

# Act One



You are Hereby Invited into the Heart of

the World of the Mother Memoir

Come along with me. Be my guest on a journey of discovery. As a *TellTale Soul*, it's often been said, you'll slip and you'll slide on emotions that erupt from deep places. You'll meet extraordinary characters who dwell in curious spaces. Just imagine getting to know interesting folks disguised as yourself.

In the rich recesses of mind, you'll hunt for clues of all kinds. For pieces that fit, through mysterious puzzles you'll sift and you'll sort 'til understanding you'll get. You may change your perceptions as you solve and you stew. But, I promise, by the time your tale is through, you'll be wiser by far, knowing more than a few.

## WHY THE *MOTHER MEMOIR*?

There is memoir and then there is the *Mother Memoir*.

*If you could tell just one small story that would capture  
your mother's character and keep her spirit alive  
into the future, what would it be?*

This is the seminal question I asked people over a decade ago after my mother died of Alzheimer's disease. I began what I now recognize as a spiritual journey inspiring women and men from all walks of life to write the *Mother Memoir*. I was filled with a burning desire to guide them to that tender spot deep inside themselves to locate striking memories and then to show them how they could move even the hint of fragrance, the turn of a phrase, the hum of a tune, the flash of an eye, the back of a hand, or a fragment of family ritual, temporarily eclipsed in memory, into successful and unforgettable short, true tales. The *Mother Memoir* has the power to move people and change awareness.

An initial shift in my awareness actually summoned my pioneering effort into this place of treasure I call the *Mother Memoir*. In company with countless daughters and sons, I witnessed with great sadness, pain, and mounting disbelief the ravages of mental deterioration as my mother's ever creeping inability to recognize me became irrevocable. How could this be? I was with her 24/7 during her last three years, how could she not know me? A tragical shift, yes. A sharp-edged turn that took with it my being *known* by my mother while she lived, but also one that moved tragedy through inspiration to a source of satisfaction that would keep her spirit and hosts of spirits alive for years to come.

There inevitably comes a time when it is too late for each of us to ask mom how she would describe the spirit of her mother—always a tough lesson to learn. I knew my grandmother well, and I heard many a story about her from the town folk as I grew up in a small community in North Dakota, but I would love to know the one story my mother would have written as most telling about her mother's character and spirit. I feel a personal loss and regret because I no longer have the luxury to elicit stories from my mother about anyone who held a significant place in her heart, those who were connected to her soul. I hope you won't wait until it is too late to coax stories out of family members and to write your personal *Mother Memoir* so future generations reading your words will catch a glimpse of your mother's character and spirit.

The *Mother Memoir* is literary nonfiction, and you'll learn throughout this guidebook how to turn one memory of your mother into a remarkable story. You can also view the *Mother Memoir* as the basis or the point from which to begin writing memoir that may lead to longer works. Writing personal stories is an avenue to challenging myths, healing psychological wounds, soul-searching, and connecting to something larger than one's self. The beauty in the *TellTale Souls* method is that you will inadvertently realize your deepest self-truths in your quest to discover the underlying truths found by taking a close look at the character of the woman you will choose to play the major role in

your story. I have been an eyewitness to the courage it takes for women and men to travel to and through their most memorable and intimate recollections and, with a little practice and soul-searching, to make the internal connections it takes to write with honesty.

It is accurate to say your being began with mom—she was your first relationship—she gave you life. Writing about her with honest emotion is the best place to start the memoir process; doing so will breathe new life into your conscious actions. When you stop to think about it, stories are all we have, and each of us has a particular story and a distinct voice. Similarly, various cultures, religions, and family traditions are rooted in stories spun as golden threads radiating from the core of the rich and multicolored human tapestry, a fabric binding us together as one and reminding us of what it means to be human. From woman comes life, from life...stories. From the *Mother Memoir*, the circle widens.

What is this single story you will tell about your mother, grandmother, or another woman from whom you felt a motherly connection? This isn't a question I want you to answer just yet; I simply want you to keep the thought of it uppermost in your mind, as each of you follows your particular path through this guidebook. Powerful images and unique insights will make themselves known to you when you consider deeply the memories that will be revealed as you look for the essence of your mother and illuminate her character through a true story, as no photograph could ever do.

It has been said a picture is worth a thousand words. I say a picture complements a thousand words, and that's why I like to add, whenever possible, the complement of a picture at the end of each published story. I recommend you do the same with the story you are about to write. Although bringing your mother's spirit to life or portraying her character in so short a space as a few pages is not altogether a simple feat, it has a more potent and honest effect than that of a mere photograph. Your words filled with the genuine emotion needed to capture mom's character in a short, true story will accomplish more than a two-dimensional photograph, which may have been staged to create a certain atmosphere or camaraderie that was not authentic.

Writing memoir is an act of honest creativity, just like tapping into memory can be thought of as brainstorming creatively, which is always fun, and I'll ask you to do this later on through interesting exercises. Creativity is used to provide answers to questions about why people significant in our lives acted as they did. The entire act and art of writing the *Mother Memoir* is nothing more or less than creative brainstorming, since answers are provided in an adventurous and out-of-the-box way. How can our memories be reduced to a conventional approach based on pure logic, when they are alive with emotion specifically felt in our own unique and subjective way?

In taking a new slant on the art and craft of writing memoir, it is my belief that your story will be of greatest personal consequence when your work is neither confined by convention nor measured by predetermined notions of what your story should be. You don't want to be limited and neither should your mother's spirit be cramped by rules. My angle of intent is to keep you from becoming bogged down by a system of order, the conventional way writing is taught, so that your natural creativity is not hampered, allowing you to discover more about yourself and your mother while chronicling her spirit. As you travel with me through this guidebook, arranged in five acts or stages

to accomplishment, I welcome you to this invigorating vision as a partner in the tried-and-true *TellTale Souls* memoir writing method I've developed over the past decade.

The *Mother Memoir* is an opening to truth and understanding: truth that is met when you take the time to greet and revisit memories with an openness of mind and understanding that will ripen through your time spent musing and writing. The art of capturing character is not about tracing the life history of your mother; rather it is about writing a vignette revealing the essence of her spirit by expressing the effect of a particular incident or event, an anecdote, or combined moments in time that will reveal who she is at her core. And it's through telltale stories, bio-vignettes that compel awareness, appreciation, and unity, that we find the ultimate connections.

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**WRITE:** List ten reasons why you think discovering what makes your mother tick and writing about her as an individual would be easy or difficult, painful or pleasurable.

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### ***TELLTALE SOULS METHOD***

The *TellTale Souls* method is an imaginative process of discovery and connection rather than an academic sort of discipline.

Through Five Acts to accomplishment, memoir writing is demystified for writers of any level as they learn techniques to access memory and create true and telling tales with a thoughtful openness of mind and the intent to look closely at someone other than themselves.

Memories, perceptions, feelings, and emotions are processed through reflection, *innersearch*, and stimulating creative writing exercises. A powerful focus on voice, truth, honesty, alternative ways of thinking and being, and new understanding gives rise to a universal linking of our spirits.



## BIO-VIGNETTE

Why bio-vignette? “Bio” signifies a story written essentially about someone other than yourself, and “vignette” is a small grouping of movements, moments, notes, actions, or events that in the case of *Mother Memoir* are pulled together into a literary sketch capturing character. Bio-vignette is comfortable and appropriate; it fits what we’re going to achieve.

Throughout this book, I use the terms vignette, bio-vignette, memoir, telling tale, and story interchangeably. The bio-vignettes I suggest are generally between two to five pages in length or around 800 to 1,600 words.

*TellTale Soul’s* succinct definition of bio-vignette: Your short, descriptive story capturing the character and spirit of someone who had a significant, motherly impact on your life.



Throughout the story you are here to write, you will focus energy toward paying tribute to or better understanding someone other than yourself; consequently, when all is said and done, the result will be a deeper understanding of yourself after exploring that relationship. Writing an autobiographical memoir, where you are the primary subject of the story, has a markedly different effect than writing the *Mother Memoir*. When the focus is on you, the autobiographer, the urge to self-protect tends to shroud you in subjective secrecy so that your innermost thoughts and feelings will not be so openly displayed; moreover, disappointment stemming from unpleasant incidents and fault are often projected on to someone else. Writing a bio-vignette has a refreshingly opposite effect.

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**WRITE** three paragraphs about an incident where you believe you were wronged in some way by anyone—a parent, friend, or coworker, perhaps a physician or politician. Let your feelings flow, rip the offending party apart on paper, cast stones, cuss if you must, feel justified in your anger.

Only after you have completed the step above, and you feel justified in your response, write a few paragraphs standing in the presumably offending party's shoes to check out the other side of the story. This exercise is a must to orient you toward writing with greater objectivity while seeking truth in relationships.

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Unless your purpose for writing memoir is for personal revenge or exposé, the desire to write memoir stems from a sincere need to know, to learn, to understand, as well as a willingness to examine your present perceptions of intimate family relationships. The act of reflecting on the character of someone other than yourself in a memoir deserves high praise. Emphasis on self is given too high a priority today. Granted, you play a big part in your *Mother Memoir*, but you narrow the gap between yourself and understanding mom when you direct energy toward telling the truth and looking at her in her own right—as an individual—when you write a deceptively simple story.

Since the word “deceptive” could imply that your story is misleading or untrue, don't let that throw you off track. It's not the stories themselves that are deceptive; it's the idea that a memoir, a bio-vignette of say 800-1600 words, may not be long enough to get your point across or be impactful. Longer is better? Not so. By following the *TellTale Souls* method, where the essential impact of immediacy and intimacy are implicit, your story will fully illuminate the significance of your mother's character and spirit. You will become a more focused, energized writer.

Those exceptional souls—both women and men—who preceded you in writing their bio-vignettes, found that it was one of the most meaningful, fulfilling accomplishments they had ever achieved. It is fair to say this statement rings true for all of the *TellTale Souls* who have embarked on this stimulating adventure and reached the other side more thoughtful, more knowing, and more satisfied—far richer for the experience.

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**WRITE** for ten minutes on why you believe it is important for you to write a bio-vignette about your mother—for this exercise do write about your mother, rather than someone else.

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## WHO IS A *TELLTALE SOUL*?

Simple answer: A writer of the  
*Mother Memoir*.

*TellTale Souls* are people who have the courage to look deeply into personal memories and then to shape certain striking ideas into short, true stories. The resulting bio-vignettes will satisfy their individual needs to better understand, honor, and allow the spirit of their mothers to live on in the hearts and minds of family and friends.

The threads *TellTale Souls* spin resonate universally on multiple levels. The hearts of strangers are also touched, because it is in truths shared through story that we connect intuitively to the essence of primal female wisdom. Reading the *Mother Memoirs* inspires others to write and to share telling tales.

While reading the story examples throughout this book, you'll find a stronger connection to some than to others. By *listening with care* to each ordinary woman's authentic voice, as she weaves a lasting impression of her mother, you will gain insight into what it means to be a *TellTale Soul*.



One woman, after her first *TellTale Soul* class, commented, “*I know I slept last night, but I kept waking up and thinking and remembering. I just want you to know what a profoundly meaningful experience working with you was for me. In order to move forward those many years ago and get on with my life, I slammed a lot of doors....I suspect that behind those doors, some of which are still closed, lurk many memories I’m still not in touch with. Knowing that there are ALL these women willing to talk about their mothers, both in glowing and painful terms, gave me permission, as well as a frame of reference, to think about and interpret many of the things I’ve not really revisited....a HUGE thank you, Lynn, for getting me started down this path.*”

One man, after completing his *Mother Memoir*, said, “*I went through a whole gamut of emotions writing this story, reliving all those previously dormant memories of frustration and restrained lifestyle while growing up. Yet, all the while, feeling this powerful love—the lifeline thread that held my brothers and me together with our mother. This journey, this experience, has been one that I would highly recommend.*”

As you begin, I believe it is helpful to set a goal so that you have a clear idea of what you are striving for. Within that goal you will find both quantitative aspects and qualitative rewards. The first part of your goal is to write just one story, a bio-vignette, capturing the character or essence of your mother, one which you will record for posterity. The second part of your goal, the narrative aspect, brings to light and pays tribute to the universality of the soul.

The stories are about synergy and communion where truth lies in the stories of ordinary people’s lives and reveals the inner workings of their souls as myriad possibilities for embracing life unfold. You will discover that a certain memory or an unpretentious *slice of life* will take on a tangible meaning of its own as you capture it on paper. Using this book as your guide, you will find effective ways and ample opportunity to bring memories into focus. Focusing on powerful memories will give you time to reflect upon them without distraction and help you find the best way to preserve them with clarity.

When memories do float in, please allow yourself the time and space to contemplate their significance. Whether they are memories that you cherish and reveling in them is sweet, even poignantly so, or whether particular dark memories fill your being and call for a bolstering of inner strength so that you can begin to understand them, this is the time to consciously connect to the soul-line. This is your opportunity, in the present time, to gain greater self-realization and universal understanding by paying tribute to and acknowledging the wonders inherent in the soul of humanity.

So much is being said about the healing qualities of writing, journaling, or keeping a diary. These avenues to healing are powerful. Through my experience helping people write stories that chiefly reveal someone other than themselves, I’ve witnessed a leap to an even higher level of healing. Awareness takes a wider stance when we give someone other than ourselves center stage in a story. Through memories that impact us like no other, we hunger for the truths we find in the actions of other people. In writing down what we have found, we find comfort. At a talk given several years ago at Dominican University by Jean Shinoda Bolen, M.D., after she published *Close to the Bone*, one single sentence has stayed with me always: “*We are spiritual beings on a human path and sometimes we need a story more than we need food.*” Wise words we can take to heart from a Jungian analyst and prolific, celebrated author.

Marie, a *TellTale Soul*, told me that she studied and earned a degree in psychology and went through therapy where she tried to forgive and made excuses for her mother's behavior. She went on to say, "Telling this story was a good experience for me, and I've since done much soul searching and writing, exploring the negative experiences in the relationship between my mother and myself. I now realize that the pain around my relationship with her is gone. What I'm left with today is called health!"

A young man said, "Thank you for the occasion to explore and better understand the significance of women and make peace with personal issues. I see my mother in a whole new way after this difficult but rewarding experience of writing about her. Taking a new look at long buried issues, through more grown up eyes, I began to realize some things were not as I had thought they were for so many years. I asked for her forgiveness and she gave it to me."

Interestingly, another woman, who participated in a memoir writing class I led, was fully prepared to write a bio-vignette about her paternal grandmother; in fact, she did write a touching story about her grandmother. On the first evening, however, she announced that she had no intention of writing about her mother—that subject was way too complicated, and she did not want to write anything uncomplimentary about this woman whom she loved, but who had also caused her considerable pain. By week two, however, she had switched gears and began a story about her mother which she subsequently completed and then gave to her mother as a gift on Mother's Day. That took strength and courage.

By now I think you realize, in the overall picture, there is an unspecified outcome directed toward you in this process of writing a bio-vignette about your mother. One immediate advantage is that if the story you will write is the first story you have ever written, you now can move forward to write all you have ever dreamed of writing, whether that be nonfiction or fiction, since you will then trust that you have the voice and creative talent to write. For those who are adept at writing, after completing your journey here, you may look at writing through a different lens—one that focuses on the power generated by the art and craft of writing your *Mother Memoir*.



## CONSIDERING THE *MOTHER MEMOIR* A GIFT

I have often used "Give the Gift of Story" as the title for workshops and presentations. Although that phrase now sounds a little dated to me, that simple idea will always be appreciated and valued. I see the idea of giving and receiving gifts of memoir from several angles. However, not everyone sees the gift angle as I do, partly due to the fact that their mothers may no longer be here to accept a gift or that the painful memories included in their *Mother Memoir* do not seem a suitable gift. But gifts are not always two-sided—one side realized by the giver, the other side acknowledged by the recipient—although this is often the goal in gift giving. Consummating both sides is not necessary for a satisfying outcome.

As you write a heartwarming, even poignant, memoir, it is a natural to want to give it as a gift to the person you have chosen to portray. You believe your gesture will be well received, and you can imagine, for example, your grandmother's delight in reading it—a memoir where you've taken the

time to look at her as an individual. What's more, your gift of memoir will preserve treasured memories of her spirit, as well as your relationship with her for years to come.

On the other hand, some of you may turn away from thinking about your memoir as a gift because the person you pick as your main character and the experience you intend to use as the basis for your story are unpleasant, or worse. Obviously, in this situation and from your point of view, you certainly don't think of this particular memoir as a gift. However, from my point of view, it is truly a gift. If you don't deem it appropriate as a gift to give her, then accept it as a gift you will give to yourself through the act of writing it and learning from it.

For those of you whose stories about "mothers" bring up dreadful, heartwrenching memories, you will write through painful experiences, and you will come to some understanding about what happened due to the fact that you have opened your mind to those things buried deep inside and placed the painful events out in the open through the process of writing memoir. You might decide not to let anyone else ever read what you've written. That's okay. The story can be for your eyes only. When you make this process fully intentional and take personal control over the emotions linked to the events, you have given yourself a very special gift. It could just be the best gift you will ever receive.

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**WRITE** two pages detailing your reasons why you think writing *Mother Memoir* will be a gift. A gift to whom? You as the writer, or the woman the story is about? And why is this so? Concentrate, locate your precise feelings and thoughts and expand on them. Just to say, "It would make Mom happy," or "I believe it will help me heal some of the wounds from my past," is not enough. Get down to the nitty-gritty. What changes could this act of writing bring about in you, in her? Why will it bring up anger or joy, for example, and how do you perceive it will be manifest? Above all, be completely honest with yourself. No one else will read this, unless you want them to.

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