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Essay by Elizabeth Marcus

My Three Eureka Moments Writing Memoir



“Know thyself” is a tall order. Is it even possible to uncover—without outside help—what is blocked from conscious awareness? To my great surprise, writing a memoir did just that.

I began the memoir almost a decade ago, and during the many years I worked on it, I experienced three epiphanies that completely reversed core beliefs I’d never questioned in years of work with several excellent and very helpful psychiatrists. My goal was not self-analysis. These three flashes of insight came spontaneously and were the unintended byproducts of trying to write well.

Memoir writing is not a substitute for psychotherapy. My husband and many of our friends are psychiatrists. A true believer, I recognize that my earlier therapy may well have been essential to my later self-discovery. Still, the writing

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succeeded where the best professional help had failed.

The first epiphany was about my cherished memory of having an exclusive relationship with my father as an only child growing up in 1950s Manhattan. Our Sunday excursions felt like a temporary boost to princess status and were an escape from the nonstop marital war at home.

We two often went to Central Park and the Metropolitan Museum, where I steered us to the mummy rooms. There, staring at the tombs of long-dead queens, I held my father's hand and hummed "Mummm, Mummm," under my breath—"Mummy" being what I called my high-powered, executive mother, whose constant, crushing efforts at child improvement terrified me then and into adulthood.

The outings with my father were recorded in family albums, the hard evidence—I thought—of our special, romantic twosome; for every photo of me with my mother, there are twenty with my father. The mummies and photos never came up in therapy, where the vocal and facial expression of two-way conversation could carry my long-accepted version of the story.

Only when I tried to evoke the feelings with the written word alone and had to dig for more vivid, visual detail did I recall the photo albums. So, it was an insightful member of my writing group, not a therapist, who asked the key question: "Who was holding the camera?"

No one but my camera-shy mother could have taken the pictures. We'd been three all along.

The second revelation occurred without prompting, when I was writing about a persistent childhood fear. I was raised by a live-in nanny, my very own Mary Poppins, who arrived when I was an infant and later became the cook. I loved her desperately and lived in dread that she would be fired for her daily missteps—a mismatched button thread, a forgotten doily—which drew my mother's condemnation. The dinner table was a nightly plank walk: Providing only one serving spoon for *two* ice-cream flavors might propel my nanny overboard. I watched, mute, torn, convinced that any defense from me would mean our joint dismissal.

Then, years after she and my parents had died, it dawned on me that my nanny never *was* fired. She'd lived with my parents until she died. While fixed on the computer screen, I felt thunderstruck by something that on another level I knew perfectly well. The subliminal dread, which in therapy came up only as a bad memory, had outlived the players. Not until I, the writer, stared hard at the book's younger, unknowing protagonist, did my irrational conviction emerge.

My life had been shadowed by fear of a catastrophe that never happened or was even at risk of happening. And, it is only now, as I write this, that I see my lifelong self-employment as a shield against ever being fired myself.

The third discovery came when I answered the question that prompted the memoir in the first place: What lay behind my parents' bizarre unraveling at the end of their lives? A hard-driving, professional couple who had always been sensible, savvy, and fiercely independent, my declining parents retired in their eighties to Mexico, where they uncharacteristically embraced adventure—and a pair of wacky shysters. Their new, much younger best friends led them into one lunatic disaster after another, but my hypercritical mother refused to notice.

Puzzling out this mystery on the written page forced me to see my parents through their eyes, to draw them in the round. I focused on their early lives, something not possible in fifty-minute therapy sessions.

I read my father's half of their correspondence during World War II, when he was stationed in Florida, eight years into their marriage. My mother had taped the folded, crinkly sheets into a blank book, three to a page, and titled them in the margin: "a red-letter day," "a can of peaches," "love?" Each begins with his scolding her for not trusting him to be faithful. Each contains an apology for making her "winch thru all this slush" when he breaks down and admits he can't live without her.

Months of imagining my parents' upstream journey from immigrant beginnings to Manhattan sophistication slowly made me see that, in taking them at their word, I'd gotten them wrong: Their constant fighting masked a secretly happy marriage; their airtight self-assurance was a false front; my frightening mother was frightened of me.

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One day, all the pieces fell into place, including those that had never fit my lifelong, child's version of my parents. I was sitting in the Raleigh airport between flights when it hit me, and I burst into sobs that left as quickly as they came. Suddenly, I saw under *everything* a continuous fight to deny their own vulnerability—and especially the vulnerability that comes with love.

Correcting a false premise you don't know is false, all on your own, seems impossible. But you aren't truly alone when writing your life. The writer-you regards the character-you with critical remove—and must, if anything meaningful is to be said. And then there is the imagined, skeptical reader behind the computer screen. The digging and parsing required to make a solid written case to someone who needs convincing can bring down your whole shaky reconstruction of the past, shocking and freeing you in an instant.

Art Information

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Elizabeth Roper Marcus is a former architect and current freelance writer. Her articles and essays have appeared in the science and travel sections of the *New York Times* and in various travel essay anthologies. She maintains the website [elizwrites](#) [6], where you can see more of her work and engage in conversation on an absurdly wide range of quirky topics.

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