

Should You Write When You're Feeling Emotional?

By Jessica Bram

Founder/Director of the Westport Writers' Workshop
(www.westportwritersworkshop.com)

And author of *Happily Ever After Divorce: Notes of a Joyful Journey* (Health Communications, Inc. 2009)

Tears are common when writers read their work aloud at our memoir writing workshops. And no wonder, since the best writing often involves revisiting and decoding moments of heartbreak, loss or pain. Tears are not only a fact of life for the memoir writer, but as I tell my workshop participants, a good sign that the writing is on target. ("No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader." - Robert Frost)

However, like many memoir writers, I have a personal pet peeve, which is to be told that writing my memoir-based essay collection *Happily Ever After Divorce: Notes of a Joyful Journey* "must have been therapeutic."

Not so. For therapy, I can go to a therapist. Writing is something else entirely - and much harder. I wrote my book for readers. In other words, when I write I must put the reader's needs ahead of my own feelings.

How do you put the reader's needs first? There is one way, and it's by paying attention to your craft. Emotional truth in a memoir is important, certainly. But never more important than craft.

What this means is that in order to get the critical distance that the writing craft requires, you cannot be actively caught up in the emotions of your subject.

Here is how [Writer's Digest](#) editor Brian A. Klems puts it in his recent article "[7 Ways to Perfect Your Writing Tone](#)":

*"If you're having a hard time distancing yourself from the raw emotion of a personal subject, this may be a sign that you need to let time do its magic work. Frank McCourt said it took him years before he could detach from his anger toward his feckless father enough to give *Angela's Ashes* its nonjudgmental tone. When something bad happens, of course we feel upset, even as if life has treated us unfairly-but that's not a great place to write from. Let the experience ripen in your memory until you've achieved the distance you need."*

When you're grieving, angry, or going through a hard time, by all means, get your feelings out in a journal. Journaling can be useful, and even powerful; sometimes, I don't even *know* how I feel until I start journaling. And certainly, have a good cry. But keep in mind that journaling is something completely different from what we call writing.

Only when you're ready to slice and dice your experience with the emotional distance of a surgeon will your writing draw the reader's tears, rather than your own. That's pay dirt.

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