

## Commentary... Memory is a river

By Katy Yoder  
Columnist

Writing a memoir is not for the meek! Opening portals into the past, especially places that hurt, may seem counter-productive. I've been asked, "Why do you want to bring that back up again?" and "Why do you want to focus on the bad things? There's so many precious memories to cherish." Those are all good questions to answer. But it's important to remember we're all unique and so are our circumstances. For me, it's all about thinking it through and deciding if looking back can help me heal.

Some people are better than others at letting the past go. Maybe some memories are easier to forget, while others seem to hang around like mist in the morning. They may evaporate as the sun's warmth reaches them, but there's a good chance that come tomorrow morning they will be back.

My barometer for what to examine and what to forget is whether or not it keeps reemerging. Memories of past trauma triggered by scents, familiar faces or locations are usually the ones needing attention. It's my hope that by bringing up memories that were swept under the rug all those years ago, I can finally gain control over them and watch them recede. I won't need them anymore. They taught me what I needed to learn and they can go.

Writing a memoir about childhood trauma is my way of learning from the past to understand my present. I wish I'd done it a long time ago, not that I haven't written about certain troubling parts of my life. During my two-week writing residency at PLAYA, I read all my journals from middle school to

present. There were missing time periods, but overall they allowed me to visit my younger self with all of her angst, frustrations and fears. I don't think I was capable of diving in as deeply as I am now.

The younger me was living a life ruled by opinions, instincts and anxieties she didn't understand. She just obeyed her emotions and did what she could to stop the pain and gentle her wild thoughts.

I didn't understand the way I felt. Discretionary amnesia controlled my memory and a misguided attempt at self-preservation took over. I wasn't ready to look closely at parts of my childhood that made me numb. I just shouldered on, survived and stuffed the questions about why I was in the situations that caused me pain. I didn't have the tools or power to extricate myself from the situation, so I handled it as best I could and then left it behind... I thought.

Now, after five decades on the planet, through sickness and health, I'm ready to wean myself off the anesthesia. Hearing other stories, I know many have endured much worse. I'm learning that often it's not just about childhood trauma, it's also how adults reacted and either fostered security or isolation.

I understand now that pain unacknowledged can do permanent damage to my immune system. Research for my memoir revealed some startling ideas. There may be a correlation between the aftermath of childhood trauma and being diagnosed with cancer later in life. There's also a higher instance of eating disorders, anxiety, thoughts of suicide and depression.

I grew up before people



openly discussed child sex abuse. Quite often signs that a child was the victim of abuse went unrecognized by adults. The secret abuse, hidden to avoid retaliation by the perpetrator, was never resolved for the child. That missed opportunity for healing often left scars remaining into adulthood. Certain triggers cause them to resurface. In my case, the smell of cigar smoke evokes an immediate feeling of repulsion and anger.

When we were first married, my husband and his brothers liked to have a cigar together on the back porch. At first, they misunderstood my reaction. I had to explain to my husband why I hated cigars. Once he understood, I felt better and he knew why I had such an overblown reaction to something that seemed so benign. Years later, cigar smoke still evokes a twinge of disdain but it doesn't change my mood or bring back painful memories. By figuring out what was going on with me and then telling my truth to my loved ones, I was able to tame the emotion and learn to live with it in peace.

A memoir is a slice of life. It's a focused look at one time period or experience. I see it as a river. That analogy keeps me on track, only including tributaries that flow into the main river. The river's final destination, the ocean, is the universal truth found in my experiences. There may be dams built along the way. They can slow or stop the flow and impede my journey. Due to stagnation, the emotional waters heat up impacting everything along the way. Healthy water has to move. I know I've been stuck.

Sometimes a spillway that barely lets the water flow through is all I can handle. Eventually, I plan to blow that dam to smithereens and

let it all go. It'll cause some flooding of emotions and upset for those used to the calm but I know it's necessary to bring permanent healing for my inner landscape... and hopefully my outer landscape too.

Right now, I'm rounding up all the items that have risen to the surface and will investigate them one by one. I will take my time, making sure I don't overload my capacity to take in and process what's there. The important thing to remember is the river is flowing again. It's on its way back to the sea and soon it will heal, allowing for new life and the return of what was lost so long ago.

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