

The Business Corner
Walk the Walk



by Denis Ledoux

The foundation for building your lifewriting business, whether it focuses entirely on presenting workshops or includes editing, co-authoring, and coaching services, is your firsthand experience as a lifewriter.

You can be a skilled and experienced teacher, a thoroughly organized publicist and a dedicated small business administrator, but if you have not written your own stories you will lack authority. Your voice when you advocate the importance of lifewriting to students, sponsors and clients will be “as a sounding brass,” clanging falsely.

How can you speak from deep conviction if you do not speak from experience?

How can you speak from deep conviction if you do not speak from experience? How can people not sense that your belief falls short of a personal commitment memoir writing? How can they not doubt your ability to lead them? Though unspoken, this weakness can only undermine your work as a mentor and teacher to those who come to you for guidance.

Your teaching will be limited to encouraging others to go beyond where you have travelled yourself. Or your students, sensing your lack of experience, will limit themselves to the cute and simple stories that do not risk deeper understanding and insight.

Though I regularly stress the importance of teachers undertaking their own lifewriting projects, I still meet workshop leaders who hesitate or procrastinate. You are not alone if you have neglected this fundamental step in your preparation to effectively lead lifestory writing workshops.

A speaker at the 2001 convention of the national Association of Personal Historians asked how many in the audience—almost all of whom consider themselves professionals—had written, recorded, or videotaped their own lifestories. Only about 20% raised their hands. The overwhelming majority—80%!—had not undertaken the work they urge others to do.

Yet, the experience of encountering and surviving the challenges lifewriters meet is invaluable in leading meaningful workshops. How else can you counsel the writer who has many separate, insubstantial stories to assemble a larger, more significant whole? How can your workshop help her to rewrite her pieces with links, and sustained imagery? How can you recognize that dialogue or setting is missing? That tone or theme is told not

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shown? That key details of personal interaction to explain an event are missing and must be unearthed and examined?

Summer is a great time for you to do some catching up on your own writing...

It's like presuming you can teach someone to swim when you've never been in the water. Jumping in isn't enough. Explaining that it's wet won't do. Even claiming that the human body is buoyant won't be convincing if your knowledge of this fact is hearsay.

Authority (*author-ity, the quality of being an author*) can only come from doing the work yourself.

Summer is a great time for you to renew your commitment and catch up on your own lifestory writing. Your fall workshops will be more successful because as you lead your participants to deepen their own search for meaning, you will be a fellow journeyer who knows the route.

A drop in workshop enrollments in the summer is to be expected as people get involved in family and vacation plans. Use these months to continue to develop your business—by experiencing for yourself the joys and frustrations, the rewards and challenges of writing your stories.



Here's what I suggest if you have not yet committed yourself to authoring your own lifestories:

- Set up a schedule for yourself to write on a regular basis. Do it right now. For the next three months, select an hour (hours) and a day (days) at which you will sit down and write your stories. Mark the time in ink on your calendar. Ask people in your life to honor this commitment as they do other appointments you regularly keep.
- Select a task that you would like to complete before the end of summer (Sept. 1?). This should include a number of stories (e.g., ten) or a range of stories (e.g., my childhood).
- Do the work outlined in the *Soleil Lifestory Network Curriculum Manual* and in *Turning Memories Into Memoirs*. Do everything that you have asked or will ask your students to do. No exceptions!
- If you still have trouble working on your writing, join a *Soleil Writing Group Tele-Class*, find a writing buddy, work with me as your writing coach to identify and get over the gap between your “talk” and your “walk,” or plan to attend a *Turning Memories Into Memories® Workshop*.

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