. You can say *I'll fill the rest of this out later, or I remember this conversation, but I don't know where it happened*. That happened to me recently. I really strongly remember a conversation I had with a friend. I couldn’t tell you what restaurant in Berkeley we went to, but I can easily recreate the vibe of the restaurant and the time because what is meaningful to the scene is not where we were sitting...that just gives flavor. What’s meaningful to the scene is the conversation which the two of us had, which I remember quite well.

We’re going to talk about the difference between what happened and emotional truth because emotional truth can still be intact if you put someone in a red dress instead of a blue dress; or if you see someone in a McDonald’s instead of a Jack in The Box. These are not lies. You need a



container sometimes for the things that you remember to place your reader someplace meaningful.

LJM: Yes. Choosing, selecting, making decisions.

BW: Yes, absolutely, all these things are important.

Now we'll look at how to turn important moments into scenes. We've been talking about that already, and we're going to get into it more in just a minute with getting into writing scenes a little bit. This is the craft portion of your class, folks, because you want to consider the specificity of the moment. That doesn't mean, "Every summer we would go down to the shore, and I love to swim with Dad. It would be sunny all the time," and blah, blah, blah. That's not a specific moment. That's every summer of your youth as opposed to, "That Monday, we walked down the steps, and sun was glaring." That's a moment.

- You want to, as much as you can, harness the specificity of these moments, and sometimes that's what we mean by composites. Every summer needs to become one day.
- And then, what happened? What do you remember? You might need to jot this down a little bit. You might need to spend some time with your memory and reconstruct the day out of the many, many days of summer that you had over the course of five or six years. Then you can write about what did happen on that day because usually the meaningful moment is rooted in something that you remember around something someone said, or what someone did. It might have been a dramatic moment; it might have been a poignant, sweet moment. But again, write down as much as you can remember and begin to fill out what these scenes are.
- These are the strategies for writing out what you don't remember. Some of you are going to have traumatic memories that are so bright that you could feel them as if they happened yesterday, though you were ten or fifteen or twenty years old. But in other moments, you're not going to remember so strongly, and it's okay to have some moments that you remember be crystal clear, and to have other moments that are really vague. That's going to be par for the course. Just consider that there's a strategy for working in both directions.
- Once you get what happened on the page, look at what's missing, and how can you fill in those details of what would have been true. I've had lots of moments like this in my memoir that I'm working on, and I just jot down a note to myself in the margin that says, "Fill this out later." Again, who cares what restaurant I was at with my friend. That's a container, and I'm not going to waste my time right now building that. I'm working on the conversation and the meaning-making in that conversation. Then, I'll come back later, and it might be a bar, which will give some anchoring to the scene, but I'm much



more invested in what's emotionally true and the details and the contours of why that scene matters to my book is because of the conversation with my friend.

- You're looking to also ask yourself about these important moments, how they are serving your story because later, and this goes back to Linda Joy's first slide—later you can do the research to fill in the setting and the clothing and the location and the specificity of what you cannot remember. You probably know that it took place in Chicago in 1982, or New York City in 1993. You can reconstruct these moments around places that you have been to and that you know.

I hope that I'm being very clear here about there's a huge difference between making up little details of "what would have been" for flavor, which is not the same as inventing things out of whole cloth. The scenes and the events and the circumstances have to be true, but the container for these things can be what you draw from your emotional truths. This really is freeing when you get into memoir and will enliven your prose tremendously.

LJM: I just love that we're talking about this because it's such a stumbling block for people so often, and they don't write or they begin and the voices in their head start yelling at them, "You're a liar," and then it all starts to get too complicated, and people give up. We really want to support you. It's murky, but you'll see that you're going to start to tie things down and give yourself more permission.

BW: Absolutely. And we have a lot of writers who will say, "Okay, I just wrote a page," or "I wrote two pages, and that's all I have to say," because they don't remember the rest. This is where your creative mind kicks in. You're building a story out of a partially remembered scene, which leads us to talk further about writing scenes.

LJM: Most of you have read memoirs and books where you're engaged and really involved—and you would have been in a scene. We teach that scenes are significant parts of writing a memoir, and necessary. We know that there are memoirs and stories that are mostly narrative, but when we see people coming into our class, often you see narration, but it's very flat. It's almost like straight out of a journal. That actually isn't going to work for a book that's going to come out that people can get engaged with and feel and be in the story with you. We teach scene, scene, scene. Later, you might figure out, *I want to narrate this book*. Okay, fine. But if you have the craft already developed, for one thing, it's going to help you see and feel what was happening even more clearly and write it even more clearly with more emotion and color. We're going to teach the basics of how to do this.

You take your Turning Point, which is:



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- A specific moment in time on your list (event, challenging moment or conflictual moment, a certain situation) that you want to write about that you'll need to respond to. It's not a static thing. Something important is going on.
- You are the protagonist, the "I" in the story. Have some kind of thing you're trying to deal with. It needs to be about something significant to you, like we were saying, and problems that aren't immediately solvable, which means you're going to be engaged emotionally and possibly physically in sorting this out, whatever this thing is, and letting us know what was going on both inside you and in action.
- Setting is the where. Where is this moment taking place? In our class, we teach a lot about where is your body in this scene. Where are your feet standing in this scene? You need to find that setting, like we were talking about earlier. Where in the world are you-- and really set that up.
- A time frame for the action. Again, straight out of the turning point. When? What year is it, as close as you can get to that. How old are you in that scene? We don't want to have to be doing math every ten minutes, so it helps to have that timeline point. In this scene, let us know that you're eight years old; in the previous scene, maybe you were four. Let us know that, and you need to know that, so you don't have to do math for your writing.
- This scene includes sensual details, meaning colors and sounds. What is the sound in a room; taste or smell. Say it's your aunt's kitchen. Is it always an apple pie smell even if there was no apple pie? What is that world? Or there might be really disgusting smells and scary sounds.
- Whatever it is, readers, the reason we need scenes, studies have been done on this, is that our body will start to respond to these sensual details in a similar way as you the writer lived that scene. We start to feel what you must have been feeling. So you want to give those vivid descriptions and understand that you're probably going to work on some of these scenes further with description to develop them. I wrote and rewrote scenes quite a few times when I was writing my memoir because I'd get some of it down, and then on another pass, I'd add more detail. I'd remember more stuff, or I'd go, "Oh, I kind of want to say it this way," or "I think the reader will be able to enter the scene better this way." You want the reader to feel you, the protagonist, in those moments that are on your turning point list.
- Characters will be included in a scene. You're the protagonist character, and there will usually be others in the scene. You can have a scene where you're alone, but what are you doing? You want to look at why you're alone and what you're showing or doing. You're the protagonist, and there will be other main and possibly secondary characters as well. You're going to work into eventually being able to include dialogue. We're not going to get into all that right now, but think, what do people say to each other? What is happening? You'll learn how to lay that stuff down in an early first draft as best you can and then develop your craft around it.

Do you want to add anything, Brooke?



BW: I think it's perfect. This is really just a little bite of stuff that we go into in such detail in our longer classes, but hopefully this gives you a starting point for today and gets you thinking about all the various things that you need to be including. As you sit down to write in this moment, you're not going to be able to grasp all these things, and it really is like a layered canvas.

LJM: It's about how you had to practice when you learned the piano. You did exercises, you played little pieces, and then they got more complex based on what you'd already learned. It's a little bit like that.

BW: Yes there's a question in the chat: "Any tips for getting better at vivid description?" Read, read, read. I've been listening to audio books and finding that the story comes into my senses in a different way listening to other people's prose. I appreciate how vividly and gorgeously they create sentences and the audio version invites you to slow down and drop into the moment and not feel like you have to rush yourself.

LJM: Sometimes we suggest that people take a description that you really love and copy it, write it out yourself onto a Word document just to feel what it's like to write those words in that way.

BW: That's such a good idea. Someone else's words that you admire and feel it come through your own fingers and metabolize into your own process.

The great Abigail Thomas: "Half of writing is deciding what to leave out. Learning what to leave out is not the same thing as putting in only what's important." A little brain twister there, but it's important. It is deciding what to leave out, but then, as she says, learning what to leave out is not the same thing as putting in only what's important. There's a lot of discernment. I think what's coming up to me today is this word "discernment." There are so many different little moments, and there's random asides and little details. Not everything has to be of utmost importance. Some little, funny anecdotes are appropriate. If you have a very heavy story, some humor and levity is going to be necessary. If you have an only funny story, you're going to have to find a way to put in some profound insights, so it's also a question of balance.

We're going to tee you up with a little exercise before we start writing. Linda Joy, they only need a minute or two to jot this down, I think. Do you want to tee it up?

LJM: We want you to get started here by just thinking literally a minute to write three profound moments that pop into your mind as meaningful, just boom. Just jot down what comes to mind as a way to start thinking about your Turning Points. We'll do this now, and then we'll get into the writing prompts.



[Pause]

BW: So here are prompts, everybody, and I'll do the same thing as last week, which is to cut and paste them into the chat once we start writing here. Linda Joy has been doing these prompts, which are wonderful, so thanks for these, Linda Joy.

1. Write about a moment that stands out in your memory—something you have always carried with you and that needs to be captured in a story.
2. Choose a moment when you met someone who's remained important to you in your life—meeting them, how you became friends. What you remember now. These are great exercises for capturing character, for capturing a moment. If these appeal to you writing around something, trying to capture the specificity of a moment, that's wonderful.
3. Otherwise, I know a lot of you are here to write from your memoir, continue to write in your memoir. So we have the same amount of time as last time.

END