

WORD PHOTOS

Moments from our lives...

"along the brittle treacherous bright streets of memory comes my heart, singing like an idiot, whispering like a drunken man..." e.e. cummings

Journal Work:

Create a Turning Points continuum; a line that features major events in your life. These events can be anything that has changed your life or became a "turning point" in your life. Put them in chronological order. I think about my life and I know that there are certain turning points; like when my best friend moved off our block when I was 8, and when my second best friend died when I was nine, and when we moved from Philadelphia to Cherry Hill, N.J. and my life no longer existed on one block. And I can look later in my life and see my first real girlfriend and the day we said goodbye because we were going away to college – her to Pepperdine and me to Arizona State – and we both realized how different we really were. And other turning points would be when I first heard a scene of mine read out loud by actors, and my first play being produced for a live audience, and moving to Seattle and Las Vegas, my first teaching job, and meeting my wife and divorcing her because she was really Satan, and then meeting my real wife, the birth of my kids, and moving to Georgia, and so on...so many turning points that I could write about in my journal and really see, hear, feel, touch, smell and taste these moments. And then:

Toward Public Writing – From Bozeman to Bricks

From your journal work, pick any three times from your life-line that you want to work with and create a word-photo from each. The idea of a word-photo is to describe carefully a small moment or scene from that time in your life (a brick in the wall in the building in the square-block in Bozeman). Work on showing rather than telling—but by the way that you show and by the words you use, try to capture what is going on beneath the surface. Do this one in third-person (i.e. don't say "I" rather say "he" or "she" or call yourself by your name); this increases the sense of "watching yourself." These "pictures" need not be factually true; they can ever be surrealistic. But try to get them to touch the emotional truth ("It's the truth, even if it didn't happen"). Try to get the photo/moment to capture something of what was going on for you at the time in your life.

Make these pictures short (no more than 75-100 words each?) but powerful. That is part of the challenge of this exercise. This working to get a few words to paint at much helps us to see more and to write better. Try to be there again, try to see the detail. Bring it to life. As we do this our words, private and public, get stronger and more effective. So play around with this. There is much to learn, much to see. These should be flawlessly written and carefully crafted. Give each one a title. Place them on a single page (or two) like photos.

SCHOOL

First-grade class picture. Motley farm-town kids in sepia tones. Innocent. Happy. But look closely at their eyes: a hint of confusion—as if this does not fit with some vague memory rapidly melting away inside them. He is the tall one in the middle in the back row, slumping, trying to fit in. Twenty years of this. And then a lifetime of un-learning, trying to find his way back home, following a distant, sweet memory....

CHILDREN: All Of Us

The boy remembers his father, as he left him, telling him in a voice he could scarcely hear, to go tell his parents where he was.

He remembers the smell of Lysol and the empty echo of his footsteps as he walked down the long hallway of the mental hospital toward the exit, walking past doors with little barred windows, leaving his father farther and farther behind.

He remembers, miles and hours later, standing awkwardly in his grandparents' kitchen. The old clock on the table ticked loudly. The geraniums in the windowsill waited.

He remembers knowing no other way, so he just blurted out: "I took Dad to Hastings to the mental hospital." The words hung in the air between them for a long time, sound searching for meaning.

But most of all, he remembers how his grandparents suddenly began to wail and cry and how they held on to each other like frightened children.