

A Lasting Legacy

Loren Stephens gives tips on how to write a memoir.

By MICHIKO TAMURA
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Deciding on a gift for parents often could be troublesome work when we are running out of ideas. For those people, Loren Stephens says writing their parents' memoirs would be a priceless gift.

"Everybody has an important story to tell, and once they are gone, that story disappears with them. So, I encourage everyone to take time to write their stories," said Stephens, president of Write Wisdom, Inc, a private publishing company that offers guidance on writing memoirs.

"One of the wonderful experiences is to have adult children interview their parents, so they have time to get to know their parents in a different way, and to create a different kind of bond."

Throughout the year, Stephens, also an Emmy nominated documentary filmmaker, conducts one-day workshop on "Writing Your Life Story" and "What Is Memoir," in Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, and Ojai. At each class, which limited to 20 participants, students write small essays and share the stories with other participants.

"Most people are afraid to write. They don't think they can write. And so my job is to inspire them, and to give them a sense of confidence that they can really write," she said.

The first step on writing memoir, she said, is to create a chronological road map, and then to identify turning points—moments in your life when



Loren Stephens

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Courtesy of LOREN STEPHENS

The left photo was taken in 1967 when Stephens' husband, Dana Miyoshi, was adopted by his aunt and uncle, and became a U.S. citizen. Right is Miyoshi's birth mother, Miyoko Ito, pictured in Osaka, Japan. Stephens hopes to preserve Miyoshi's family history by writing the memoirs of his two mothers.

you've made decision, when you took this road, instead of that road, and what were the underline reasons.

"Typically, people have somewhere between 12 to 20 turning points in their lives. So you write those things down, and that gives you the broad

frame work," she said.

Another way to start the writing process is to answer this: What is the question that people most often ask me about myself? "It often becomes the theme

for the story," she said. For those who have immigrated to the United States, for example, the question can be, "Why did I come to the United States?"

After the brainstorming process, the story can be started from the beginning, such as "I was born..." or from the certain emotional moments like "birth of my child."

"There are certain elements in memoir writing—depth of feeling, emotional power, conflict and dialogue, which I consider are extremely

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important and really drives a story," she said. "And also, details are critically important to fill in the picture."

In addition to the workshops, Stephens helps people with editing their memoirs and publishes books for them.

"It's not for the large audience, but for their own purposes and use. Their intension is really to create a way to leave legacy for their children and their grandchildren, to tell their stories, to tell their life experiences," she said.

For their requests, she can also carry out the interview, in total of between 10 to 20 times. Each interview, which lasts about two hours, will be used for the basis for a first draft. The whole process of writing a memoir could take up to six months, she said.

"It's more than a job ... because I really get to know people in every intimate, close personal level, and I become the part of the family in a certain way."

Her career in writing memoirs started with interviewing her own mother several

years ago. Her mother's story turned into a book, "I Turned a Key and the Birds Began to Sing: The Memoir of Carol Rubin Meyer," and was published in 2001.

"The notion was to, first, give it away to immediate family," she said. "But as time when on, anyone who came to the house, she would give the copy of the book, to other friends, colleagues and business associates. It was something she was unbelievably proud of."

Her mother passed away in February this year, and some of the passages from the memoir were read at her funeral, Stephens said.

Now, she is planning to start a new project in the next few years, a story about her husband's "two mothers."

Her husband, Dana Miyoshi, was born in 1961 in Osaka, Japan. Since his father, Ichiro Miyata, had suffered fatal tuberculosis, Miyoshi was sent to the United States at the age of 2 and half to be adopted by his aunt and uncle, Mitsuko and Harry Miyoshi, in Glendive, Mon. He became a naturalized citizen in 1967.

"He did not see his birth mother until he was almost 20 years old while sta-

tioned in the Navy in Japan," Stephens said. "And, the next time that he saw her was 17 years later when she came to the United States for our wedding."

His birth mother, Miyoko Ito, still lives in Osaka.

"I have encouraged my husband to write a story of his two mothers, to learn more about their relationship," she said. "This is my dream, for us to go to Japan, and to interview Miyoko."

The purpose of writing memoirs, Stephens describes as a "notion of legacy."

"For readers in the Japanese American community, it's important to honor the memory of the elders in the family and in the community, especially those who lived through some of the tragedies, having been sent to interment camps," she said. "Younger generations should understand what they went through, and those stories need to be told and preserved."

Loren Stephens' next workshop will be held in September. For more information, contact her at (310) 820-2052 or loren@writewisdom.com or visit www.writewisdom.com