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Christina Lane

Purposeful Memoir as a Path to a Thriving Future

By Jennifer Browdy, PhD

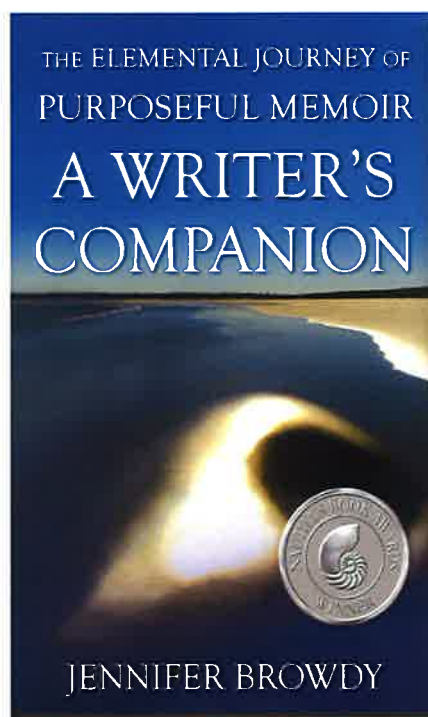
In these trying times, many of us are asking ourselves: What can I do to make the world a little better? How can I contribute my talents and gifts for the good of all? What is the best use of my precious time?

As I worked on my memoir, *What I Forgot...and Why I Remembered*, I asked myself these questions repeatedly, and in the end I came to a clear and powerful answer. I wrote in the conclusion to the memoir: “The psychologist Kaethe Weingarten says that hope is a verb—and it assumes its most powerful form in the first person plural. I want to spend the rest of my life out in the forests and fields of Gaia, and in circles of thoughtful people, doing hope together: overcoming fear, moving beyond silence, and creating for ourselves and our descendants the once and future heaven on Earth that we forgot, a long time ago, and must remember now.”

Through writing my memoir, I realized that my way of “doing hope” was through teaching: sharing my knowledge, convening and facilitating groups of people, and offering thought-provoking entry points for writing and conversation.

And so I embarked on what I’ve come to call “the elemental journey of purposeful memoir,” which is also the title of my award-winning memoir writer’s guide.

I’ve offered memoir workshops in all kinds of locations in the U.S. and Canada—from college classrooms to conference halls, from church parlors to wilderness lodges. I invite participants to try out my elemental framework for thinking about our life journeys, using the four elements (Earth, Water, Fire and Air) as an organizing principle. We explore the ways our personal experience has been set into the political and planetary landscapes of our time and place, thinking deeply about how our life experiences (including



our family histories and ancestry) have culminated in this potent present moment, which can serve as a springboard into the more positive future we can envision, co-create and live into.

No matter the setting or the group, the impact is unmistakable: people get an incredible charge from discovering their purpose through writing memoir, as well as through the deep listening and facilitated sharing of workshop participants.

As one workshop participant put it, “I’m a little in love with this writing workshop—the leader, Jennifer, so engaging, generous and encouraging. And the women so earnest, intent on digging into their psyches to meet the questions of the day. Where does inspiration come from, in what secret places in our

being might it be hiding? And what emerges? A force from some mysterious place tugs at us, pulling up memories, ideas, feelings from both past and present, colliding. This brings me to life! This feels like love.”

Purposeful Memoir as a Contemplative Practice

As I’ve brought purposeful memoir to hundreds of people over the past few years, my conviction has grown stronger: this inner work is essential, in order for us to be grounded enough to take effective action in the world. We must understand where we are now, as individuals, as a society, and as a planet, in order to envision and work towards the thriving future we yearn for.

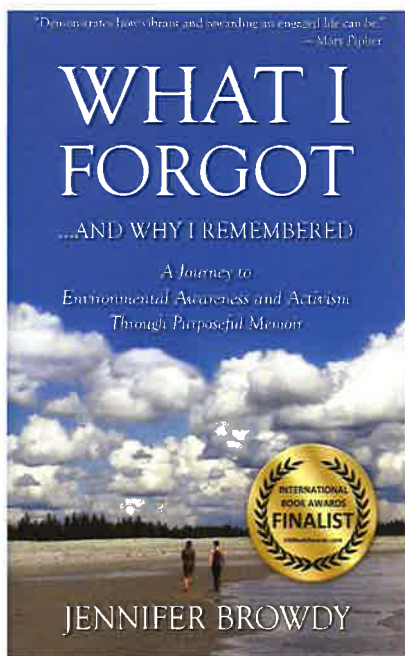
While the process of purposeful memoir is wonderfully productive for someone who aspires to publish a memoir, it is also an invaluable contemplative process for anyone and everyone. It’s a structured way of looking back over the full complexity of your life experience, not as a form of navel-gazing, but as a way of offering the accumulated wisdom of your life experience for the benefit of others.

Purposeful memoir, as one memoirist observed, “offers so many opportunities to engage in writing and deepen my own practice, commitment and desire to be published in service to others.”

Saluting the Positive and Transmuting the Negative

The transformative potential of this contemplative journey is emphasized in my new series of workshops, “The Alchemy of Purposeful Memoir,” meeting monthly on Sunday afternoons in Lenox, MA from December 2019 through May 2020.

I’ve noticed that when people think about their life stories, they tend to focus on some of the more neg-



Workshop on Mt. Greylock Photograph by JB

ative aspects of their life experience. Sometimes they get stuck in a dark place of memory that keeps them from going further.

In my Alchemy workshop series, we start from positive qualities or emotions that we desire in our lives: confidence, health, community, resilience, and so on. We explore uplifting moments in our lives when we've felt these qualities, before considering more somber moments.

And then comes the magic, when we liberate ourselves for a moment from the fact of memoir to explore the "what if?" potential of fiction. We give ourselves permission to rewrite a scene of struggle from our lives, with the goal of transmuting that negative experience into the "philosopher's stone" of understanding, producing a valuable lesson that can guide us as we move on into the future.

Given the pressures of life in our current moment, which all of us feel to varying degrees, I've realized that it's important to find ways to keep our spirits up. We can't be of help to others if we are downhearted ourselves. In my Alchemy workshops, we write in a conscious, forward-looking way, saluting the positive and transmuting the negative in our life experience in order to cheer ourselves on in the practice of purposeful memoir: offering our life stories in the hope that our experience can be of benefit to others.

Heeding Gaia's Call

These days, climate disruption and the Sixth Great Extinction are serving as powerful reminders that we humans are out of alignment with the natural world, and must reinvent our relationship with the planet in order to survive and thrive. Here too, I've found that purposeful memoir has a role to play, giving us productive pathways into understanding our historical role on the planet as individuals and societies, as well as portals through which to envision a more harmonious future.

For me, there is also a spiritual dimension to this work: I write my way towards a greater understanding of the human calling on the planet. What are we here for? I don't believe we have emerged as the

dominant force in the Anthropocene simply to wreck the Earth and subside into extinction.

The present moment, difficult as it is, provides extraordinary opportunities for learning and growth. We are being called to remember that we humans cannot survive without the healthy functioning of all other parts of the Gaian system, from the pollinators in the air and the microbes in the soil to the clean waters of our rivers, aquifers and oceans, and the plants that make our oxygen.

Remembering these deep interconnections is part of the process I call "aligning the personal, political and planetary": seeing how our fundamental values as individuals have been aligned—or not—with the ways we've lived our lives in community, including in the larger Earth community of which we are an integral part.

As one purposeful memoirist noted, "In the past I've felt like my spiritual practice, my interest in memoir writing and my political/climate essays and activism were all on separate tracks, but I feel them steadily converging, energizing and informing one another." The discoveries that come from this inquiry can be startling, prompting new ways of understanding the past and a new dedication to the essential work of co-creating the future in our communities.

An Invitation to Embark on the Journey of Purposeful Memoir

If you are feeling the call to take stock of your life—whether or not you have the intention to ultimately publish a memoir—you are warmly invited to explore the contemplative practice of purposeful memoir. Writing for as little as 10 minutes a day can make a difference in how you understand your life purpose, bringing you greater clarity about what you have to offer the world.

I have many opportunities coming up, including monthly in-person workshops in the Berkshires; summer writing retreats in Findhorn, Scotland and Nova Scotia, Canada; a six-week online course; and my new coaching program for 2020, "Write Your Memoir in a Year."

For those who already have a manuscript in draft,

I offer expert developmental editing and manuscript review, as well as the publishing services of Green Fire Press, of which I'm the co-publisher. Subscribers to my newsletter receive free monthly doses of inspiration: Writing Life blog posts, writing prompts, and short video pep talks.

The truth is: your story matters. You will benefit from exploring your life journey more deeply through the practice of purposeful memoir, and if you decide to offer your insights to the world in published form, others will benefit too.

As we salute the positive and transmute the negative in our life stories, our spirits brighten, and we are able to offer ourselves in a stronger, more resilient way to the future-oriented work of bringing our communities and our world into balance.

What could be more important than that?

Jennifer Browdy, Ph.D. has taught literature, writing and media arts at the college level for more than 30 years and is currently chair of the Languages and Literature Division at Bard College at Simon's Rock. Her memoir, *What I Forgot ...And Why I Remembered* was a finalist for the 2018 International Book Awards. Her writer's guide, *The Elemental Journey of Purposeful Memoir*, won a 2017 Nautilus Silver Award. She provides coaching and manuscript review for authors in fiction and nonfiction, and offers memoir workshops nationally and internationally, including at Kripalu, Bioneers, and Findhorn, Scotland (in May 2020). As publisher of Green Fire Press, she recently published *Nature, Culture & the Sacred: A Woman Listens for Leadership*, by Bioneers co-founder Nina Simons (Nautilus Gold Medal, 2018), and *Wisdom Lessons: Spirited Guidance from an Ojibwe Great-Grandmother*, by Native American activist Mary Lyons. She is also the editor of the online magazine *Fired Up! Creative Expression for Challenging Times*. Find out more at JenniferBrowdy.com.

