

Feminism and the Art of Memoir

@ April 2014, Catherine M. Wallace
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I want to talk today about what's at stake in how we tell our stories about who we are. Identity itself is a story. Your sense of yourself *is* a story, and so everything is at stake in your life when you tell that story. *How do you tell Your Story of You?*

And let me tell you: I *need* your story. Women one another's stories. Given the complexity of women's lives, given the unique culture pressures women face, there's nothing more vital to any woman of us than a clear understanding of other women's lives--our difficulties, our achievements, our path in life and how we have traveled it, and what we have learned along the way. That's what I want to talk about today.

As I talk, and as you enjoy this lovely meal, I want you to be thinking every step of the way about your *own* story. So let's start out here with a very simple memory exercise. If you think it will be helpful, you might want to dig out your phone and open your notes app. Or dig out a pen so you can write on the program. So . . . close your eyes. Sit up straight: assume that power pose everyone talks about. Okay then:

Remember a moment when you made a defining choice in your life. Defining because it mattered to *you*. Defining because it showed you something about your core self. That's all that counts. Go with the memory that comes to mind, without passing judgment on it. The *very* first thing. That very first thing is a gift from your core self. If you want, jot down a two or three word reminder. [x3]

Now then: Your significant choice or decision had its beginning somewhere earlier in your life, It started *somewhere*. There was an experience. Or there was a moment of out-of-the-blue insight that *began* your journey to that significant decision. *Every* significant choice has its backstory. In narrative theory, this beginning point is called "the initiating incident." You may not know what it is at this very moment, but trust me, it exists.

Now then: imagine that you were to tell the story of your significant choice, about how would you get from your own initiating incident or starting point all the way forward to the significant defining choice or action that reveals your identity?

In any story, the hero wants something. She goes for it. She runs into trouble. She wins some, she loses some, she changes, she grows, she learns a few things. Eventually she gets over "there," to whatever defining choice or significant decision you named to yourself a minute ago. Your significant choice or action is the culmination of this particular story.

In order to tell the story of how you got to that moment of defining choice or action, you have to solve the five big problems every storyteller has to solve: plot, theme, character, and voice, and setting. Let me repeat that: plot, theme, character, voice, and setting. You have to solve these five big "elements of narrative" *simultaneously*, because they are all interwoven, but I'm going to explain them one at a time.

First problem: PLOT. What were the key episodes tracing your path from here to there? Russell Baker points out a big problem we all face. We know too much about our own lives. Too much has happened to us. We have too many memories. The solution, he says, is perfectly obvious. *Leave out almost everything*. In a book-length memoir, he says, there is at most room for 1% of our memories. The key is picking out that 1%, those defining memories: what experiences *have* really shaped your life?

Wow, there's a big question. What has really mattered in your life? In answering that question, we have to avoid two archetypally bad answers. First, who we married. Second, our job titles. Prince Charming, Job Charming.

I'm not just "Timmy's mother." I'm not simply my husband's wife. 1960s Feminism made that point loud and clear. But let me add: I'm not the titles of my books either. I'm not my job title. Both my family and my career are important, but they are *not* my core identity. At the core of me, at the very core of me, I am something more than my job title and something more than my relationships. Who, then, am I? What are the key episodes,

the key memories, that showed me who I *really* am? Figuring that out is the first problem we have to solve in telling our stories.

Second problem: THEME. Theme is *why* things happened as they did. Another, maybe better label is "dramatic causality." Once again, there are two archetypal answers. And both of them are wrong, or at least both psychologically dangerous and morally misleading.

The first is that things happened as they did in our lives because *somebody else did something*.

Let me give an example here. Jill Ker Conway talks about this in her study of Jane Addams memoir. From Addams's correspondence it is clear that Addams decided for herself that she needed to see urban poverty in Europe. She spent months writing letters, networking, planning. None of that is in her memoir. In her memoir, she says that once when she was in London--as if she just "happened" to be there- friends took her to see a famous London slum. As if that was *their* idea. She didn't *make* it happen. That visit to a London slum lead directly to the founding of Hull House, but every step of the way she obscures her own causal authority, her own executive authority. Things just "happen" to her

Jill Ker Conway was baffled. So she made a study of women's memoirs, many of them unpublished, held in an archive at Bryn Mawr. She found the very same pattern of deflected causality. Overwhelmingly, women have described their lives as swept along by events outside themselves. in the wake of actions taken by other people--often men. Women say *I was offered, this happened to me, I responded,*, not *I came, I saw, I conquered*. Or at least I fought like hell, and *let me tell you* what that was like!

What's behind that ambivalence about powerful women? Aren't we "over that" by now? Not by a long shot we're not. Talk about the "confidence gap" is everywhere. Our ambivalence derives from the second grand, archetypal explanation about why things have happened as they have in our lives. Philosopher James C. Edwards traces this archetypal assumption to what he calls "the spiritual grammar of the West." The spiritual grammar of the West offers *the* explanation for women's lives. *We Screwed Up*. And if we have not done so yet, just wait: we will. Anything that ever went wrong anywhere,

anything anywhere that's less than absolutely perfect in our households or in our offices, all of that is ALL OUR FAULT.

Look at how widely women are blamed *for everything*, from autism to obesity to real estate prices. And no matter how we lead our private lives, we are wrong there too. It's wrong to stay home with your kids; it's wrong *not* to stay home with your kids. If you don't lean in, you're a failure and a wimp--and a bad mother. If you *do* lean in, you're a ruthless, domineering bitch--and a bad mother. If your house is in order, you're a controlling neurotic--and a bad mother; if it's not in order, you're a lazy disorganized slob--and a bad mother. Kathleen Hall Jamieson wrote a brilliant book about this: *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership*.

As both Edwards and Jamieson explain, "Woman" is culturally associated with disorder, with failure, with culpability, with bad judgment, with everything that is *incomplete* and *mistaken* and above all in need of control-and-correction by others. Men, for instance. All these associations go all the way back to Eve, the archetypal mother of sin and suffering and moral disorder. It really *is* All Her Fault. A woman is always to blame. We inherit that spiritual grammar.

This gets me to the third problem we have to solve in telling our own stories.

CHARACTER. When we tell a story, we create a protagonist. We create a hero. In a memoir, she is *based on* us, except for this: in selecting that 1% of crucial memories, we are creating a *version* of ourselves. That was my scholarly work in memoir; my first book was an analysis of how the "I" of a particular autobiography was beyond question a construct, an artifice, a version of experience designed to let the autobiographer make an argument that he wanted to make about what it means to be a poet and what used to be called a "man of letters." The hero of any memoir is a *version* of ourselves.

So who is she, this hero of our own stories, this daring agent of our core identity. Let's call her "I-eye-aye."

I, the pronoun. Me. You. Right here, real adults. What happened to our heroes happened to me or to you. Real facts.

"Eye": *our* vision of what matters most in *our own lives*. *Our* values. *Our* wisdom. *Our* core desires. *Our* core truth about ourselves.

And, finally, "aye"--what choices we have said *yes* to, what dreams we have said *yes* to, what actions we have said *yes* to. What we have *done* to live our lives *deliberately*, as the core identity we most truly are.

Now as any novelist will tell you, a character is defined by four things. What she does. How she does it. Why she did it--her motives. And who reacted. So let me ask you: what have *you* done? What have you done, what are the episodes in your life where you did something or made some choice that you felt was significant for your discovery and expression of your core self. What have been *your* defining choices? [gesture].

How did you do that?

Why did you do that.

And then, wow, how did others react?

AND THEN, *WOW*, For better for worse, *what happened next???*

That's the stories of our lives, ladies. It's the stories of our lives. We all want to hear those stories.

Problem 4: You need a voice. You need the ability to *tell* this story.

How do we find a voice? How do we *develop* a voice? We need two things. First, we need an audience, a face-to-face audience, people whose sympathy and interest are written all over their faces. We need the faces of people who need to hear our story--people who need to listen to our stories just as fervently as we *tell* our real stories.

Second, we need to hear strong voices. We need honest models, healthy models, face-to-face models of women taking full moral responsibility for their own lives: . . . [softly] *I came, I saw, I conquered*.

Problem 5: setting. We need a place for all these face-to-face moments with other women. We need a place to speak and to be heard. We need a place to listen to other women whose story is just as powerful and just complicated as our stories are.

We need Women's Exchange, where women have been listening to one another's voices for 30 years. For thirty years, Women's Exchange has been a place where we can be characters in one *another's* stories. It's been a place where we can find an audience and where we can *be* an audience for the stories of what it means to be women in our day. We do that as we sit together talking about books and ideas. We do that as we listen to presentations by women who know their stuff on some topic. We do that by writing together, painting together, quilting together, reading novels and short stories together, and so forth.

However you get from your inciting incident to your significant decision, your friends are part of that story. And if Women's Exchange has made a difference in your story, then take this opportunity to make a donation in honor of someone whose story has made a difference for your ability to tell *your* story. Maybe that's Madeleine Albright or Gerda Lerner or Jill Ker Conway. Maybe it's Kathleen Hall Jamieson: she sure changed my story! Maybe it's another woman sitting right here, some Woman's Exchange woman with whom you have *exchanged* stories--changing both of your lives in the process. Whomever. Maybe it's Eve in the Garden of Eden: there's a woman whose story needs reclaiming!

There is nothing I do and no where I contribute with more pleasure than my support of Women's Exchange. I do so because I'm a cultural historian and a scholarly specialist in memoir, and I know how important this place is. I do so because this place is a blast. I always come home brimming with exactly the energy I need.

We came, ladies. We came, and we saw what was going on in women's lives--in *our* lives--and we conquered. We started this organization against all odds. Against all odds we have kept it going *all by ourselves*. We have given the money. We have given the \$90,000 a year. Ninety-thousand. That's what Women's Exchange needs from us above and beyond what we pay to attend classes and events. And we have given it. For

decades. And we have given generously of our time, our talents--which are remarkable. For thirty years, we have kept this outfit going.

Us. Just us. Just a bunch of women.

Thank you for *being* Women's Exchange. And thank you for listening. As we all know, the best part of being Women's Exchange is the conversation. So tell me, what are you thinking at this point?

gather ourAll you'll need to do here is a jot two or three words, just a reminder to yourself, nothing more. We'll do a quick mindfulness exercise, and then I'll ask you to remember something. Jot down what you remember in two or three words.

Nothing more than that: just a two or three words. Just a reminder to yourself, not anything you are going to read aloud to anybody. Just a reminder *to yourself*

So: sit up straight, feet on the floor. Take a power pose: square your shoulders. hold your head up. Put your hands on your waist, up high, right under your ribs. enough up that you can feel your bottom ribs. Got that? Good. Now close your eyes. Feel this power on the *inside*. Feel your own inner strength. And feel your ribs moving with each cycle of breathing. [x3]

Your breath. Your breath in the very center of *your* body. Your breath that has been with you, on *your* side, every moment of your life. *Your* breath that has been on *your* side even when maybe *you* weren't--even in those moments all of have, those moments of doubt and fear and uncertainty. Feel *your* breath . . . [3] Be *with* your breath, and let your *own* breath be with you . . . [3]

So here's the first exercise. Go with the first answer that comes to mind, because that first answer is a gift. *Your* gift to *you*.