The Art of Memoir

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Over the past 32 years, I have asked more than 2,500 college students to write about the best or worst thing that ever happened to them.

The traditional students wrote about everything from finding God to finding out a fiancé had Hodgkin’s disease. They explained what it was like to be born with big ears or to be born with cerebral palsy. They described their parents’ divorce or the drug addiction of a sibling. They wrote about a friend’s suicide or their own battle with cancer. They mourned the death of a grandparent or discussed bearing a child out of wedlock.

The older students reminisced about everything from escaping Nazi Germany to building a home in Alaska. One non-traditional student described his ongoing battle with HIV. A retired minister discussed his dishonorable discharge from the army. Another wrote about the murder of a close family member.

All of them wrote well, so well that I wanted to keep their papers forever. I wanted to inspire other students—graduate students, retirees, the entire world—to write their memoirs. Memoirs are history, literature, culture, and poetry. Above all, they are the human heart. In one sense, they answer the
question, “Who am I?” In another sense, they present a time capsule holding the memories of generations who came of age in the 20th century.

That is the method and the madness behind my fascination with memoir. Since 1986, I have read and reviewed hundreds of memoirs for publications like The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the National Catholic Reporter. I have written or edited seven books including the memoirs, Songs of Myself, Reading Lips, Memoir, The Best of 2000, and Radiant. I have taught numerous graduate and undergraduate memoir courses at Towson University, and I’m now teaching “The Art of the Memoir” for the Johns Hopkins University Osher Program.

The idea for having my students write their memoirs originated in a required writing course, “Writing for a Liberal Education,” in which students wrote several critical papers. To these, I added a paper that combines critical writing with creative writing: the memoir. Russell Baker’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning memoir, Growing Up, gave me the inspiration for the assignment. My students read Baker’s memoir and loved it. They also read his discussion with William Zinsser in which Baker explained that he learned to write by writing—in his case—about eating spaghetti with his family. If you don’t believe me, see chapter 13 in Growing Up. Writing wasn’t just reporting, he realized. It was telling a story.

The cliché is “Write what you know.” If this method worked for Baker, I decided, it would work for my students. Even if they didn’t win a Pulitzer Prize, they’d have something concrete to write about and something they’d want to write about. They’d also gain confidence in themselves as writers which is vitally important to writing well.

Their papers blossomed into something more than writing exercises. They revealed the hearts and minds of college students who defy characterizations like materialistic or slacker. They were not the heartless druggies or the sex and booze-crazed groupies so often seen on television. They were caring, thoughtful, sensitive individuals. They loved deeply. And they wrote personally. Personal is the thinking behind the book, Songs of Myself, which collects the 30 best memoirs that I received from my students over a period of several years. Like Walt Whitman’s classic, “Song of Myself,” memoir celebrates the personal self. Yet because the personal at its most profound is universal, memoir also celebrates the humanity we all share. “What I assume, you shall assume,” writes Walt Whitman. “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”

As you read a memoir, aspects of your own self emerge from the words of the story. How many times have you looked forward to an occasion only to find that it was cancelled? How many grudges have you held against people—even those you love most? How many people have you loved and lost in one way or another? How many dumb, crazy things have you done? How few smart and noble things have you accomplished?

Quite a few of my students are excellent writers. Several have had their memoirs published. That includes book-length memoirs which they worked on after our course ended. Most of those were self-published. But a few were published by major publishers.

Many of my students didn’t realize how well they could write until they started composing their memoir. Perhaps they had never written anything that sparked their imaginations the way a memoir does.

Their work inspires me as well. I use my courses as a way to scoop up a wonderful catch of talented writers. When I taught “The Art of Memoir” at the JHU Osher program in Baltimore in the fall of 2017, I was amazed to hear the members’ stories (and poems).
Some of their memoirs were exquisitely written and polished to a high sheen. These people were not writers per se. They were retirees from jobs in health care, business, education, retail, library science, etc. What thrilled me was that they were now discovering a talent that they didn’t know they had.

Talent often shows itself in the writing of memoir. Memoirs are not merely an opportunity for writers to see who they were, who they are, and who they will become. Memoir shows writers things they didn’t realize about themselves. They also offer the chance to write on a subject that evokes one’s passion. Anyone writing a memoir has a vested interest in writing it well.

People—both old and young—need to understand themselves and to be understood. Memoirs tap into those needs in a way that no other writing does.

Writing memoir encourages people to write using their own voice. Most writers will tell you that voice lies at the heart of good writing. Voice establishes authority, readability, and humanity. But getting the right voice takes years of work. Writing memoir, however, seems to almost magically give students their voice. It’s almost impossible to reminisce about your past without using your voice.

Memoir also pushes writers to choose significant details as they explain what made this or that person unique, this or that place different, and this time significant. Memoir leads writers to find the inner truth of an experience. Or as the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins S. J. put it, the “inscape.” T.S. Eliot called it “the objective correlative.”

People often wonder whether writing can be taught. Teachers can give students basic information about grammar, syntax, and punctuation. But that information is not writing just as learning colors is not art. If writing isn’t simply grammar etc., what is it? Writing is the ultimate form of expression and, in the case of memoir, the most intimate. Writing communicates with a reader and with the writer himself. It communicates with the writer’s many selves. It works through conflicting thoughts and arrives at a synthesis. It analyzes and expresses feelings.

It’s a way of talking to oneself—and to the rest of the world.

Diane Scharper is the author or editor of seven books including Songs of Myself, from which parts of this essay have been excerpted.

Devalued Disparaged Demeaned and Dismissed

by Randy Barker

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Recently I learned, in Kathleen Sander’s biography (JHU Press), of the clarity and energy—and success—that Mary Elizabeth Garrett brought to combating negativity toward women in the late 19th and early 20th century. Not only did she and her fellow advocates achieve equal-status admission of
women to the JHU School of Medicine but she also played a key role in promoting schools that offered excellent education for girls and the right of women to vote. Her acquaintances included Susan B. Anthony and Harriet Beecher Stowe, ardent abolitionists before the civil war. She and her fellow advocates lived to see the inhumane Jim Crow laws imposed on African American citizens but had nothing to say about these laws. And her closest pal, M. Carey Thomas, founder of Bryn Mawr College, was an ardent champion of eugenic “science” that devalued, disparaged, demeaned, and dismissed people of southern European, Jewish, and African origins. Pondering all this, and looking at the wonderful JS Sargent portrait of MEG, I felt compelled to write my poem on those four Ds. The line in the poem “Missed what perfect prophets see” is intended to be both critical and understanding. None of us is a perfect prophet, meaning that what is nowadays called unconscious or implicit bias is something that happens to persons whose moral compasses are sound but imperfect.

Your florid cheeks and wirey specs
Were fiery and prophetic
When you were
Devalued
Disparaged
Demeaned
And Dismissed!
But you spread wildfire across America
To undo that
And do unto your sisters
What your brothers would not do.
What I want to know is
Did your pals Susan B Elizabeth C and Harriet B
Fire you up to undo what Jim C did to
Devalue
Disparage
Demean
And Dismiss?
Your silence and M Carey’s eugenic fervor
Tell me those wirey specs’ lenses
Missed what perfect prophets see.
Am I right?

Mary Elizabeth Garrett (John Singer Sargent portrait)
and M. Carey
Thomas reconsidered as we wake up a bit, April 2018
Waiting Wives
Jan Brady

Waiting Wives.” Times then were very, very different, not at all like having the entire country behind our service members during World War II. A while ago, one program presented at our Army Officers’ Spouses Club in Fort Myer, Virginia, honored all Vietnam Waiting Wives. We were asked to write our experiences, and mine was presented to 200 spouses, many new to the military, at that luncheon as an example of our life in that era. Here are all the actual and unadorned facts and events we Waiting Wives endured, experienced, and survived while our husbands served in Vietnam:

1) In lieu of a better description, we wives and children (at the time we had three, all under six) were “kicked off” post where we had been living for three years in government quarters in a two-bedroom duplex. Bob was posted at Fort Rucker, Alabama, and since he was now assigned a PCS (Permanent Change of Station), there was “no room at the inn” for the family left behind. So we all had to quickly find a place to live. Since the war—excuse me, “conflict”—was most unpopular, especially in the liberal parts of the country, it was dangerous for some of us to return home. I’m from New Haven, Connecticut, the home of Yale University, which was a hotbed for anti-Vietnam demonstrations.

2) At that time, many home-town newspapers printed a column titled “Our Men in Uniform” and listed those local citizens who were serving. Well, if I returned home, and Bob’s name was mentioned along with his/my listed home address plus parents and spouse names we risked being harassed. So…

3) Prior to Bob’s deployment, he helped me find a place “off post” in Daleville, Alabama, where almost 200 Waiting Wives and their children found rentals for the year. Tours of duty at that time were exactly one year—365 days. When I requested flood lights for our backyard for protection, the owner (he also was the sheriff) replied: “Little lady, you flatter our town!” Daleville indeed was small with only one stop light in the center of town.

4) The friendships I made during that one year were precious to us. All our children attended the same local school and quickly made playmates. About 10 of us wives had a card club that met every Saturday evening. It was a most unusual club in that you were welcomed into the club when you carried the heaviest heart, but you happily exited the club exactly one year/52 weeks later—if you were fortunate to have your husband return. Literally every week a new Waiting Wife would come into the club, so you never were the long-timer more than one week. Now you only had 51 weeks before you left the club! Fort Rucker was the home of Army Aviation to include rotary-wing training, which included Chinook, Huey, and other assault and air-evacuation aircraft. Tragically some Waiting Wives in Daleville lost their pilot husbands in the line of duty.

5) We Waiting Wives spent all the holidays together, and our group had numerous children who gathered
for our Thanksgiving and other holiday celebrations. We only had each other for support due to being so far from our parents and families. We WERE each other’s families, and it worked.

6) Only “snail mail” existed. It took about 11 to 15 days for a turn-around from your letter to your husband and his back to you. We wrote each other faithfully every single day. No phone calls, no voice messages, no texts. Some had tape recorders which helped communicating, but we couldn’t afford one.

7) Each Waiting Wife created a “Short Time” calendar, starting with the day your husband left home and ending with the 365th day of his tour. Mine was taped on the kitchen wall in our tiny house in Daleville. It had all 365 days posted, and I crossed out a large “X” each night before retiring to bed.

8) R&R (Rest and Recuperation) was usually halfway through your husband’s tour, almost always in Honolulu. However, Bob deferred his R&R date to lower ranking soldiers. Finally, at ten months into his tour we had our glorious seven-day R&R in Hawaii. He had lost 33 pounds but to me he still was the handsomest man on the planet (as each of us thought when the buses pulled in at Fort DeRussy in Honolulu unloading our men from their plane). Each Waiting Wife had to fly to Hawaii with an additional suitcase packed with her husband’s civilian clothes; Bob’s literally hung on him, but he wore them like a badge of honor!

9) The year 1968 was an extremely volatile time in our country’s history: three months prior to Bob’s deployment President Johnson announced he would not run for reelection. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated; and Bobby Kennedy also died as a result of assassination in California. One year later, on Bob’s 365th day of his tour, July 9, 1969, he was due back to the States. I telephoned Travis Air Force Base in California to confirm his name was on the manifest—it wasn’t there! That’s when I finally lost it. (I had only cried once the entire year when our family poodle was flown to the wrong airport when I and the children, and Buster, went home to Connecticut for Christmas.) I learned that Bob was due to return one day late, July 10th, 1969, the 366th day of his tour. When he finally disembarked from the plane in Alabama, he told me that the explanation they were given was that his entire group was bumped the previous day from returning home by members of Congress who were on their way back to Washington after a “Fact Finding Mission” in Vietnam. You don’t want to know what I thought and said about that!

All in all, I grew up in leaps and bounds during that year in my late 20s as we all did; Waiting Wives became independent and more self-sufficient, in my case caring for our three small children (our fourth, Michael, was born in 1971), maintaining order in our tiny rental house, paying off Bob’s dental school debt, and even paying off our car. Days after he returned as a new Major, we both watched Neil Armstrong walk on the moon. Quite a time for us. He served 30 years in the Army, loving every minute of his service. I was proud to be a wife and mother for sure. However, as for me, of all my ventures in the working world (when you move multiple times, usually every two to three years, you reinvent yourself regarding your career)—the title of “Army Wife” is still my most precious.

May God bless America and all who serve her.
Refugee Camp, 11:00 PM
by Charles E. Sternheim
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Asleep
you two
my daughter
son

separate
straw mats
imagined
quilts

I stand watching you now
I the mother
clenched fists
continuous

suitcase
half open
waits
to leave this airless stench
leap the barbed-wire fence
land on our land
grandfather’s land
land I’ve never seen.
Voices of Terror
by Carol Garvey
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“Tommy, what happened? You are so thin!”

“I was very active at camp, and the food was not as good as at home,” our son answered cheerfully, anticipating an end to being tagged “Fatty” at school. Still, we were alarmed to see our 11 year-old lose 18 pounds in a four-week stay at camp—down to 87 pounds from a high of 105—when we picked him up at Dulles Airport. He seemed happy and energetic, however, and we shared in his delight at his slender appearance.

“My right ear hurts,” Tommy told us two nights later, a few hours after he went to bed. We gave him a dose of Tylenol, and he went back to sleep. He was fine the next day. The ear pain recurred the next night but again responded to Tylenol. He began to develop a stuffy nose over the next two weeks.

“He needs an antihistamine,” said the first ENT physician he saw; this accomplished nothing, however. His pediatrician then prescribed an antibiotic, which caused him to develop a rash. We began to fear that something might be seriously wrong. A second ENT physician sent him immediately for a CT scan, which revealed a tumor several centimeters in diameter in the back of his throat.

“I am afraid it is malignant—a rhabdomyosarcoma,” the surgeon who had done the biopsy told us a few days later, in a waiting room at Children’s Hospital. Having learned of the terrible prognosis when we were in medical school, we were devastated, and both of us wept. Tommy was a sweet, wonderful child and the center of our lives. Our efforts to produce more children had resulted in a few obstetrical disasters for me but no additions to the family. Now, over a period of only a few weeks, he had gone from a healthy child to a much less robust child with a potentially deadly cancer. The huge weight loss suddenly made sense.

“Where can we get the best pediatric oncology treatment?” my husband asked colleague after colleague. For the next few hours, he telephoned physicians at NIH, in Boston, and in New York. An NIH friend strongly recommended a consultation with Dr. Paul Peebles, a Bethesda-based pediatric oncologist. He agreed to see Tommy that evening. His approach was thorough and his manner both kind and confidence-inspiring. All three of us felt comfortable with having him become Tommy’s doctor.

“Why do I have to go to the hospital again?” Tommy asked as we headed up to Johns Hopkins, our chosen institution for Tommy’s treatment, a few days later.

“Because, Sweetie, you have cancer, and we want you to have treatment in the best place,” I answered.

“Cancer!!” he exclaimed. “Why didn’t anyone tell me I have cancer?”

“Paul told you on Wednesday.”

“He just said that I have a tumor. He didn’t say that it was cancer!” he replied angrily. I realized then that the use of euphemisms was not productive—that Tommy wanted and needed all the details clearly laid out. As the evaluation and treatment proceeded, everything was explained to him in as much detail as he was capable of absorbing.
Dr. Brigid Leventhal, the chief of pediatric oncology at Hopkins, headed a terrific team to care for Tommy, which included Dr. Moody Wharam, Chief of Radiation Oncology; Dr. Michael Holliday, the ENT surgeon; and Tommy’s “primary” oncologist, Paul Peebles.

“Keep Tommy out of school this year,” advised Paul. “He will be spending a lot of time in treatment, and his immune system will be compromised by the treatment. It won’t be safe for him to be around other children all day every day.” We signed him up for home schooling through Montgomery County Public Schools, which sent a teacher for an hour and a half, four days a week, for the three weeks out of four when he was not getting treatment.

“Let’s talk about Tommy’s radiation,” Paul said next. “The protocol calls for whole-brain radiation. As you know, this can reduce a child’s intellectual capacity, and we thought you might want him to go to medical school.” We were lucky that Tommy’s physicians empathized with us. None of them would have wanted their children to have whole brain irradiation, and they proposed giving Tommy a “shrinking field,” radiating the whole brain only for a few days and then giving him less every day except at the tumor site, which would get the full amount.

“A lady told me that if I get chemo, I might not be able to have children,” Tommy sobbed as we reentered his hospital room after the only meal my husband and I had had together in a week. We were taking turns sleeping at the hospital, one of us driving back to Potomac from Hopkins every night, so that Tommy would always have one of us with him. However, that evening, we decided to go to the cafeteria together instead of one at a time. Big mistake! A pediatric oncology fellow had been foolish enough to talk with him in our absence about chemo side effects, including the likelihood of sterility. Tommy had been aware of our unsuccessful efforts to produce more children, and it had become important to him to have children himself. We never again ate together in a hospital cafeteria during Tommy’s more than two years of treatment. One of us was always at his side. We wanted him to be fully informed, but we needed to be part of any discussion.

“It’s a good thing that I am the one who has cancer,” opined Tommy one evening as I tucked him into bed at home, “because you and Daddy need to work so that we have enough money.” Tommy was very brave and very cooperative during the extensive evaluation and treatment initiation at Hopkins, which included introduction of chemotherapy into his spinal canal as well as into his veins. His nausea during chemo, however, was untreatable—he was allergic to all of the anti-nausea medications. He vomited 20 to 30 times during each day of chemo, and the chemo was scheduled to continue for over two years. About two months into his treatment, he became despondent.

“I feel like going to the roof of the hospital and throwing myself off,” he told us one night after yet another uncomfortable procedure at Hopkins.

“Get him a puppy,” insisted my mother-in-law Lillian. That turned out to be a good idea. Cindy, the adorable Chesapeake Bay retriever puppy, joined Ada, our old black Labrador retriever, on Tommy’s bed at home and brightened his days. There was never again any talk of suicide.

“There go a few more brain cells,” exclaimed my husband, as Tommy went in for one of his radiation treatments. After a three-month period of intensive chemotherapy, the “induction period,” he underwent six weeks of radiation, which seemed innocuous at the start but which gradually sucked away his energy and appetite, leaving him weak and weighing only 65 pounds—40 pounds less than he had weighed before going off to camp. He had lost all of his hair during
the first month of treatment and he looked like a concentration camp victim. Nonetheless, he tolerated his treatment in good spirits and even, at times, with humor.

“He needs an audience with the Pope,” declared my mother-in-law—a novel idea coming from a Jewish woman. We worked with Tommy’s doctors to figure out how to work the trip around his treatment schedule, and they gave their approval, conditional on the state of his health at the planned time of departure. About eight months into Tommy’s therapy, the four of us flew to Rome, where he was kissed on his bald head and blessed by Pope John Paul II.

“He has a fever,” we told Paul innumerable times during the 27 months of treatment, especially during the second year of treatment, when Paul had allowed him to return to school. During the first week of his four-week treatment cycle, he needed to be hospitalized for intravenous fluids during chemotherapy to replace all of the fluid he vomited. He attended school during the second week. During the third week, when his white blood count and resistance to infection were at their lowest level, he often developed fever and infection requiring a hospital stay and antibiotics. During the fourth week, he was back in school again and feeling well. Then the cycle would begin again.

All of the low white blood counts and febrile episodes were frightening. Each raised the possibility of death, not from the cancer itself but from infection.

“Congratulations! Your treatment is over,” declared Paul, giving Tommy a top hat as a gift.

Despite all the terrors, Tommy survived the cancer and the therapy; finished high school (Paul attended his graduation); graduated from college, law school, and medical school; got married (Paul performed the marriage service); and fathered one child before being diagnosed with three new cancers 20 years later—all three believed to be due to the radiation he had received as a child. Thus he began a new round of surgery, chemo, and radiation; fell prey to life-threatening infections; but again survived and has remained positive and upbeat. The terror never ends. Tommy has had two strokes, from which he has recovered, and has recurrent severe nosebleeds due to radiation-related tissue damage. Periodic MRIs occasionally reveal anxiety-producing changes, all of which have so far been benign. He is deaf from the chemotherapy received in adulthood. His jaw is frozen shut by the radiation treatment he received as an adult, thus limiting him to liquids and finely cut-up food, and the right side of his face is distorted by radiation damage.

But—Tommy is now 47 years old, has a wife, and a child, and a dog, and a cat, and a house, and a job that he enjoys, practicing internal medicine. And we have him. And we are thankful!
Cloud Mountain
by Mike Abell

On the far side of a highway
that curves along a rocky seacoast
across a valley
terraced with taro ponds
neatly arranged in patterned rectangles
a steep hill rises skyward
toward rain-full clouds
which settle about
its green-cloaked shoulders
and cover it in a deep gray shroud

I stand apart
separated from the hill
by the busy highway
and the mist-scrimmed valley
and gaze at the steep green slope
for a long time
until I feel my heart pulled
toward the foot of the hill
and like one of those figures
in a Chinese “cloud mountain” scroll painting
I begin the long climb
a walking stick in my right hand
helping to lift me
step by step
to the shrouded summit

Lost in an ancient dream
I whisper myself
toward heaven

Written near Hanalei, Kauai, Hawaii

December 30, 2010
No matter who you are: man or woman, wavy-or straight-haired, thinning or bald, even if you recoil from curls; aren’t you curl-curious? Noticing more curly heads and curly-hair products? Then again, maybe you are open to changing your routine after fighting the nature of your own hair so long. Wishing to come home on a humid day looking like the same person who left? Thinking your hair-care routine could be faster, less damaging, possibly more flattering? Please allow me to expose some secrets of the curl underground.

My hair has been pretty good to me through the years, remarkably cooperative with my sculpting attempts to achieve waves, curls, or, more recently, straightening with a flat iron. Sure, it morphed over time; didn’t the rest of my body? On vacations and lazy days, I would liberate my hair to express itself into erratic waves. One such day, a friendly woman casually inquired if I was a “curly girl.” She encouraged me to Google Lorraine Massey’s book Curly Girl.

What a revelation, this book and the body of knowledge that has coalesced. Ms. Massey categorizes curly hair into nine texture types. Each type has specific procedures to encourage curl and suppress frizz, with tailored products. These types encompass all ethnicities and heritages except the straight-hair ones. African-Americans notably embrace the techniques for their types as kinder alternatives for creating attractive hairstyles. (Chris Rock’s funny documentary, Good Hair, gets serious exposing chemical straighteners.)

Men have their own considerations, as do children. (Rescue for a straight-haired parent who styles a curly-haired child.) My favorite website for care and purchasing advice is https://www.naturallycurly.com/. Google further led me to a community of discussions and instructional videos. Because everyone cites their type, I target my Type 2B cohort. Our tresses are mostly straight at the roots, with S-shaped waves and frizz at the top.

Retraining my brain to create new routines is good for aging, right? Brushing and dry-combing are now evil as curl-breakers, as is rubbing water from my hair with a towel. Products I choose are recommended for Type 2B but also lighter weight for my fine hair. Other individual needs are met by humectants, protein and oils. Everyone is encouraged to avoid harsh chemicals like sulfate and silicone.

New vocabulary for the curl-sphere include scrunching (grasping a handful of damp hair to encourage it to coil), plopping (wrapping wet hair in a long-sleeved cotton T-shirt to sop water up), poo (shampoo as vilified for how it removes oil necessary for curls), and co-wash (a non-lathering combined shampoo and conditioner used to avoid the dryness of frequent shampooing).

**My Shampoo Routine**

(If hair is really dirty) Shampoo once, scrubbing scalp well, and rinse.

If shampoo, apply conditioner or mask. Otherwise, apply co-wash generously. Either way, scrub like it’s
shampoo, and use a wide-tooth comb to comb it through. This is the only time to work any knots out.

Rinse with warm water, then lean forward and finish rinsing with cool water to close the hair follicles.

Blot with a thirsty terrycloth towel, not scrubbing. I finish by wrapping a microfiber towel, not that T-shirt plop.

Press hair oil (to moisturize) and styling products (to hold the curl) into the hair.

Air dry or blow dry some. The hair dryer needs a diffuser, so curls don’t break in its breeze. Allow curls to coil into the diffuser’s well to help shape the curls as they dry. Fuss to scrunch the curls as much or little as you feel like.

**Refreshing the Curl**

Waking up in the morning or after removing a hat or bike helmet, curls are broken and flattened. A fine spray of distilled water—with either a few drops of lavender oil or liquid curling product—followed by lots of scrunching, pops curls back as my hair dries.

During the day, a brisk scalp massage with wet fingers may look like I am messing it up but really makes my hair fuller from the scalp level.

After a few curly years, my life has changed subtly. Strangers readily approach me with curiosity about my curls; the hairstyle somehow lowers barriers. Standing in a checkout line, I have been told more than once that someone was watching my curls as I was shopping. Not to mention the shout outs I get from other curly-headed people.

Even more challenging than re-inventing hair-tending routines was accepting the change in my appearance. Straight hair used to match my reserved and restrained personality. While the ease of curly hair fits my retired lifestyle so much better, letting go of hair control took some self-control. Maybe the random locks tumbling from my head have affected my personality. On not “good hair days,” I have even come to embrace appearing in some state of dishevelment. The retired me has evolved to become more casual, natural and healthier. Now so has my hair.
Acknowledging Oedipus
by Fred McCormick

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Within the sacred grove of olive trees,
Ancient and holy, bearing for the press
A utilitarian fruit beneath
The gray green leaves shimmering in the breeze,
Mother earth holds the body of old
Oedipus, finally resting here at
Colonus, quiet suburb of Athens;
Away from the bustle of the teeming
Agora, the courts on the Mount of Mars,
Theater, stoa, and the perfection of
Building and statue on the City’s Hill.

A long, arduous, and irascible
Road leads from rival Thebes to the silent
Glade where cicadas murmur at high noon.
A fountain that will, in a different age,
Be consigned to an early Christian Saint
Bubbles by the tomb, symbolic of the
Purity gained through suffering and pain.

Theseus adopts his Daimon to hold
As talisman against future peril.
But luck will not hold—Spartan, Frank, and Turk
Will all rule here, with or without Mercy.
Yet, through the ruins and blasted fragments,
The poet’s story of his awful doom
Will command compassion, exorcise shame,
Until all the Western tongues are broken
At the altar of relentless time.
A Tribute to Leonard Mades: Osher member 1991-2008

By Susan Howard

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Dr. Leonard Mades joined Osher at JHU in 1991 when it was the Evergreen Society. According to Kathy Porsella, Evergreen Society founding director, “he was a respected and much beloved faculty member of Evergreen in Baltimore. He was a great scholar and had quite a following”. In later years he attended classes on the Montgomery County Campus. Dr. Mades passed away in December 2017.

Leonard’s wife, Pearl Oxorn Mades, taught humanities courses for Osher at JHU for 26 years. Pearl captured the essence of their experiences best in an article she published in the Osher at JHU Journal in May 2001:

“But it was especially at Johns Hopkins, and most of all at the Evergreen Society, where we have spent, and continue to spend, some of the most rewarding years of all.”

The Mades’ were so enthusiastic and passionate about the Osher program that when the Johns Hopkins Office of Planned Giving informed me of Leonard’s $10,000 bequest, given for the sole benefit of Osher at JHU, I felt deep gratitude, but not surprise.

It is in his honor that I share these excerpts from his 2003 Osher at JHU Journal article, Autumn Thoughts about Columbus:

As autumn approaches—it is after all, the season when the Discovery took place—I find my thoughts turning to Christopher Columbus. (If I spell ‘discoverer’ with a capital D, I follow the practice of such eminent 20th-century Columbus scholars as Samuel Eliot Morrison.)

To many, Columbus is simply the man who, 1492, “sailed the ocean blue.” But to scholars he is a complex man of mystery. Salvador de Madariaga, one of his most outstanding biographers, said of him:

“Like the squid, he oozes out a cloud of ink round every hard square fact of his life.” Madariaga adds to this: “No amount of ingenuity can solve the crossword puzzle of Colon (Spanish for Columbus).”

Columbus was given credit for having an uncanny sense of speed and distance. As for the air currents, he was said to know them so well that some of his routes are used to this day. His immediate mastery of the treacherous reefs and shallows of the Bahamas is considered an amazing feat. His competence as a dead-reckoning navigator is considered astounding. He had that God-given gift, as one expert put it, of knowing how to direct and plot the course of a ship in the midst of the sea, where there are no landmarks to guide one.

Dr. Leonard Mades may be gone from our sight, but his gift allows him to help guide and enhance the Osher at JHU program, a kindness for which I am very grateful.
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The Osher Journal is published for the entire Osher at JHU community. Articles from all members are welcome, subject to editorial review. To submit a story or article, send it by email to linda@middlestadt.net, or by hard copy to the above address.

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