

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## “Who Would Care About My Story?”

William Zinsser · Thursday, October 6th, 2011

Every September they come out of the New York night—20 adults, mostly women, who have signed up for my course, at the New School, on writing memoir and family history. This is my 20th year of teaching the course, heading out into the night myself to meet my students and help them wrestle their life narrative onto paper. The women are almost paralyzed by the thought of writing a memoir. How can they possibly sort out the smothering clutter of the past? But mainly it’s fear of writing about themselves. My suggested cure always comes down to two words: think small.

They don’t want to think small. They are writers, novitiates in the literary enterprise, duty bound to obey its rhetorical rules and admonitions. I don’t want them to think of themselves as writers. I want them to think of themselves as people—women who lead interesting lives and who also write, trusting their own humanity to tell plain stories about their thoughts and emotions. Why do they think they need permission to be themselves? “Who would care about my story?” they say. I would. I give them permission to write about the parts of their lives that they have always dismissed as unimportant.

One woman in my current class, in her late 60s, is from a prominent Christian family in Cairo....

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