

When I start out working with writers, regardless of age, I begin by saying that writing belongs to everybody. It's not about making books. That's just one thing that can result from it. The main purpose of writing is to get what's in your head and your heart out on paper so that you can get to know yourself, so that you can understand your stories and make sense of your experience. Often the response is "But I don't *have* any stories!" To get past that and open doors to the riches within, I ask a series of questions. As a preface, I show them examples of my journals—plain, fancy, waterproof, and edible--where I collect and reflect on my stories. My intent is to plant seeds for their own writing.

Here are sample questions. I hope they'll send you to the page, too!

1) Have you ever moved from one place to another? Why? How did you feel about it? What did you leave behind? What did you find? How did you change? Here we are tapping into the hugely powerful longing for home.

2) Have you ever had a pet? Take a sensory inventory: touch, sound, smell, taste, sight. Did your pet ever do anything silly, mysterious, sad? Did your pet ever get into trouble? Rescue? Have you wanted a pet but not been able to have one? In that case, imagine a pet for yourself, name it, and write about an adventure you would like to have. This taps into the longing for companionship and love.

3) What's the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to you? Or the dumbest thing you ever did? Pretend it happened to someone else and describe it, using as many senses as you can.

4) Did you ever get blamed for something you didn't do? And the flip side of that: Did you ever do something you didn't get caught at?

5) Did you ever get lost? Where? Put yourself back there and take a sensory inventory. What did you do? How did you get found?

6) Did you ever lose something or someone you really cared about?

7) What's the scariest thing that ever happened to you? Who was with you? Where were you? Put yourself back in that moment. How does your body feel? What action did you take?

8) Think of a situation in which someone really helped you. Who was it? What was the problem? How did you tell them? How did you feel? Take a sensory inventory. What changed?

8) A companion question: Think of a time when you helped somebody. Did they come to you or did you just see they needed help? Answer the questions above.

9) Have you ever been on a trip? The journey is one of the oldest story forms there is. Was there an especially meaningful moment on your trip? Take a sensory inventory and recreate it for us. How did you change?

10) All of us have personal stories which touch the larger story. For example, folks who have a family member in the military, or have just gone through flooding in the northeast or who went through this spring's tornadoes in the south and the Midwest have their own accounts of what happened to them, but those are pieces of a mosaic of a the larger story. Think of a personal or family story which connects with the larger story and write about it in that light. If

this confounds you, think of an important moment in your life, write about that, and then look up the news of that period. You may find connections you never dreamed of.

11) Is there anyone missing in your family? This can be through death, divorce, the military, or some kind of family rupture. Regardless of how it happens—and it could be in previous generations—it has a profound effect on those left. Write about this person. What happened? What did the family lose? How do you feel? Do you have hopes for their return?

12) Grandparents: further story roots. Ask for their stories, take notes, including direct quotations, sense impressions. Do you see your parents in their stories? Yourself?

13) Place: Where you're from and/or where you live now are also wonderful story sources. Is there anything in the local history that you are curious about? Maybe you won't find it interesting at first, but look at a historical marker, Google the event, and see if you can find something that you connect with. Or maybe it's a local monument. Or legend. Ghost story.

14) Heroes: Who do you look up to? What is it about them that acts like a mirror for your dreams? Free-write about those dreams and about this person. Read all you can. Collect images. Consider writing a WIF poem in their voice or a dialogue between you and them. What would you like to ask? What might they say? Or you could try a picture book biography as I did with my hero, Helen Martini, in *Mother to Tigers*.

As you can see, all these questions have the possibility of evoking strong emotions, and that's where the energy of good writing comes from. Don't be afraid of your students' feelings . . . or your own. If you try to steer clear of them, you're guaranteeing that their work will never go very deep and they will miss the fun and healing that genuine writing can bring.