

GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY: TELLING YOUR LIFE STORY

Coordinator: David Grogan

Guided Autobiography is based on a course developed by James Birren, a social psychologist, to help older adults organize their life stories. This is a writing workshop focused more on the process of life review than on producing polished prose. Weekly themes evoke memories of events that include the nuggets of good stories. The study group is open to anyone who wants to take stock of the experiential wisdom they have accumulated over the years and tell their life story, but doesn't know where to begin. Few of us can be considered natural-born writers, yet each of us has a story to tell. Be yourself. Tell your life story, in 750-to-1000 word weekly installments, with non-judgmental support and inspiration from your peers. This study group is a repeat.

Readings and other Materials: Supplementary readings and priming questions for thematic stories will be provided on a weekly basis by the study group coordinator.

David Grogan is a former magazine editor.

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Each study group participant writes a two-page story every week on a progressive sequence of themes and, in the process, creates a 7500-to-10,000-word memoir by the end of the term.

Week 1: Introduction and impromptu writing exercises

Week 2: **Turning Points** Each of us experiences unique events or moments of insight that propel us in one direction or another. They may be big events such as marriage, war, moving to a new city, or retirement. Or they may be small events that had big outcomes, such as a chance encounter with a stranger that changed the course of your life.

Week 3: **Family** Our families of origin (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins) can exert a powerful influence on the course of our lives, for good or ill, that can reach across generations.

Week 4: **Money** Most of us learn our financial values early in life. We mimic those around us, picking up both good and bad habits. And how we manage our wealth through the course of our lives reflects how we see the world.

Week 5: **Work** Most of us work to live; the lucky ones live to work. In either case, our life's work includes the activities that occupy a lion's share of our time and energy. Many people change careers several times or have to balance two, sometimes three jobs at once. Others stay with the same job for decades. In some cases, volunteer work is a person's most important legacy. In one form or another, the work we do defines who we are.

Week 6: **Health** Good health is one of the primary components of our well-being. Acute or chronic illnesses, whether experienced personally or by someone close to us, can lead to major changes in the way we live. Health and self-image are also often intertwined in complex ways.

Week 7: **Gender Identity** Our ideas about what it means to be a woman or a man evolve and come from many sources, including family members, friends, reading and our experiences in life. This identity can vary with different periods of life. A young girl may grow up as a tomboy and strongly express her male attributes. A young boy may grow up delighting in the more feminine aspects of life and feel disinclined to participate in the rough-and-tumble world of sports and skinned knees. As sexual preferences come into play, further categorization may define us lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or straight.

Week 8: **Death** Our perceptions of death can affect our lives in many ways. As a child, the death of a pet or a national hero may have had a profound impact on you. Or the loss of someone close to you may have pushed death to the forefront of your reality at an early age. You may have had a close call with death and been given a second chance to appreciate what you almost lost. You might fear dying. Or perhaps you've accepted it as inevitable.

Week 9: **Spirituality** The history of our spiritual lives need not be confined to experiences in organized religion. Nor does it necessarily

exclude someone who is an agnostic or atheist. In a broad sense, the notion of spirituality encompasses the quest to discover meaning and purpose in our lives. Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going?

Week 10: **Life Goals** Our goals and aspirations form an integral part of the fabric of our lives. Over time, experience may teach us that we should change our goals or change our aspirations for new ones that better fit with the realities of our lives and our changing values.

Week 11 and 12: Wrap-up: Themes for Further Exploration