

*Writing An Obituary
Worth Reading*

Sampler

*By Martin
Kimeldorf*

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

A Guide For Writing A Fulfilling Life-Review

**This Sampler version contains the first half of the book.
You can find a complete print copy version at Amazon.
Or, you can ask the author for a free digital PDF version in exchange for your
donation to the causes listed on the last page entitled *I Give, You Give*.**

By Martin Kimeldorf

Draft 28

Images for obituaries provided by authors and friends.
All other words (not quoted) and images by Martin Kimeldorf.

©.Kimeldorf.2015

Second updating and digital distribution April 3, 2016

SearchInc Press, Tumwater, WA

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means-electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without written permission from the author. Write to him at Kimeldorf@me.com

Publishing History: First Digital Distribution and copyright in 2015 by Martin Kimeldorf.

Publication Data: Kimeldorf, Martin.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

1. Philosophy 2. Writing

Copyright Code TXu 1-967-439

This book is licensed and distributed for your personal enjoyment only. This electronic PDF book version and the print version may not be re-sold, distributed nor given away to other people without the author's permission. Thank you for respecting my hard work on this book. Other works can be found at www.martinkimeldorf.org.

This book is not intended to diagnose, prescribe or treat any ailment, nor is it intended as a replacement for medical, counseling or other professional consultation. The author and publisher strongly suggest that at the first suspicion of illness or problem the reader should consult a professional care provider.

Table Of Intents

PREFACE—WHY THIS BOOK, WHY NOW?	5
INTRODUCTION TO A LIFE-REVIEW OBITUARY	8
LEARNING FROM AN OLD TOMBSTONE LESSON	8
GERIATRIC EXPERTS ACTUALLY PIONEERED THE LIFE-REVIEW TOOL.....	9
A LIFE-REVIEW HAS VALUE AT EVERY AGE AND ANY STAGE.....	10
THE LIFE-REVIEW OBITUARY WRITING PROCESS.....	10
PART I—WRITE AN OBITUARY WORTH READING	12
REASONS FOR WRITING YOUR OBITUARY NOW	15
OBITUARIES ARE NOT ABOUT DEATH	18
THE LIVING FUNERAL AND OTHER CELEBRATORY OPTIONS	19
THE LIVING OBITUARY OPTIONS	21
REVIEWING THE EVOLUTION OF OBITUARY STYLES	24
CELEBRATING THE CYCLE OF LIFE AND DEATH IN THE DIGITAL WORLD	25
SAMPLES OF THE ART OF THE OBITUARY	27
USE THE CREATIVE NONFICTION APPROACH TO MAKE YOUR LIFE-REVIEW WORTH READING.....	30
PART II—STARTING AN OBIT WORTH READING	31
TIPS FOR WRITING AN OBITUARY WORTH READING.....	31
USING THESE QUICK-START TOOLS FOR A SHORT OBIT.....	32
USE THESE TOOLS WHEN ATTEMPTING A LONGER LIFE-REVIEW OBITUARY	33
EVERYONE SHOULD START WITH THE PART II EXERCISES.....	33
BEGIN WITH THE QUICK-START <i>TOMBSTONE</i> EXERCISE	34
ADD IN DETAILS FROM THE <i>SELF-INTERVIEW</i> ACTIVITY	36
ROUND OUT YOUR OBIT WITH FAVORITE QUOTES OR HUMOR.....	43
FINISH BY BOOK-ENDING YOUR STORY WITH OBITUARY COMPONENTS	44
ONWARDS TO MORE RESEARCH OR EDITING AND REVISING	45
PART III—PROMPTING A DEEPER LIFE-REVIEW	47
BEGIN BY PONDERING THE TWO ESSENTIAL STARTING QUESTIONS.....	48
PROMPTING YOUR SOUL’S LIFE-STORY	48
PICTORIAL PROMPTS FOR VISUAL LEARNERS	51
PART IV—DRAFTING AND REVISING	58
WRITING IS A PROCESS—ALWAYS	58
STEP 1—AFTER RESEARCH ORGANIZE YOUR NOTES.....	59
STEP 2—WRITING THE GAWD-AWFUL FIRST DRAFT	61
STEP 3—REVISE, REVISE, REVISE.....	61
PART V—COACHING WRITERS WITH THEIR FIRST OBITUARY	67
TIPS FOR YOUNGER WRITERS OR THOSE USING A JOURNALING APPROACH	68
LISTEN TO LAURA IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE NOTHING IMPORTANT TO SAY	70
TIPS FOR PEOPLE WHO FIND THEMSELVES PROCRASTINATING	72

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

THEMATICALLY TAKING IN THE LONG VIEW	74
WHEN STRAIGHT NARRATIVE WRITING DOESN'T WORK TRY IMAGERY	76
PART VI—SAMPLE OBITS WORTH READING.....	79
AFTERWORD.....	98
RESOURCES.....	100
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	103

Sample Obituaries Included

GUS EAGAN —MY FAVORITE OBIT.....	29
BILL BAILEY'S SELF-INTERVIEW OBITUARY-MEMOIR	37
KATE DUTTRO'S LIFE LINE OBIT.....	55
MORGAN MONTGOMERY FAIRLESS	69
LAURA GEANE CONLEY	70
JIM WEBER.....	73
JEAN O'KEEFFE	74
SHANIL SAMARAKOON'S POEM	76
GARTH (AT THE PHOTOMAGINARIUM)'S PHOTOMONTAGE	77
ANNE CROWLEY.....	80
DARYL GRAZIA.....	80
DAVE SEIBERLICH	81
CAROLYN MILFORD GILBERT	81
LINDSAY AMANDES MCCOY	82
AUSTIN STEPHEN TOWNSEND	84
JOY MARIE LOWER.....	85
CHRISTOPHER KEARNS CONLEY	86
MICHAEL PETERS.....	88
JUDY KIMELDORF	90
MARTIN KIMELDORF	92
WAYNE H. KELLER	97

PREFACE—WHY THIS BOOK, WHY NOW?

Something stirs the still, still air of our daily habits. Increasingly our conversations and comforting laughter chase after the topics of light and shadow. Can you hear the mortality-mindful discussions breaking through the surface?

A number of young women are choosing to give birth in their home while their parents are choosing hospice over hospital care. Many families now consider holding funerals at home, instead of attending commercial funeral parlors. People from all ages and walks of life are re-examining their routines and long-held beliefs surrounding birth, medical care, daily life, and death. We return home in search of comfort and kindness in the beginning and at the end of life.

Across the generations and across the planet, people are talking about their mortality. We've left behind the funereal dirge to sing instead at a celebration of life. Death, once a taboo topic, is now discussed at Death Salons and in 2,350 Death Cafes across the globe, including my hometown of Olympia, Washington. The rituals surrounding death are changing in the process. And this trend interacts with *how* and *when* we choose to write our life-review obituary.

It seems as if every generation today has more questions than answers. Older people question whether extending one's life with intense medical-procedures is worth the decline in the quality of life that often follows. Pausing at midpoint, middle-aged workaholics (stressed out by family and career obligations) wonder, "Is this all there is?" Increasingly people are asking, "Isn't it better to search for more life in the years we have left, rather than desperately chase after more years in a medicated life?"

Head towards the younger part of the timeline, and you'll find twenty-year olds dressed up as Zombies or Vampires. Off they go to costumed Meetups, video groups, book clubs, survivalist training, or 5K runs. Small groups of Millennials dress up in tuxedos or glamorous gowns, and then lay down in a casket to pose for portraits. They mock the hooded shade by uploading these selfies to Instagram or Facebook.

And everyone everywhere senses our global protoplasm growing older, as Baby Boomers turn into Elder Boomers. From grandparents to grandchildren we enter into conversations about our mortality. Countless individuals ask, "How does the eraser of death affect my current choices about living well?"

And in this convergent moment, an apocalyptic worldview streams in from all sides. Scientists question the species' survivability of atomic war, population explosions, or climate change. Fanatics from every major religion and armed anti-government groups beat holy war drums and call for a final cleansing Armageddon. Sometimes, the headlines begin to sound like an obituary for our species.

How do we create a breathing space in an atmosphere filling up with angst? Many of us cope by leaving behind the front page and turning to the cartoons for some relief. Humor can become a

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

tonic in these difficult times. For instance, I've long felt our young people dress up as zombies and vampires as a way to cope with the expanding conversations about the end-of-days and apocalyptic raptures. Humor offers a pause in which to catch our breath before rolling up our sleeves, and going to work on the myriad problems besetting our planet's inhabitants.

I predict that a positive seed will grow out of the serious conversations about our mortality. As people grow more comfortable talking about the sour expiration date stamped upon each soul, possibly they will discover some common ground. Hopefully, new ideas and cooperative attitudes will take root in this shared space.

When chatting with the youngest contributor to this book, Austin openly described his previous fear and fixation on death. It often kept him from sleeping. He observed how writing his obituary helped him reconcile his conflicted attitudes towards the cycle of birth and death. His letter concluded, "The experience has helped me make some sense about the meaning of my life." Up and down the generational staircase our attitudes towards birth and death, life and purpose keep evolving in a complex, pulsating dance. This book seems to fit the tumultuous moment we inhabit.

After contemplating the meaning of death, we're prompted to focus on the sweetness and importance of the life we still possess. As a sense of meaning seeps back into the empty dangling conversation, a renewed sense of purpose emerges. After conducting a reflective life-review, we eventually realize we cannot write an obituary worth reading, if we do not also choose to lead a life worth living.

The Modern Obituary As Creative or Literary Nonfiction

Memoirs continue to sell broadly, and are no longer restricted to journal writers or famous people. And unlike the past, where obituaries were limited to the well-connected, today's obituary column is very egalitarian. Everyone is invited in, and not just to list the tiresome dates and accomplishments in a detached, somber voice.

As you sometimes paw through your attic scrapbooks or stashed diaries you sense you're holding the raw material for your life's story. In another ten years, blogs and social media may also become fertile ground for future memoirists. Reviewing these materials often prompts you to conduct a life-review. The contemporary obituary offers the shortest and easiest way to craft your life story.

The contemporary obituary is emerging as a distinct literary genre. It reflects the style of creative nonfiction exemplified in most biographic works. These short gems are written in a conversational voice with everyday language, wit, and insight. The contemporary life-review can both entertain and inform. Readers want to know about your character, favorite sayings, and well-known traits. We most enjoy those obituaries when you reveal your personality and personal challenges. Obits laughing at life's follies provide comfort and are passed from hand-to-hand.

Shine Your Light On An Obituary Worth Reading

I'm not trying to trivialize death because I respect it as a great teacher. Its lessons are always

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

about living life well. Writing my own obit demanded that I elbow my way between heaps of recollected fury, joy and folly. The process also drew me past many comedic lessons learned the hard way. In the end, I came up with a short story representing the most important themes animating my life. It was a very satisfying experience.

You too can profit from reviewing your own treasured memories.

This book will try to shine a light on a new path leading away from the dry and ponderous obits of the past. This book invites you to join with me in writing an obituary worth reading. And in this small way, you can also join me in jesting with our mortality. It may turn out to be one of the best elixirs you ever consume.

I know you can do it because I purposely solicited sample obituaries worth reading from neighbors and acquaintances. None were professional writers. They did it. You can too.

Death has long been called the great equalizer. Now in this book I hope to democratize the art of the obituary. I want to encourage everyone to write a warm, thoughtful and succinct obituary full of life. I invite you to join me in what popular author and columnist Marilyn Johnson calls the *golden age of obituary writing*. Come, I'll show you how to write a life-review obituary worth reading.



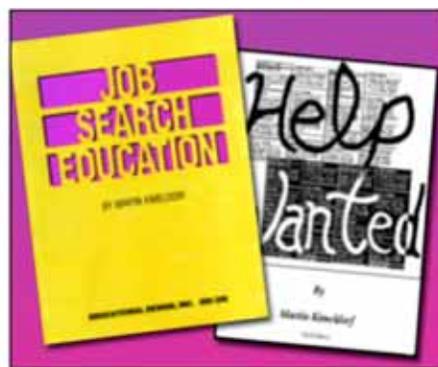
M. Kimeldorf
Martin Kimeldorf
Tumwater, WA
January 1, 2016

INTRODUCTION TO A LIFE-REVIEW OBITUARY

In the recession of 1982, I found myself unexpectedly in the ranks of the unemployed. I tried to sell my house in Tumwater and move back to Portland. But every other house on my block also went up for sale. Feeling trapped, I began an intense research project into the best job search methods.

After reading *What Color Is Your Parachute?* by Bolles and *Job Clubs* by Azarin, I felt I was fully prepared to compete in the tight job market. After finally securing an interview, I decided to blend my job-hunting notes on both books and teach these powerful techniques to future high school students. The first, concrete job offer bestowed on me: a new title *vocational consultant* at a local juvenile correctional facility. There, I staged an experimental class based on my new blended job club-parachute notebook.

Impressed by the changes in these young people, I turned my lessons into a full-fledged workbook entitled *Job Search Education*. This would become my second printed book, lasting an incredible 20+ years, unrevised! And out of my soul and job searching experience, I wrote a new play *Help Wanted*, which went on to win awards in Seattle and Portland. I could now introduce myself at parties with the hyphenated job title: *teacher-author*. I'm see the obit-writing book as my final title. It has been a summing-up project, weaving the early threads from my career books into later ones about *Serious Play* and *Gourmet Aging*. With well-seasoned pride, I present you with my final work, *Writing An Obituary Worth Reading*.



The early workbook and play.

LEARNING FROM AN OLD TOMBSTONE LESSON

Back in that long-ago job search classroom, the first challenge we faced was to help the young people become more competitive in finding a job at a place they might enjoy working. The first step began by tuning up their networking skills. This meant replacing the vague question: “Can you help me find a job?” with a more productive phrase like “Do you know any place where they might be interested in my gardening or landscaping talents?” But making that first career or job choice was daunting for most of my students. Later I would find my college graduate students also stumbled in the same way. The years rolled by and most of my midlife career changers would freeze up when asked about the kind of change they wanted to make.

Back in that early prison classroom, I asked if anyone knew where he or she wanted to be buried when his or her time came. Naturally I got back blank stares. Then I inquired, “What might you want on your tombstone? What do you hope might be said about your life?” After giddily sharing their roughed-in tombstone messages, I asked them to look on a partner’s headstone and report back any skills or aptitudes found in the stony etchings. Armed with this feedback, I finally inquired, “What kinds of places or employers might prize these abilities?” In most

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

instances the tombstone wording opened their eyes to a new set of choices that had previously laid just below the conscious mind.

Later I would redeploy a variant on this life-review exercise when coaching newly minted retirees searching for a new identity beyond their old job titles. Additional follow-up questions were added for my more mature clients. For example, I asked them to try and recall any talents they enjoyed using when they were younger, but now feel have been neglected.

GERIATRIC EXPERTS ACTUALLY PIONEERED THE LIFE-REVIEW TOOL

Older people's tendencies to reminisce and review their lives have been well documented in the field of Gerontology. The early geriatric pioneers who formed the Gerontological Society of America after World War II initially incorrectly feared the life-review experience. Perhaps the youthful geriatric experts found the emphasis on reminiscing, out-of-sync with the post-world war appetite for focusing on future trends. This might explain why they cast the act of reminiscing in pejorative terms. Many of their early textbooks suggested "fixating on one's past to the exclusion of the present" could lead to senility.

Thankfully in the 1960s, Robert N. Butler entered the field and reversed this hypothesis. He not only found that older people universally conduct some form of a life-review, but that the process promoted *cognitive vitality*. Butler and others developed methods for encouraging and assisting life-reviews for the old-old part of our population. They found that looking into the past deepened one's enjoyment of the present. They promoted life-reviews as a wellness tool during the late-stage, when pain and loss become more constant companions. Dr. Butler would go on to win a Pulitzer Prize for his writings about aging. He also became the first director of the National Institute on Aging.

Butler felt a life-review could help older people sort out their feelings about how they had led their life. It may also help in coming to terms with the shrinking distance between life and death, or the growing sense of one's mortality. Later he and other gerontologists were able to demonstrate how a life-review was not a morbid process, but rather a method for promoting healing, providing closure, and fostering hope and joy in later years.

Later in 2007 Dr. Andrew Weil, a leading advocate of integrative-medicine, wrote *Healthy Aging: A Lifelong Guide to Your Well-Being*. His prescription for a wholesome and positive aging experience includes writing a personal legacy letter (in earlier times known as an *ethical will*). Unlike the more public obituary, this letter is privately written to those individuals you care deeply about. And like a contemporary life-review obituary, this letter sums up the most important lessons and values in your life. The letter writers share their ideals with future generations as they create a bridge to *living on* in the hearts of their readers. Echoing Butler's earlier sentiments, Weil feels that the legacy letter increases one's sense of worthiness, completion, and accomplishment.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

A LIFE-REVIEW HAS VALUE AT EVERY AGE AND ANY STAGE

Today the *Life-Review* (LR) refers to a well-defined genre and methodology. LR becomes a tool for deepening our understanding of the decisions we have made in life, and the experiences defining our lives. The American Library Association summed up the value of a life-review in an article entitled, *Wellness Through Reflection: Recalling the Past and Envisioning The Future*. The author Loriene Roy asserts that the benefits of a life-review are not limited to the aged. In fact, she insightfully observes how repeated life reviews can bring us wisdom.

The review can be triggered at any age, especially when entering a new stage in life or by a sudden change or derailment (e.g., unemployment, health issues, birth, career promotion, divorce, moving, marriage). This reflective process encourages recollection, evokes nostalgia, heals up old wounds, generates new daydreams, promotes hope, and can suggest new directions. At the end of any life-review, many people report experiencing a sense of fulfillment or closure. The life-review can become a powerful lever for getting unstuck.

I have constantly recycled the earlier tombstone exercise across the entire arc of my many explorations and teachings. And now, that original exercise makes a final debut in Part II of this book. This repeated use of the tombstone activity underscores the importance of conducting a life-review at all ages or stages in life.

THE LIFE-REVIEW OBITUARY WRITING PROCESS

At age 67, the tombstone metaphor returns in my writings, no longer an abstraction. It stands before me as a trusty life-long comrade. The tombstone re-appears in this book as a tool for helping you to quickly rough in a first draft of your obituary. The experience becomes a celebration of your life rather than a retreat into morbidity. After all, you're NOT writing about your death, but rather the highlights of your life.

In this booklet, I'll provide you with background, examples, and writing tips to help you perform a similar review of your own biography. I have kept this booklet purposefully short because I feel that a delay in getting started can distract from one's initial intentions and efforts. Keeping it short gets me out of your way quickly; allowing you to start the essential thinking and writing tasks as soon as possible.

But I must also note how the act of conjuring up an obituary worth reading should not be done in a hurried way. In fact, I hope you experience a warm and lasting joy as you linger over the recollections of your life-story.

Part I is about the changing art of the obituary. It reviews our evolving attitudes towards death and changing obituary writing styles. Samples from the best obits I've enjoyed are also included. Then Part II, we plunge forward with two exercises and many examples designed to help you get started. You can use the activities in two ways. Some will use the activities to begin pre-writing for a longer piece. Others will use the same tools to get started on producing a short-and-sweet first draft. Part III greets those who want to dive deeper into their history. It includes writing and thinking tips for a more extensive life-review.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

In Part IV we get down to the nuts and bolts of drafting, revising, and editing your obit. In Part V you peer over my shoulder to view how I coach beginning writers. In the final Part VI you'll find contributions from everyday people. Hopefully, by cruising these varied approaches your tank will fill up with ideas and you'll get a real feel for how your own scribbling experience could unfold.

Whether you consult all the writing tips or just a few, whether you are a nervous or a confident writer, everyone writing his or her own obituary is trying to answer two basic questions. The first question becomes, "At this point in time, how do I feel about how I've lived my life?" This is followed up with, "How do I want to be remembered?" Hopefully, you'll find your way to answering these questions as you write an obituary worth reading.

PART I—WRITE AN OBITUARY WORTH READING

When I turned 40, I became the oldest living male in my family. That was when I went hunting in the obituary columns, noting circumstance, age, pictures. I rarely found them of interest until I was well past 60 when I ran across obits that, not only provided insight, but also teased the frowning face of death. These became my models for an obituary worth reading.

Around 2012, while vacationing in the hip coastal town of Astoria, Oregon, I came across a picture of a jaunty looking fellow, beaming behind the bow of his boat. The obit sadly reported the sea captain died in his early 60s. After recounting a few of his adventures, it was briefly noted that he was married *three* times “...and two of his wives will miss him.” It was the first obit I felt was worth reading, and the next week I took it out of my pocket to share with others.

I wondered whether it should matter if one’s obituary is interesting, compelling, or worth reading. The beginning of an answer first emerged when, following knee surgery, I was sent for cataract surgery in 2013. After the first eyeball surgery was complete, I picked out new frames; something a bit more stylish than I was used to. But during the second post-op visit with my optometrist, the exam was quickly terminated and I was told to go see my doctor for a referral to a specialist. My optic nerve pressure was so high that it was felt I could quickly go blind. And foolish me, at that moment, I wanted a new camera. The brain scan one week later revealed how a tumor had squished my brain up against the left side of my skull. If truth be known, my speech had slurred, my walk had turned into a shuffle, and my wife took away my car keys. The brain surgeon scheduled me for an operation in two weeks.

All my life, I’ve enjoyed learning and teaching, creating and writing. The notion of messing with my brain profoundly shook me to my core. I was neither angry nor depressed. I did not have time for anxiety and sadness. I just found myself in a numbed moment. I began an intense review of my own journey and wondered how my story “might read” to others. Would others want to read it?

Gathering Verse and Insight

The intense pondering transported me out of late summer and into the darkness of winter, back to when I was twelve years old. I recall finding my father reciting out loud the poetry of Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat* before the crackling fireplace. Like my father, Omar had the mind of a scientist, the soul of a poet, and the convictions of his principles. In the dead of winter, my dad often read this poem out loud to warm up his heart with hopes of spring.

Khayyam’s fatalistic verse often dances around the light-and-shadow cycle of life and death. Many of his quatrains encourage us to seize the sensual moment of love, wine, and song. This message became a balm to the walking wounded, the Lost Generation, returning home after WWI. Those inclined to interpret their lives with verse really only had two poems to choose from: *Rubaiyat* or *The Waste Land* by T.S. Elliot.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

Somehow, before the brain surgery in 2013, the *Rubaiyat* perfectly suited my reflective moment as I teetered between hope and despair. I quickly read an entire book recounting the impact of the *Rubaiyat* on modern literature around the world, beginning in the first half of the 20th Century. Clubs and cults appeared to study Omar's work, translate it, and create new quatrains. His words were so widely quoted that more than half of the *Rubaiyat* appeared in *Bartlett's Quotations* and *The Oxford Book of Quotations*. There I was, setting out in the new century, forming an Omar Khayyam club of one, reading an occasional verse to my wife, and scribbling like mad in my journal. As a result, I feel it is fitting to punctuate this booklet with his verse:

*'Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays:
Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays.*

This particular poem summed up my experience in the MRI tunnel right after surgery. It was the only time I wanted to stay there in that clanging, claustrophobic tunnel. In the hallucinogenic post-operative clanging and claustrophobic tunnel, I found a strange, comforting vision. First an undulating fabric appeared and I was somehow able to peer behind it and see the technicians working the controls of the mechanical beast. Shortly, I returned to the tunnel and found myself peering over the silhouette of a horizon sunset. Images of people important in my life paraded across this purple tapestry. This was all set against a classic music sonnet I had never heard before, music that would keep playing in the first week home. After returning home, I promised myself to recreate that vision in Photoshop. It was easy. Jacked up on prednisone, I hardly slept for four days. Here is the image I would eventually recreate, an image belonging to Omar, my dad, and me.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading



The Checkerboard of Nights and Days
(A facsimile of my Near Death Experience vision)

About a year later, I would realize that I had perhaps experienced a Near Death Experience or an out-of-body journey. It was so wondrous, I initially refused to leave the MRI tunnel. That was hard to explain, even to my claustrophobic self. And, yes, it makes conceiving and writing this booklet seem very natural to me. The outcome of that journey healed me in ways unimagined. God had given me a pass; He had upgraded me to Marty 2.0.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

Two years later, I would return to reviewing local obituaries and reached a milestone at age 67, becoming the oldest living Kimeldorf in my clan. During my birthday week, I was asked to again teach from my book *Gourmet Aging*. After one of those sleepless, high-energy nights, I awoke with the title for a new class: *The Art of the Obituary*. It was just a title calling my name. Like the MRI moment, this too just appeared without explanation. I had no idea really what would go into that class, but the education coordinator liked the idea and entered the class title into the catalogue. Researching, outlining, learning, and deeper understanding followed. I truly cannot explain the “why” of any of this; I have learned to simply accept the grace I was granted. Eventually, I gathered up my verse and insight to share with you in this booklet.

REASONS FOR WRITING YOUR OBITUARY NOW

There are numerous reasons why you should consider writing your obituary now. I have generally divided them in to two groups: practical and personal. And here is one more kicker. At a local fundraiser I got to chatting with 23-year-old woman and drifted into the topic of my latest obsession. She asked to read this document. I wondered why. Over the next few weeks, I’d find that this topic is not just neatly pigeonholed into the geriatric three-ring binder of things, but contains powerful learning moments for people at all stages in life.

Practical and Classical Reasons for Writing Your Obituary

Most of us have at least five practical reasons for writing our own obituary, the most common being to exert control over how we will be remembered. Second, we also might choose to do it well in advance to ease the transition for loved ones left behind. Erica Iverson, obituary specialist at The Olympian, observed how family members submitting an obit can cause all kinds of conflicts when not everyone agrees about what is to be written. Each author wants to say goodbye in a different way. Erica explained how different people end up writing separate obits that reflect different memories or perspectives that may not blend together. Luckily, today we have the additional option of publishing an obit at a memorial website, where anyone can add his or her own comments or recollections.

Third, obits can be used to set the record straight. I first realized this when reading about a World War II volunteer. In an interview, she shared how male veterans were treated very well, but women who actively volunteered were mostly ignored after the war. In comparing how veterans and volunteers were treated, she left behind the caustic observation, “*We could’ve stayed home and danced with all those people. That was the easy way out.*”

Erica cautioned me against using an obit as a political bullhorn. She related how the paper often must reject obits that they feel would inflame and offend their readers. I too wanted to set the record straight and in my first draft I included the following potentially inflammatory passage:

In 1969, J. Edgar Hoover’s people left a folder full of lies on the desk of the Dean of Elementary Education at Oregon State University. Martin knew that people who opposed war (King, Kennedy, Einstein, Chavez) had all been victims of the Federal Bureau of “Intimidation” (FBI) campaign of disinformation. The dean called him in to state he could not be placed in student teaching because of the file. Martin left Oregon for New Jersey to become a machinist trainee. Five years later, he returned to OSU with a full scholarship and earned a Vocational Teaching Certificate. Somehow, the FBI never felt

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

obliged to update the file to include the awards he won later as a teacher and writer. Subsequently, he sported a car bumper sticker reading: All of My Heroes Have FBI Files.

Thinking again of Erica's admonition, I had to weigh the heat I still feel on recollecting those experiences against the minor part it ultimately played in my life. I took a step back and looked at the larger, cultural and historical forces that propelled my progressive activism. I rewrote everything, choosing to flavor my words with a bit of humor and nostalgia as I let go of the bully pulpit and embraced a more graceful type of writing. I came up with this alternative:

Like other Americans in the 1950s, he embraced Superman's idealistic slogan: "Truth, Justice, and the American Way." But McCarthyism, the Segregationists, and the War in Indochina proved to be "Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive" and ultimately revealed the ugly underbelly of injustice and deception. These contradictions hollowed out Walt Disney's promise of a utopian Tomorrow Land. Like many others in his generation, Martin struggled to regain his early idealism by attaching himself to the early revolutionary ideals in the Declaration of Independence of 1776. In the heady crucible of the 1960s, Martin put away his merit badges and took up the picket sign. On his laptop, he placed a sticker which read: All of My Heroes Have FBI Files. He became a life-long progressive political activist.

Fourth, in addition to setting the record straight, you can also use the obit to share the little known backstory of your life. One 80 year-old died of liver cancer after serving as the head of a local Union Gospel Mission. As a child, this man was beaten by his stepfather, and would go off to seek temporary shelter at the local mission by volunteering to cook potatoes and eggs. In his obit he wrote:

I'll never forget their response: 'You are responsible for your own future. You cannot use your stepfather as an excuse to not have a future or be less than you can be.' We were never allowed to be victims.

And he concluded with:

He and his wife took in 42 foster children.

One newspaper notice humorously summed up the finality of it all when it began: *He contracted an incurable case of death; 'Tis a disease we will all eventually catch.* This exemplifies the fifth classical reason for writing your obituary now: to take the sting out of Death's scary mask. The practical reason suggests that writing your obit in advance makes it easier to discuss and plan for your end-of-life rituals. All of this reflects a changing attitude towards death and dying, and ultimately obituary writing.

Personal and Poetic Reasons for Writing Your Obituary

I've speculated on additional and more intangible reasons. These tend to be more poetic than practical, more fleeting than concrete.

The first was brought to my attention by Sara Rucker, the educational director of life-long learning at the local senior center in Olympia, Washington. When asked why she wanted me to bring this class to the center, she quickly replied that writing her obit would offer her an

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

opportunity to review her life. Her eyes darted up from her pixie haircut and she cracked, *I just might learn some things about myself in the process.* I shot back, *This could be true at any age.*

Writing your obit earlier, rather than later, also offers you the chance to celebrate surviving the obstacles placed in your path to date. As you record details for your obituary, you might step back to honor your blessings, both given and received, both small and large. In my life, this process brings forth a lively warm feeling of fulfillment as I complete the listing. And this process can prove to be quite therapeutic for those completing this review much later in life. Mary Pipher, a clinical psychologist and author, observes that many of her elder clients exhibit a post-traumatic stress syndrome symptomology when struggling with depression, entering hospice, or other disappointments. The act of counting and recording their blessings can turn into a hiking staff as they try to ford the river of the old-old end stage of life.

Personally, I feel that authoring an obit is both a literal and symbolic Near Death Experience (NDE). This is the symbolic second main reason. Like all such experiences, it changes you. At a minimum, an NDE underscores the value of the time remaining. Again, this will be true regardless of your age or condition.

When you write your obituary, you are also bravely acknowledging the tragicomedy lines performed in the Shakespearean play *As You Like It*:

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances...*

This third poetic reason grants entree into authoring your own exit scene, where you craft your final stage directions, settings, and dialogue. As the playwright of your own life this can include planning your funeral arrangements or celebration of life, and writing a will and obituary.

Personally, as I sum up the serious and silly in my obituary, I also celebrate the passage towards the golden horizon. For me, this small, written gesture brings me closer to understanding that death is not my final chapter in the cosmos. In this way I feel I honor my creative attempts to live well, and also honor my sense of a creator. It puts me in touch with belonging to something larger than my own life. And this kind of writing supports my growing spiritual awareness as I drift slowly towards a final sunset on Earth.

The fourth benefit extends the original end-of-life decisions concerning services and celebrations, wills and obits. In his book *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, Atul Gawande suggests that we don't understand our life as an average of all the painful and joyful moments. Rather we draw strength and satisfaction from viewing life as a story with the plot driven by significant moments. We feel most alive when we have the opportunity to make choices that continue to shape our storyline up to the end. We derive additional pleasure from recalling the story and in that reminiscing we seek to understand the direction or purpose of our narrative.

Once we realize that we belong to something larger than ourselves, we can live more comfortably with death's finality. If we can find connections between our story and a history that begins before us and extends after us, then death can no longer make our lives meaningless. We make our lives more meaningful by first searching locally for connections between our

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

biography and our family and community. Then later this meaningfulness transcends time when we glance heavenwards and find our reflection in the starry cosmos.

Understanding our story becomes one of the most important pursuits during our lifetime, especially towards the end. This is why we should spend some time crafting an obituary worth reading. It can bring us a sense of completeness or fulfillment. I urge my readers to start this task long before the final days. Later we can update our memoir's synopsis as we see fit and have opportunity.

In our society, science, technology and modern medicine create the illusion that we can master everything, including death. While our technical-medical masters can more easily add years to my life span, they can't necessarily add life to those extended years. And, at what point is this extension artificial? At what point does it migrate from helpful to draining and painful. As a result, many people have come to believe that a right to a life with dignity is based on the right to a death with dignity. Writing my obituary helps me untangle the jungle of emotions associated with these ending-of-life questions.

OBITUARIES ARE NOT ABOUT DEATH

Margalit Fox is a senior writer at the *New York Times*. She began as a book reviewer and ended up writing over 1,200 obituaries. When she began 20 years ago, editors used to assign the obituary desk as punishment. Ms. Fox wryly observed very few children complete a career assessment test and race home to tell their parents they want to become an obituary writer.

As the contemporary editors push the obituary far past Victorian-era formalities and constraints, the obituary desk is no longer seen as punishment. The obituary editor at the *London Telegraph* observed how visitors to newspaper offices often ask: "Who are those people over there, laughing?" An amused expression surfaces and the reporter replies, "Ah, that's the obits desk." Many people become speechless, assuming it must be a dreary and morbid setting. But in fact, those working the obit desk often describe it as "the jolliest department in the paper." Obituary writers emphasize that their pages are about Life... NOT Death.

Surveying Our Changing Attitudes Toward Death

The focus has shifted from burying a person at a gravesite to celebrating their time with us in this world. Instead of being summoned to a somber, funereal event, we now receive invitations to a Celebration of Life. These events ask us to gather to reminisce, listen to favorite music, and view photos and mementos. People share stories, both touching and humorous.

The invitation to a Celebration of Life at the Three Flames Restaurant in San Jose, California read:

To make all services a place that Evan would want to be at, the family is requesting all in attendance to either be geared up for a Bison Game Day or a night at the races. Any casual clothing will be fine, but please no dress clothes.

The banquet hall was packed. A sign in the corner read "No Tear Zone." Then on cue, 140 people raised their glasses to toast Evan.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

Joanne Grady-Savard, an avid runner and business owner in Boston, found great comfort in planning her final exit in advance. Her celebration plans included a gathering with her friends and family at a favorite spot on her running route. They dined on lobster under a tent. High heels and black dresses were not allowed. Guests were invited to sit on her engraved memorial bench overlooking the Atlantic, where they could take turns reminiscing. Attendees often feel refreshed or renewed after attending these kinds of memorial celebrations. The event guides people in letting go as their loved one moves from the known world to the unknown.

How did we arrive at this new end-of-life celebration? As with so many other changes in our lives, the popular press blames it on the Boomer cohort. They played new music and went off to live in communes where they made organic farming popular. As the 60s kids entered adulthood, they explored natural childbirth and started the re-birth of midwives. They tried to re-define the relationship between work and play, giving more emphasis to the latter as they explored hitchhiking through Europe and the USA. Some would choose to work part-time, seasonally or from home. Others chose jobs with meaning over career ladders. They changed jobs frequently in search of meaningful work.

Now as hospice replaces hospitalization, this imaginative generation is busy creating alternative end-of-life rituals. Faced with aging parents and their own mortality, Boomers are now creating new ceremonies to mark the final stages of life. Eventually the boomers—no longer babies—return home themselves possessing an elder-wisdom about the natural cycle of birth to death. The midwife or doula (Greek for “woman who serves”) now finds her place at both the beginning and ending of life where she provides companionship along with emotional and practical support for the final passage. During that time immediately following death, the healing process begins when one gazes upon, talks to, or caresses a deceased loved one. In this way, acceptance of the final change begins on a healthier, lighter foot.

Thus, emerges a new certified profession with titles like Death Midwife or Death Doula. This new cadre may come during hospice care to discuss planning last rituals. Many others enter the scene after death to create a personal home ceremony honoring the deceased. Others stick around to offer grief support and practical guidance in meeting local regulations for burial, cremation, and death certificates. Their work can be done in any setting: hospital, nursing facility, or at home. The vocabulary about dying expands to include the growing lexicon covering eco-friendly, carbon-neutral *green cremations* and *burials*.

THE LIVING FUNERAL AND OTHER CELEBRATORY OPTIONS

Today, many terminally ill people not only design their Celebrations of Life, but also attend. They yearn to share a living good-bye in person. And, as a result, we now have new terminology. When you attend your own Celebration of Life, the name changes: *Living Funerals*, *Living Wakes*, or *Living Farewells*.

In her book *Parting Ways: New Rituals and Celebrations of Life's Passing*, Denise Carson documents many of these changes. She writes in her blog and book:

People are toasting and roasting family members and friends with limited time left.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

Some look like a cross between a wedding and funeral. These formal or informal get-togethers take place in homes, community centers, houses of worship, hotel banquet halls, a favorite restaurant, a theater, or any place that would honor the person.

I've seen the honoree dressed in everything from a hospital gown to a tuxedo.

Others are more somber with collective prayers, Psalms or Holy book readings, anointing and last rites given by clergy.

... Some families suggest that attendees bring mementos, such as a picture or an item from a treasured family vacation, to help focus the reminiscing party. These celebrations help families prepare for the inevitable.

Event planners are enlarging their menu of options. Traditionally, the menu has been limited to weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, and retirement parties. Now some offer to help with perhaps the most critical event: Our Exit.

It Turns Out the Living Funeral Is Not a New Idea

One of the first mentions of attending one's own funeral occurs in 1876 in Mark Twain's book *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. In the plot, Tom had to fake his death. Later, in a touching scene, he secretly attends his own funeral and, after speeches conclude, he feels he had become "the envy of all the boys...It was worth being a pirate, after all." It became the proudest moment of his whole life.

The 2002 movie and book *Tuesdays with Morrie* centers on newspaper sports columnist Mitch Albom spending 14 Tuesdays with his mentor before Morrie passes on. Albom had the chance to tell a significant person who shaped his life how much he meant to him, and to gather any wisdom or advice Morrie might have to offer. *Tuesdays with Morrie* extends Tom Sawyer's fantasy.

In *Parting Ways*, Denise Carson suggests that Morrie awakened a memory of a long-ago ritual in which family members would gather to listen to the dying person express his or her love for those gathered, and to pass on wisdom or insight. That ritual died in the 20th Century when death moved out of the home and community and into the hospital. Now as people choose hospice over hospitals, we are exploring recasting the end-of-life rituals as a communal event.

In 2014, an Australian humanist blogged about her experience helping to mark these special moments with celebrations. She was asked to conduct a service for a terminally ill person, which she chose to call a *Living Funeral*. She admits that, at first, a layer of mild anxiety descended upon those gathered. This gave way to sharing stories, laughter and tears. She remarked on the children's moving and beautiful words offered to their father. She concluded that people delivered their message and devotions with a calmness she had not seen before at traditional funerals and memorials. And she believed this was due to the fact that people had not yet experienced the final loss. They were just beginning their grieving and, as such, they could think more clearly.

Denise Carson joined forces with Debbie Robson to merge their experiences in end-of-life rituals and hospice care. They blended their two approaches in an effort to shift the culture of hospice from dying to living and celebrating life. I feel the Carson and Robson approach embodies

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

Shakespeare's sentiment that *All the world's a stage*. And I'd add an additional thought. When you can take up authoring or designing your end-of-life stage directions, fill the inkwell with tears, laughter, gusto and a wry grin. And consider delivering your final soliloquy and gesture before you die, sharing it as a living obituary, while embracing the exuberance of the *Rubaiyat* stanza:

*Come, fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring
The Winter Garment of Repentance fling:
The Bird of Time has but a little way To fly
-- and Lo! the Bird is on the Wing.*

Interest Grows In Talking About Our Mortality

Swiss sociologist Bernard Crettaz came up with the idea of *Café Mortels* in 2004. Inspired by Crettaz's idea, Englishman Jon Underwood initiated a web site for the nonprofit *Death Café*, which has spread to over 30 countries in 2015. As early as 2011, a collective under the banner of *Order of the Good Death* formed to bring together death professionals, artists, and academics to talk about death and dying from around the world. And, in 2013 Kim O'Connor reported in the *Pacific Standard* magazine about a new *Death-Positive* movement emerging in the Los Angeles area.

And, in 2015 Dasha Fayvinova writing at Bustle.com notes how Millennials (born 1980s to 2000s) are climbing into coffins to imagine their own funerals and reflect on the meaning of life. It is interesting to note that Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi who wrote *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, and from a decidedly different generation, first wrote about climbing into a casket to experience a funereal moment for the same reason. Yup, conversations about death-and-life are definitely an intergenerational trend. Mortality seems to have become a vogue intergenerational topic. Young adults seem mysteriously drawn to it; middle-age folks approach it with a studied curiosity; and boomers, beginning to feel its inexorability, season it with a dash of irony while earnestly chatting it up at their gatherings.

Doctor and New Yorker contributor Atul Gawande authored one of the most profound and provocative titles *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* in 2014. He probes how modern science and medicine bestow upon us a sweet and sour gift of health. Increasingly, we outlive either our cognitive abilities or the body's independent functions. As a result, medicine complicates aging by often trading quality of life for longevity. We may have more years in our lives, but not necessarily more life in our continuing years. As a result, the conditions under which we die have fundamentally changed.

Increasingly, people of all ages now want to talk about end-of-life choices. This heightened awareness of mortality has helped many people develop a greater focus on the present moment. In addition, people of all ages find that discussion of our mortality intensifies the desire to make the most of the time they have left. And this becomes the segue to the *Living Obituary* idea.

THE LIVING OBITUARY OPTIONS

Like the *living* farewell, *living* wake, or *living* funeral, the *Living Obituary* is not only written in advance but also shared in advance. Sharing your *living* obituary at a *living* farewell is all about

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

affirming your life path and celebrating your life. Following this logic, I predict more and more of us will not only write an obituary in advance, but also choose to share it with others in advance.

The *Living Obituary* adds new benefits to the earlier list of reasons for writing your obituary now. Writing the obit, with some detail and in a conversational journal-writing tone, may help you better understand the forks in the road you've taken. This reflective writing adventure may present you with a chance to heal up old, festering wounds. It also becomes a chance to acknowledge the special people and moments that have shaped you into who you are today. After I completed my living obituary, I read it out loud with a scotch and soda in hand to my wife, Judy. I felt I had penned another chapter in a novel about living a full life. We sat staring thoughtfully at one another, amidst our lush backyard garden, as the golden sunset warmed up the scene. I slowly checked off another important moment on my soul's bucket list.

On July 15, 2015, I read the remarkable obituary of Sidney Edward Smith. His story began in 1922, and he would later spend a portion of his Depression-era childhood in an orphanage. The writer noted this experience shaped his views on family and responsibility. After World War II, he returned to Tacoma and married on New Year's Eve. He worked at Boeing and later served under my favorite Republican governor, Dan Evans, in a variety of programs. He was quite gregarious, hosting parties both at home in Tacoma and later in Mexico, for all sorts of people. What really struck me was the ending that read:

...there will be no memorial service. To honor his memory please enjoy time with your friends and family...and if that should include a rare steak, some extra crispy French fries, a dry martini and a good cigar, so much the better.

I now knew the menu for my own future living obituary party. We'd gather amidst the cigar and grilled steak smoke and sip our martinis. As the evening unwound, we could share our words and thoughts and feelings about the meaning of our lives, set against the certain shadow cast by our mortality.

The Ethical Will or Legacy Letter Parallels the *Living Obituary*

As noted earlier, the end of life observances and rituals have changed a great deal. And yet, they somehow boomeranged back in the last century to their traditional roots. Such is the story of the Ethical Will or Legacy Letter.

Apparently most major religions depict stories where the sick or dying person gathers around his bed his most cherished relatives to share what he has learned, his values, and his love for those attending. That ritual apparently was re-born in the 1990s and updated.

Today it is no longer limited to patriarchs and his sons; and no longer limited to the moment of exiting this mortal coil. The term *Ethical Will* has now been replaced by the term *Legacy Letter* and most of the trainers found online are women. This highly personal letter can become one of the most cherished and meaningful offerings one can leave to family and community. It is not a document with legal purpose and weight. In your heart, its' value may surpass all your wealth.

Robb Lucy expands upon the larger notion of legacies in his book *Legacies Aren't Just For Dead People*. He includes a specific chapter devoted to providing prompts for creating one's own Legacy

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

Letter. He guides the reader in thinking about beliefs and values, hopes or talents, wisdom and lessons learned, failures and success, forgiveness and love. The final message can be printed, recorded or sent the cloud (which now has a double meaning).

Like an obituary, it sums up what has been most important in your life. President Obama wrote such a letter to his daughters upon entering the White House. Grandparents, uncles and aunts write to their progeny. The obituary on the other hand is a far more public document, often including more details from your life's journey. Both can be read at celebrations of life and even posted in public forums for friends and relatives.

Both obituaries and legacy letters can help you make more sense of life. Both documents can be used to sum up your life-story as well as your values or beliefs. Advocates of the contemporary obituary and legacy letter encourage their readers not to limit the writing to the end-of-life moment. Instead, we suggest that this letter writing can help you cross over the rough waters experienced during a major change or personal challenge. Both forms of life-reviews can become tools for healing and connecting. Both help you see life continuing beyond the perilous moment. In a similar vein, these letters and obits can be shared in the here-and-now rather than wait until you have journeyed to the hereafter. In this book, sharing your life review in person is referred to as the *living* obituary.

Writing With or For Another Person Can Strengthen Your Connections

I have seen when two people writing and sharing obituaries together, it enhances their understanding or appreciation of each other. In many ways it reminds me of what we sometimes call “parallel play” among children in a sand box. Poetically this would belong to the ever-flowing sandbox of time. I've seen this among young couples as well as intergenerational writers as in the case of a grandmother and her grandson. When you write it for someone you care about, it becomes a special love-letter unlike others you may have written. This can be especially valuable when personal or world events draw one's mortality into sharper focus as it did for my Judy in 2015.

Every year I write Judy three poems for Valentines Days, her birthday, and our anniversary. I once collected all these into a book for our 35th anniversary titled *How To Stay In Love, Forever*. Over the 40+ years we've made many cocktail toasts to family members, our mortality, health, and each other as we reminisce and remember. And during the course of completing this book, Judy steadfastly refused to write an obit even though we had many, many conversations about the topic. That was when I hit upon the idea of writing one for her and sharing it with her on Valentine's Day in 2016. It's really just another way of showing that I think about her and love her. As she read the rough draft I could see her slowly digesting the words. Gradually a soft and gentle smile spread across her face. When she was done and looked up I quipped, “Well, what do you think?” She thought a moment and then murmured, “I think everyone enjoys reading about themselves don't you?” This valentine-obituary transformed all our many toasts and conversations about life and death into a concrete gesture.

After Morgan sent in one of the first obits for this book she recommended asking her brother Austin for a similar contribution. I was curious at how sibling might view this parallel effort. Later I ask Austin if writing his story and viewing his sister's words had any effect on him. He

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

wrote back:

I did get more of an understanding of my sister, I haven't kept much contact with her since she moved out of the house. So, this just helps me to see how she's made sense of her life so far. And I'm actually very happy to see where she's taken her life.

Joy Lower read her friend Laura's obituary in an early draft of this book. After being invited to contribute, Joy then volunteered to take the *Living Obituary* to another level by inviting her mother to also write her own story. Perhaps because her mom often reflected on the past she jumped right into the invitation to write her life-review obituary.

After both women had finished I asked if they had learned anything useful about themselves or each other. After sharing and reviewing the experience, Joy felt she and her mother were now better able to appreciate how their very unique upbringings had shaped them in profoundly different ways. Along these lines, they found they had more child-rearing goals in common than they first realized. Joy went on to suggest after sharing their life-reviews the two of them gained a more complete understanding of their lifelong tug-of-war between loving and bickering with each other. I can confidently predict that their conversation will continue in a positive direction for some time to come. When all was said and written down, and after hearing all this, Laura's husband Chris offered to contribute his life-review obituary a well.

The concept now validated. I put down my pen...

REVIEWING THE EVOLUTION OF OBITUARY STYLES

In the 19th Century, obits were mostly about wealthy and religious people. Men's civic and personal accomplishments were extolled, while women's obits emphasized their religiosity. These obituaries often avoided discussing causes of death. Instead, you'd hear euphemisms like "removed by the omnipotent author."

When I was growing up, newspapers were very secretive when describing causes of death. If I saw "short illness" I figured it meant heart attack. And "long illness" referred to long, painful diseases like cancer. Today we mention cancer, suicide, and AIDS.

Beginning after World War II, Madison Avenue remade us into a consumer culture. The obit likewise shifted to emphasize material wealth, but it still mostly centered on the rich and famous. Walter Cronkite, renowned television broadcast journalist from 1937 to 1981, observed how the measure of a celebrity's fame could be gauged by the obituary's length and how far in advance it is prepared.

As it turns out, my local friend, Carol Klacik, had also written her own treatise on obituaries back in 2011. Recently she sent me a copy of her well-written and researched paper, *Celebrating Lives: The Art and Craft of the Obituary*. In her work, she describes additional changes occurring in obituaries in the 1950s and ties it into the current interests in this topic.

...after World War II that attitude began a slow shift to one of viewing the obituary as a story of life rather than a pronouncement of death. In fact, as baby boomers began to

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

gray, many of them have seen the obituary as an important part of their family history and, as such, that it should be written with their input if possible.

Beginning in the 1980s, the subjects of obituaries expanded. Adam Bernstein of the *Washington Post* reported that papers then began to include obituaries of even notorious members of the community. For example, one woman was playfully described as “ex-con, author, painter, stripper, Hollywood Boulevard streaker, actress and charm school instructor.” In 1986, Hugh Massingberd at the *London Telegraph* entirely recast his paper’s obituaries. He replaced the dusty details of the curriculum vitae with lively and illuminating anecdotes. He wrote obits as character sketches, adding wit and insight.

Many obituaries reflect the changes in our attitude towards death and dying. Modern obits combine comedy and tears. Many contemporary obituary writers choose to replace worn out Victorian euphemisms and jettison the dry detailed listing of accomplishments. Their lively obits rarely include lines like, “He died surrounded by his loved ones” or “She touched the lives of everyone she knew.” Most professional obituary writers stress how obits have moved beyond redundant, predictable, formulaic language. Margalit Fox at the *New York Times* brightly notes, “*Today, obituaries are now worth reading.*”

In 2006 the popular columnist Marilyn Johnson gave up her part-time job interviewing celebrities to spend time clipping favorite obituaries, attending conferences, and interviewing some of the best writers in the trade. Luckily for us, Johnson penned a sublime summary called *The Dead Beat*. She admits her preoccupation initially made her temporarily unfit for many social gatherings. Johnson recounts how the moldy, deadly, prosaic prose of the past has withered before a contemporary, conversational and more literary style. In 2007 Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Jim Sheeler’s released his riveting book *Obit: Inspiring Stories of Ordinary People Who Led Extraordinary Lives*. This extraordinary writer shed an insight into why most obituary writing professionals rate their job as highly satisfying. He introduced his title with these paraphrased words: *this [book] is not about death...it is about what is important*. This underscores Johnson declaring, *we are living in a golden age of obituary writing*.

In the new century, obituaries would continue to shrink as historic events and technology changes the landscape. Carol Klacik notes in her paper, *Celebrating Live*, how the attack on New York City on 9/11 paved the way to using a more succinct, 250-word form of remembrance. In the *New York Times* "Portraits of Grief" project, the traditional obituary was shortened in order to cover as many people in the attack as possible. The portraits were not intended to recount a person’s entire life, but rather give a snapshot of each victim’s personality, of a life lived. The *Times* took a democratic approach, treating everyone as equally important, placing executives and battalion chiefs side by side with cooks and custodians.

CELEBRATING THE CYCLE OF LIFE AND DEATH IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

Now in the 21st Century, we can submit an obit online at funeral home websites. Obits today also appear on Flickr and Facebook. In stark, unvarnished wording, we can put away the scissors and scrapbook as we *surf the dead beat* online and bookmark the best.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

The rise of social media raises interesting options and questions. Harry de Quetteville of the *London Telegraph* writes about interviewing a panel of children with terminal illnesses. He observed how those with an intimate connection with their death are often *the least bashful discussing it*. The young people discussed many traditional subjects and a few unique ones. They discussed if one could achieve immortality on the web. Later, they vigorously debated what to do with the Facebook pages after someone has died.

How should your old blog postings, YouTube vacation videos, or Flickr photos be stored for your family in the digital age? In 2010 New Riders released *Your Digital Afterlife: When Facebook, Flickr and Twitter Are Your Estate, What's Your Legacy?* This was followed in 2014 by the release of *Digital Death* that further explores the ways in which digital media impacts our approach to death and dying.

Have you ever considered a video obituary or memorial document? In 2003 and later in 2004, I assembled slide-shows memorials for my father Don and mother Fay. I created these using images from scrapbooks and favorites songs. In 2007 *The New York Times* would upload a video honoring humor columnist Art Buchwald. On the *Times* website a reader could view his video obituary. It began with the comedian's quips, "Hi. I'm Art Buchwald, and I just died!" Today you can blend together words, photos, music, voices in a media-enriched obituary. One venue of this can be found at *OurStory.com*. They refer to themselves as a "time machine" for capturing the past.

In 2006 SMITH magazine landed on the web to promote six-word memoirs at <http://www.sixwordmemoirs.com>. Then in 2008 Larry Smith and Rachel Fershleiser compiled their postings in a book entitled *Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure*. It's popularity lead to a website supporting writing about other topics beyond obituaries for people of all ages. Buoyed by the popularity of Twitter's limit of 140 characters, perhaps there is now room for a six-word obituary line in our busy, digital age. In fact, the samples in Part VI begin with Anne Crowley's 15-word or 64-character obituary. And so it goes in our digital age...

Not everything on the web is brand spanking new. Some obit postings are chained to the older traditions of scrapbooking and shoe-boxing favorite clips from the newspaper. These practices reincarnated online at Google's alternate obituaries newsgroup where obit writers and readers gather in a seemingly bottomless site: <https://groups.google.com/forum/m/#!forum/alt.obituaries>. Folks gather to share their favorite "clips," rant and flame at each other, and look for *obit-watch* postings listing famous individuals are hospitalized. It is a whole other world that has been around a long, long time before Google ever surfaced.

When all is said and done, there are many, many more options for broadcasting, distributing, or sharing your life-review digitally. And somehow amidst this cultural-digital clutter, the gesture of sending in a written obituary to your local newspaper retains a compelling charm and simple honesty. Perhaps this is why the obituary departments are flourishing as their newspaper hosts slowly die off.

Will it matter if you use digital or old paper and pencil? Perhaps Fate's moving finger cares not,

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

according to Omar's observation:

*The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.*

It only need matter to you.

The Brave New Digital Eternity Raises New Questions

The Canadian *National Post* magazine published an amazing series *How We Die Now*. The series explored the currently changing definitions of death along with new options and attitudes about our mortality. In the article *Will technology conquer death?* Digital marketing expert Erik Qualman urges everyone to consider their digital reputations; the digital legacy that lingers on the web long after they are gone. Executors may have new responsibilities administering *digital assets*. But, futurist Gerd Leonhard questions the desirability feeling one has escaped death in a digital landscape. In fact, he sees it as an aberration when individuals in our digital society never have to say good-bye with any finality.

SAMPLES OF THE ART OF THE OBITUARY

When I began my research, I keyed into Google "The Art of the Obit." I was rewarded with at least a half dozen pages under those keywords. The most prominent finding in my search belonged to Bob Collins who curates the blog called *The Art of the Obituary*.

I encourage you to read it for inspiration, ideas, and even entertainment. His blog is chock full of obituaries worth reading. The first one I came across was about Captain Donald Malcolm; an excerpt follows:

Captain Donald Malcolm Jr., 60, died Feb. 28, 2015, nestled in the bosom of his family, while smoking, drinking whiskey and telling lies. He died from complications resulting from being stubborn, refusing to go to the doctor, and raising hell for six decades. Stomach cancer also played a minor role in his demise.

He met his future wife, Maureen (Moe) Belisle Malcolm, after months at sea, crab fishing. He found her in his bed and decided to keep her.

He taught his girls how to hold their liquor, filet a fish and change a tire.

He took pride in his daughters, but his greatest joy in life was the birth of his grandson Marley, a child to whom he could impart all of his wisdom that his daughters ignored.

The obit is no longer limited to a tedious chronological listing of accomplishments. For instance, Richard's obit began with:

Rich has left the building. His friends will tell you he's in a better place. The rest will say they can smell the Bacon burning. He is stress-free and at peace.

Towards the end, three paragraphs **later**, they put in beginning dates and a clue about the joke about bacon:

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

He was born Richard Norton Bacon, in Auburn, N.Y., July 16, 1947, the son of the late Elizabeth Dunster Bacon and Frederick Neil Bacon

Today's obits take on a human interest or personal blog style. Let's return for another example to the blog by Bob Collins at *Art of the Obituary.com*:

Aaron Joseph, age 35, died too soon...he spent years crime-fighting and a yearlong battle with a nefarious criminal named Cancer, who has plagued our society for far too long... Civilians will recognize him best as Spider-Man, and thank him for his many years of service protecting our city.

His family knew him only as a kind and mild-mannered Art Director, a designer of websites and t-shirts, and concert posters who always wore the right cardigan and uttered a timely thing to say (even if it was wildly inappropriate).

Not surprisingly, obituaries are the perfect vessels for heartfelt stories. I recall reading about the doctor who devoted his career to improving the way medics counsel the terminally ill. At his funeral, he left instructions for a recording to be played, which began with these lines:

Thank you so much for coming.

Unlike the rest of you, I got to sleep in this morning.

An editor at the *London Telegraph* shared a touching anecdote about a phone call he got early one morning. His beautifully mannered caller was reporting on her husband's passing. He patiently listened and finally asked her when he died. "Oh," came the reply, "about 15 minutes ago. He's right here." There ensued a pause as he took in the scene. He wondered at her composure and calm. He inquired and she relayed how the couple had spent most of their lives together, and together had prepared for the end in their partnership too. When the moment came, the widow had known exactly what to do. She finally answered, "We drew up a list and calling you was at the end of the list."

In my hometown newspaper, *The Olympian*, an obit about Gus Egan was posted, which left me speechless, laughing, and wishing I had met Gus. In fact, this obit became the reason I researched and now write about this topic. I went in to the paper and met obituary specialist Erica Iverson. It turned out that she helped edit Gus Egan's unforgettable obit by patiently working with family and friends through eight drafts, helping them to achieve a conversational tone. Following is a shorter version of the obit.

Gus Eagan —My favorite Obit

On March 4, 2015, Gus died at Franciscan Hospice in Tacoma.

Gus was born a month pre-mature. He wasn't breathing.

Then very quickly a nun, the maternity nurse, gave him mouth-to-mouth

resuscitation and brought him to life. His mother named him Michael. His father - for reasons unknown - called him Gus. And Gus he always was.

To his sister, his brother and neighbors he was the adorable...with golden auburn curls and big brown eyes that could be soulful one minute and devilish the next. He never lost that charm.

Don Kneeland, a friend and neighbor, remembers Gus growing up. "He always had his own really unique personality.

"He let his hair grow out and his fingernails grow out. He didn't care what other people thought."

When his brother Bart died at 50 Gus grew dreadlocks as a remembrance of him. He told that to a few people and let the rest think what they would.

"He had his own kind of idea about things," added Don. "But he was always super kind and thoughtful, not someone opinionated about what other people should do."

All his life he loved music. He was born into the era of rock and roll and his siblings immersed him in it. Later Gus became a roadie for local bands and with several bands around town and in Seattle.



Gus graduated from Olympia High School in 1971 and married his high school sweetheart. They had a daughter Justine. He later married again and had a family of three.

He worked for three decades for the state delivering mail to state offices all over Olympia, Tacoma and Seattle. He met so many people he rarely went anywhere without running into someone he knew.

With 17 years clean and sober, he was helped and helped many people find recovery from the sorrows and suffering of addictions.

His service work in recovery groups was a passionate commitment to him. "He was a leader and a teacher and a hero to us," said Teresa Esslinger to whom Gus lent a helping hand and heart.

He looked like a Harley guy, and he was, but he was also a man of many other interests.

He loved fishing, bonsai trees and old growth trees, and always, always playing music with bands such as Psycho-Pharm, Plastik Jesus, Neo-Con and other hard-rockin' punk groups.

He loved pro sports and you didn't dare call him when a Seahawks game was on. His very favorite foods: sushi and fried rice.

He was a passionate student of art and went to museums all over the world. He was a serious reader of history and biography. He avidly watched Charlie Rose's in-depth interviews

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

The writers avoided turning the obit into a laundry list of dry, moldy details. Instead, they created an obit containing the juicy stuff of Gus's life—definitely worth reading.

USE THE CREATIVE NONFICTION APPROACH TO MAKE YOUR LIFE-REVIEW WORTH READING

As a photographer, I always say I **make** pictures rather than **take** pictures. I examine the background before looking at the subject to find the most effective point of view. And before I ever put my finger on the shutter, I speak to my subjects in order to establish a connection that leads to a collaborative shoot. Later back home in my digital darkroom, I further adjust, frame, and enhance image to amplify my portrait's narrative. My approach is the same when I attempt to write my resume, personal journal or my obituary. This activist-authoring role is captured again in the words of the Persian poet Omar Khayyam in the *Rubaiyat* when he pens this verse:

*Ah Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits -- and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!*

I urge you to craft a story worthy of reading, rather than just recording the dry particulars. Dusty details are for bookkeepers. Writing an obituary worth reading means taking an opportunity to look at your life with a creative slant. In this manner you join in with the literary style known as creative nonfiction or literary nonfiction. Beginning with the facts most important to you, you craft an engaging tale based on your life experiences. Unlike a resume written for an employer or a memoir written your descendants, the audience for your obit begins with you.

Readers will skim the traditionally worded obits dominated by names of relatives, places lived, or awards received. We prefer reading obits relying on an informal, conversational style. You can raise the interest level a notch when you sprinkle in a few colorfully colloquial words or favorite sayings, lyrics, or an idiosyncratic saying you often used. Spicing it with a bit of humor or witticisms will draw the reader in. The contemporary obituary allows the personality or character traits to fit alongside your factual reporting of your life.

In the end, the act of writing an obituary helps map meaning across the landscape of our lives. And for me, by adopting a playful mindset, hopefully I've entertained a reader or two while engaging in some therapy for my soul. I'm strive to make the most of my tale. I don't think anyone says it more beautifully than Omar:

*Ah, make the most of what we may yet spend,
Before we too into the Dust descend;
Dust into Dust, and under Dust, to lie;
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and -- sans End!*

Let me end this introductory part by adapting Omar's lines with the following:

*Make the most of what you write;
Author an obituary worth reading.*

PART II— STARTING AN OBIT WORTH READING

Hopefully by this page you are beginning to see the value of conducting a life-review and putting it into the form of a legacy letter or obituary. You realize it is safe and even normal to talk about mortality. Perhaps you're also learning to give up your fear of discussing death, even pondering what could lie beyond that moment. Hopefully, the sample obituaries in Part I reveal the value of considering one's life in both tragic and comic terms, both serious and light-hearted language. And just maybe, you enjoyed reading the earlier contemporary samples reflecting our golden age of obituary writing. This is your chance to tell us who you are, how you lived, and how you'd like to be remembered.

Part II invites you to take a step out onto the limb. Part II urges you to forgo using a template to write a formulaic obituary. Hopefully, you're ready to leave behind the contrived Victorian clichés and the lengthy reporting of minor details. In this chapter you're encouraged to prepare a life-review story using everyday language, facts and humor. And after completing these exercises, you will be able to flavor your home-baked story with your personality, using a capital *P*.

You are not writing a best-selling autobiography, nor a comprehensive memoir. You're just relaying your too-short story in a conversational tone. We will enjoy reading it because it could have literary qualities, with a lower case *L*. That simply means you can choose to make your obit interesting by supplying earthy details, ironic observations, and sharing some of your well-known traits. You can produce an interesting obituary if you are willing to forgo hiding behind a detached, boring, pedantic, or formal mask? You can add in literary qualities if you're ready to step away from a podium and join us at a café table, writing the same way you informally chat with your friends? If you can relax into this kind of moment, then your obit will become a compelling read.

TIPS FOR WRITING AN OBITUARY WORTH READING

The key to crafting a compelling obituary begins when you share a bit of yourself, your personality. Readers will be tickled when you disclose your values and beliefs, your favorite sayings, and lessons learned the hard way. We don't need to hear your confessions; that belongs in a memoir or diary. We are also intrigued by choices you made when coming to forks in the road. And toss in some humor, reveal your ability to laugh at yourself, and you bend the story towards our heart. Let me briefly illustrate this next.

Perhaps after years of volunteering at the food bank you got an award one day, and the next week received a pessimistic lab report from your doctor. How did you handle balancing enjoying doing good and getting bad news? Did you mutter to yourself *I guess no good deed goes unpunished*, then picked yourself up and soldiered onwards? Every reader can relate to this story.

Did you always get compliments for your attention to style and haircuts? Did you have a way of putting folks at ease? At the end of the sample obituaries in Part VI you'll find a jewel by and

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

about Wayne Keller. On the day I took his picture he sported a favorite sweatshirt reading *Over What Hill?! Where? When? I don't remember any hill?* Do wear a ball cap, button, or sweatshirt people looked forward to seeing you wear upon entering a room? Were you known for certain aptitudes, sayings, or satiric outlooks? Who did you belong to and why? Share with us the good stuff you are made from. Part II will help you gather up a basketful of the *good stuff*. These personal details and illustrations leaven your writing with a literary quality.

USING THESE QUICK-START TOOLS FOR A SHORT OBIT

Originally, I invited 12 people, and 10 immediately said yes. A small alarm went off in my head: *If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is*. But only three obits showed up by deadline. It was clear from this beginning that I needed some additional quick-start tools to help readers gain a foothold in the life-review hike.

I eventually realized that many of my early contributors were trying to cover too much at once. I believed they stalled out from overthinking the task. I realized I needed to help them first conjure up thoughts with pre-writing steps. I added the Tombstone exercise and urged them to try writing only short pieces from 40 to 400 words. I hoped the Tombstone exercise would help them focus on a few select experiences or aptitudes that mattered most in their lives. Luckily, I was able to also share Anne Crowley's 15-word obit I the first draft of this book. This began to pay off and I later received Daryl Grazia's 6-word obit and Garth delivered a photomontage with a single line caption. And it was in this phase that I learned to become a better Obit Writing Coach.

Need more examples of the value of succinctly summing up your life? Take a look at Larry Smith and Rachel Fershleiser's short and sweet writing approach in their book *Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure*. The following six examples are reprinted with Larry Smith's permission.

Time heals all wounds? Not quite.

—Jonathan Miles

I'm not afraid of anything anymore.

—Kathryn Hammond

Taking a lifetime to grow up.

—Mirona Iliescu

Followed rules, not dreams. Never again.

—Margaret Hellerstein

Never liked the taste of beets.

—Michael Pemberton

My life's a bunch of almos.

—Shari Bonnin

Marked time till 55, reborn thereafter.

—Doug Fraser

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

My early volunteer-obit-tribe kept bringing my attention back to how people get started writing a life-review. After thinking more deeply about how to help people get started, I began compiling a list of questions professional obituary writers use when interviewing family members. After that, it was a slam dunk to add a second writing tool based on those interview questions. Eventually, my search for samples worth reading brought me wonderful pieces from 6 to 900 words. I suspect most people are best served with a 250 to 600 word goal since both long and short pieces can be challenging.

USE THESE TOOLS WHEN ATTEMPTING A LONGER LIFE-REVIEW OBITUARY

Some readers will choose to follow the bread crumbs towards making the larger effort outlined in *Part III—Prompting A Deeper Life-Review*. My lesson in coaching life-review writers was deepened after trying to help my last three contributors revise their longer works. They could not easily figure out how to break free from the compiled data in order to enliven, revise and shorten their works. I returned to Part II to strengthen this section with additional examples, notes about adding humor, and suggestions for beginning and ending an obituary. Now, after having worked with a number of contributors I offer one warning before you attempt a longer life-review.

My last three contributors had gathered a dump truck load of material. As they approached the deadline for submission the overworked writers pulled the lever and dumped their entire contents into a lengthy birth-to-death report. These comprehensive pieces reported in depth about school years, various job titles, multiple awards or honors, different marriages, and a long string of residences. They produced solid, lengthy obituaries running well over 900 words.

They had accomplished the first part of contemporary obit writing by leaving out the Victorian clichés and detached formalistic prose. But, even the most fascinating life-review cannot keep the reader's attention when it is choked with too much particulars emphasizing dates, cities, jobs, and people's names. In the process of what I'd call *over-reporting*, their life-reviews read less like a story and more like a resume-listing.

As I explained to one contributor, I am only including obits that reveal how events, people, and personal challenges or choices shaped your life. I don't necessarily need to read about all your various degrees, but I do find it fascinating to hear how a particular school experience turned you in a new direction. The name of an award or medal by itself tells me just a smidgen about you. In addition tell us how the award reflects your values, personal growth, or character. Please elaborate on how the award or recognition shows (or even hides) your efforts to thrive or survive.

EVERYONE SHOULD START WITH THE PART II EXERCISES

This chapter has changed the most since the book was first born. Initially, it was inserted to help the original volunteer contributors get quickly started on their first draft. In fact, the earlier version of this chapter was called the *Quick-Start for Creating a First Draft*. Then I added tools to promote thinking beyond simply listing accomplishments, family members, and hobbies. I eventually add the *Tombstone* and *Self-Interview* exercises to help you find the wording and

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

story material that can make your obituary interesting, captivating, perhaps entertaining, and hopefully a bit insightful. And this way you'll be able to leave a small imprint or legacy on the sandy beach of time. The Part II exercises will definitely help you find your way to writing an obituary worth your reader's time.

As a result, I now encourage every reader to begin their writing journey here in Part II. After you try the *Tombstone* and *Self-Interview* exercise you will have gathered the details that help us understand what makes you tick. The Part II activities will not only get you up and running quickly, but it will also put you in touch with some of the most engaging parts of your life's story. These elements will help make your obituary worth reading. They provide you with an opportunity for capturing the examples and words that reflect your personality, character traits, values, and wisdom—the very qualities that make the reader want to take the writer out to a café or bar. The two powerful *quick-start* exercises follow next.

BEGIN WITH THE QUICK-START *TOMBSTONE* EXERCISE

Here, I'm bringing back to life the original *Tombstone* exercise created over 30 years ago for my young job seekers. This time, we ignore the career perspective and look at this exercise as a tool for quickly generating your beginning material for a life-review summary. The reproduced page prompt follows on the next page.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

WORKSHEET 8:

ONE DAY LEFT

Pretend that you have only one day left to live. You must make out your will. You must also decide what to put on your tombstone. Below is a tombstone. Fill in what you want people to remember you by:



Here lies: _____

Who was _____ years old. My closest friend once said I was:

My favorite teacher once said I was: _____

The funniest thing about me is my: _____

If I had lived longer, I always wanted to be a: _____

I am most proud of my ability to: _____

Most people don't know that I am pretty good at: _____

My favorite saying or motto is: _____

My advice to those of you still living is: _____

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

ADD IN DETAILS FROM THE *SELF-INTERVIEW* ACTIVITY

Many professional obituarists report gathering their raw material from families over the phone or in person through several visits or calls. In Marilyn Johnson's *The Dead Beat*, she reports what these gifted writers disclose at length about their interview process. Later Heather Lende vividly writes about what she learns through her extended visits and interviews with relatives and friends in her book, *If You Lived Here, I'd Know Your Name: News from Small-Town Alaska*. Let me attempt to distill some questions you can borrow from various obituary writers. You can use this list to interview yourself. Your goal is to tease out the details, the colorful pigments that brighten up the word-picture you are trying to paint. This activity will help you find the capital *P* in the personality you are trying to describe.

Start by imagining you are interviewing your best friend about you.* What might he or she say when asked some of these questions?

- 1) I never saw him without...
- 2) Her favorite nickname was...
- 3) He often took his time and was patient when doing...
- 4) She often tried avoiding...
- 5) He would lose all track of time when doing...
- 6) When required she would grudgingly agree to...
- 7) He often sounded like he had...
- 8) People would say she was the type of person who...
- 9) He always laughed at...
- 10) He always had a knack for...
- 11) People often sought her advice or help when...
- 11) He could effortlessly XYZ...She was always good at ABC...
- 12) You could make her angry or set her off by...
- 13) One of the funniest or silliest things he did was when...We still laugh about it.
- 14) We used to always tease her about ABC...and she took it well.

* Alternately, if you prefer, see if your partner or friend will answer these for you.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

15) One of the greatest challenges or decisions he had to make was about...

16) If I were to move away, I'd probably miss her most for...

When Writing For Others Use The Interview Questions To Round Out The Story

Writing an obit for my wife Judy took less effort than writing my own. After 40 years I knew what I thought was the most important aspects of her story, at least in my heart and mind's eye views. Then I sent the questions to six of her closest friends. They added lines and phrases describing qualities I liked, but for some reason overlooked. They also added humorous viewpoints. As a result, my final obit for Judy was a good deal richer and far more descriptive.

Bill Bailey's Self-Interview Obituary-Memoir

In 2015 I considered going to my 50th high school reunion and in the process re-found an old classmate living in nearby Seattle. Bill and I shared *good agony* over the decision to attend. We began our wonder years as chronological twins in the same place and time, the same cultural moment belonging to the 1960s. And though we took similar paths, we were also circling back to a somewhat similar point.

He also sent me a very moving article he wrote about our beloved Latin teacher. Working as both a lawyer and contributing author, Bill had developed his keyboard chops. Over email, phone calls and drinks we grew to realize that we had much in common. I became obsessed with wondering what kind of obit he could come up with.

Bill constantly turned me down on writing an obit. I never gave up and persisted as with other contributors. Then the wall developed cracks, and Bill wrote back:

Martin, I just thought I'd check in and say hello. Your living obituary concept continues to be an excellent focusing tool. It has caused me to step back regularly and reflect, asking, "Does this have real meaning or is it mere unthinking habit?" The answer varies, of course.

Dr. Samuel Johnson was so right when he observed centuries ago that death "concentrates the mind wonderfully." Boswell: "But is not the fear of death natural to man?" Johnson: "So much so, Sir, that the whole of life is but keeping away the thoughts of it.

In the dry, warm Autumn of 2015, Bill sent a go-ahead email, rewarding me for my persistence:

Martin, I often get some of my best ideas on my daily bicycle rides. In ruminating on your input from our conversation today, I decided to have my younger-self interview his 67 year old successor/counterpart.

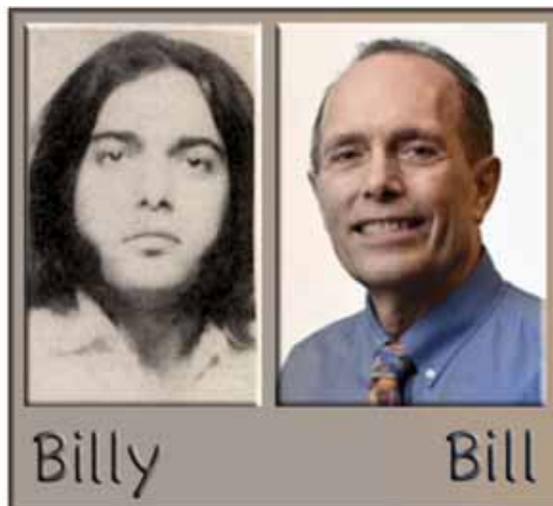
I immediately realized that his contribution was a wonderful and rich illustration of the **Self-Interview** technique. Bill's literary contribution included here, bridges between an obit and an memoir essay. He confessed that he has been writing these kinds of self-interviews in his journals since 1971.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

And so, dear reader, you and I won't be writing anything of this length or quality, but we can all enjoy and perhaps learn about the self-interview possibilities from Bill. Without further elaboration I present you Bill Bailey's self-interview by his Younger Self in 2015. I'm sure his interview material will help him in writing a future life-review obituary.

Younger Self: Billy, age 23, living in Bend Oregon, 1971, political science degree from the University of Oregon in 1970, married to Connie shortly after graduation. Trying to figure out which career path, film school, teaching or going to law school.

Billy: Whoa, dude, you look a LOT like Dad. Kind of freaks me out. Not much hair left on top, but you are trim. How much do you weigh?



Bill: [laughs] The same as in high school! Remember the vow as the 14-year-old caddie? “Whatever else happens, I am not going to turn into the Pillsbury doughboy like some of the club members.”

You are young now, but time pounds away at us and takes its toll. Vanity recoils. Mirrors and photos turn into unpleasant reminders. The only way around it is to die young like Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin. No thanks. I'd rather look like this and still be here.

Billy: I went to your Facebook page. You've been married to Sylvia for 38 years now. What happened to Connie?

Bill: The divorce can't be a total surprise to you. Remember the screaming match in the car out on front of her parents' house the night before the wedding?

Billy: How could I forget? We came so close to calling it off. When did it fall apart?

Bill: In Chicago, after we left the Oregon campus bubble world. It was her idea for me to go to law school there, remember?

Billy: Yeah. Eugene was the womb I never wanted to leave. But Connie said, “I've been in Oregon all my life. We should go to Chicago and have an adventure.” All I could think of was watching the Chicago Police beat the shit out of people at the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

Bill: Connie was right. Everyone was leaving Eugene eventually. Staying there would have turned into a nostalgia dead zone.

Billy: How was Chicago?

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

Bill: Rougher than I ever could have imagined, both law school and living in the city. We were so out of place, our hippie VW bus with Oregon plates and vision of a 1960's style revolution. I soon hunkered down in survival mode in school, overwhelmed with mountains of material and the harsh, "Are you a winner or a loser?" career focus. But I did manage to do social justice legal work I believed in, looking at the police, prisons and the mental health system. Connie was trying to figure out what came next for her too. We steadily drifted apart.

Billy: How much longer did the marriage last?

Bill: Less than two years, steadily slipping from present to past tense. Our mantra became "I can't live without you, but I can't live with you."

Billy: It always seemed nuts to me, but remember what Miss Murray used to say in the 2nd grade, "You learn more from failures than successes"?

Bill: She was right. This failure was one of the defining experiences of my young adult life.

Billy: How were things with Mom and Dad then?

Bill: I needed space from them, almost at the witness protection program level.

Billy: Wow, that bad?

Bill: Yeah, particularly Mom. It took her years to forgive you for wearing that double-breasted suit from the costume rental when you married Connie.

Billy: What was her deal? She went on and on, "Bill Bailey, I am SO embarrassed. You have disgraced the family. We will never live this down." At least Connie and our friends were impressed that I wore a suit and a tie.

Bill: And then you made matters worse, spending the money they gave you toward a trip to Hawaii on camping gear instead.

Billy: Let's move onto another subject. How did you learn to succeed in marriage?

Bill: Sylvia used to sing "Second Hand Rose" in our early years together, but I told her that it was better for me to make my worst mistakes on somebody else's watch. In addition, as my law school friend Gerald Moton always said, "Bailey, it is good to marry a woman smarter than you." .

Billy: You have three kids. What has fatherhood been like?

Bill: Delightful. Some of my happiest moments have been with my kids. Humbling too. I had this satori moment 20 years ago, driving along the freeway in the family station wagon with

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

Sylvia in the front and our three kids in the back. Steppenwolf's "Born To Be Wild" came on the oldies station. I thought of the then and the now, laughing and crying simultaneously. I still haven't learned to age gracefully and I totally blame you, constantly reminding me of things I said and did so long ago.

Billy: I never figured that you'd end up as just another bumbling suburban sitcom dad.

Bill: Hey there, hold your tongue and show some respect. I did it my way, not selling out. The only reason I moved to the suburbs is that I wanted my kids to stay in the public schools.

Billy: What about our Dad? Did you ever figure things out with him?

Bill: He was the tough one. Remember how you used to say, "He is so closed mouthed, he wouldn't talk in a POW camp even if they pulled his fingernails out."

Billy: Oh yeah, that's why I asked the question.

Bill: It was almost impossible to get his attention. Remember that cold winter Saturday morning when he didn't come to the front door for the longest time? You were 6 years old.

Billy: Oh yeah. Just the two of us at home. I went outside to check on my science project. The door locked behind me. I knew Dad was in the kitchen, but he didn't come when I knocked. I cranked up the pounding, still nothing. After a few cycles of this, I went ape shit into adrenaline overdrive, jumped down into the dirt, found a rock and flung it with all my might against one of the panes. The crash was so satisfying. And then, as summoned, he appeared, staring at me through the jagged edges of the freshly made hole. Even without my jacket, I knew it was time to make myself scarce. I turned and ran away, but not for long. It was too cold.

Bill: He did feel somewhat responsible for leaving you out there that long. And at age 6, all is quickly forgiven. I found ways to get Dad's attention without throwing rocks. There was an astonishing exorcism the year he died, My two brothers and I went back with him to the Indiana farmhouse where his own father had died suddenly 65 years before. It was like a haunted house to him. As we stood up in the third floor attic, my older brother Rob asked him the question, "Dad, what was it like for you in this house the day your Dad died?" All the pain came pouring out of him. His three sons were there to help him through it. We emerged as a real tribe for the first time. Walking down to the second floor hallway, we stood in a football huddle formation, then embraced like we never had before. Dad said, "Nothing can ever take the importance of this day from me." Norma, the lady who lived there, took our picture on the front porch as we left. It captures the power of what had happened perfectly.

A few months later, the last time I would see him, he and Mom came up for his 82nd birthday. He and I talked at the kitchen table until midnight the night before they flew off. As Dad and I got up and started to shuffle off to bed, he looked at me, paused, and said, with heart piercing sincerity, "You are the one I count on." Hugging me tightly, it was the perfect finish to our journey together. Who would have thought? I have marveled at the incredible luck since.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

Billy: Amazing. He NEVER talked about his feelings. So what about being a lawyer, how did you make that work? The way you described law school, it didn't seem too likely.

Bill: The honest answer is that it never totally fit my rebel nature, but I liked the constant mental challenge. Conflict is an inescapable part of the job and it took a big toll on inner peace. I don't like to fight with people all the time.

What made it worthwhile were the close ties to clients, many of whom had lived through some variation of my worst nightmare- parents whose child was killed, children who had lost a parent.

Compassion is one of the qualities in life that means the most to me, which is why I have such great respect for Buddhism. The kind of law practice I did after criminal justice work, representing trauma victims, required enormous compassion.

Teaching and writing tapped into the other parts of my brain that courtroom battles did not. Contact with my students, teaching colleagues and the classroom environment gave me the chance to go deeper.

Billy: Are you seriously a law professor now? Professor Kingsfield of "The Paper Chase," an imperial know-it-all with a stick up his butt?

Bill: [Laughs]. Kingsfield is pure caricature, I assure you. No student today ever would put up with him. The job I have now is one that I have wanted to do for more than 35 years. I started teaching part-time in 1980, told repeatedly that practitioners like me were not permitted in the legal academy on a full-time basis. But teaching was my passion and I refused to go away, steadily cranking up the level of my game in the classroom. The day came when the Dean at UW gave me the chance to prove that I could add value. At a time when most of my peers are retired or thinking about it, I am beginning a new career.

Billy: That sounds nuts to me. You hated law school. Why do onto others?

Bill: [Laughs]. A good point. But thankfully, law school is far different now than it was in the 1970's. I remain a 1960's social activist to the core, trying to live by the slogan, "If you aren't part of the solution, you're part of the problem," The law was the best way for me to attack injustice, though the form this takes has changed over time.

Billy: What about the students now, are they different than you were?

Bill: It is hard to describe. Just as dedicated to social justice. Not as vocal, but more trustworthy, grounded in compassion, commitment and pragmatic reality. A favorite student of mine gave the commencement address this past year. He lost both a brother and a sister while he was in law school. His reflected wisdom on this shows how he has blessed my life: "There are some things you never really get back up from, but you keep going because you have to. The sad truth is that the more times you get knocked down, the better you are at taking life's punches."

This same student concluded with a line that took my 2nd grade teacher Miss Murray's theory of learning from failure to a whole new level: "Every relationship fails, except the one that doesn't,

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

and part of what makes the one that doesn't so special is all the previous pain. So dance like everyone is watching, sing like everyone is listening, and love like you've been hurt."

The teacher learns as much or more from his students. After 40 years of wandering in the desert, I finally have found my bliss.

Billy: What are the most important things you think you have learned in life?

Bill: I have come to look on adult life as a process of trying to get reunited with the members of my lost tribe. When I was in college, like most, I often listened to The Beatles. Two songs I particularly liked were "I Get By With A Little Help From My Friends" and "All You Need Is Love." But I didn't have the life experience to really understand them then. I do now.

Billy: Do you have a legacy?

Bill: At 2 years old, our mom wrote in our baby book about a passionate sense of wonder and caring for the world and all the life forms on it. This is a birthright, which has remained unchanged. To the extent I have any legacy, it is this.



Graduation, 2015. Victoria Clark, a brilliant young lawyer who will change the world and one of her proud teachers. These are some of my happiest moments in life.

ROUND OUT YOUR OBIT WITH FAVORITE QUOTES OR HUMOR

To make your obit worth reading, even memorable, please add one of your favorite sayings, comedic or otherwise. Death is not offended by humor, any more than God is. But when you joke with Death he/she no longer remains a mystery, stops feeling morbid, and steps out of the taboo shadows. I find value in deploying funniness to put Death in the correct perspective on my horizon.

Upon reflection, I now realize that most of my life I've had long, personal conversations with God and Death. These constant dialogues remained as private companions in my life. They've often guided my most difficult decisions. In the end, once I worked out my viewpoint*, many of my life decisions became easier.

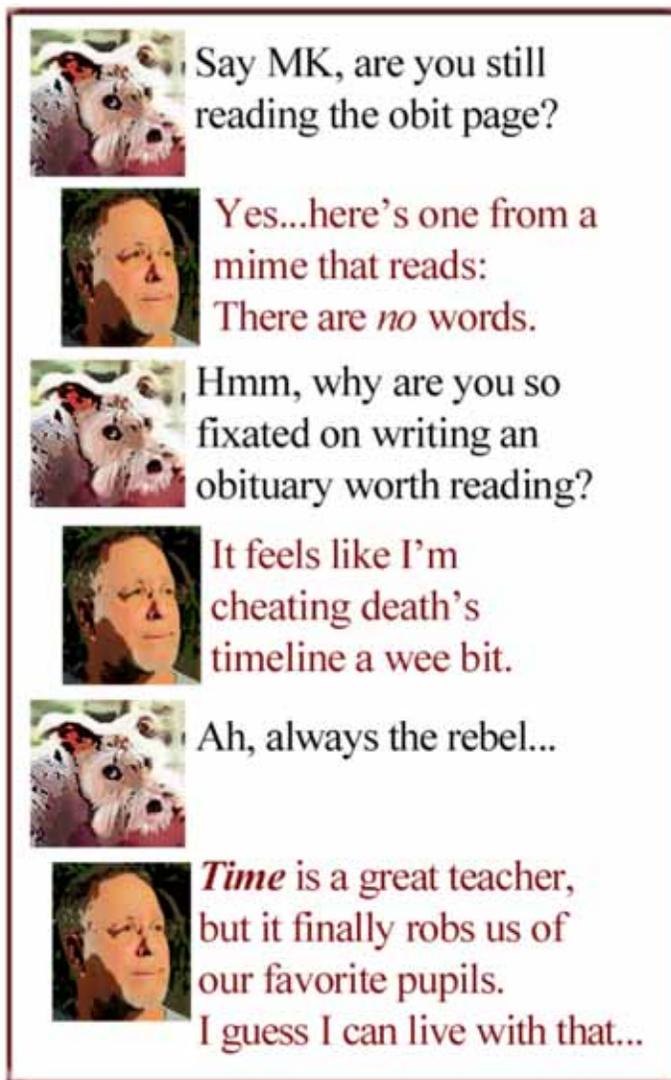
When my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer, I bought her a poster reading, "We laugh to survive." And we both use that as a guidepost in difficult moments. That is why I urge others to add some quality of the hah-hah to their story.

In my men's coffee group we have a monthly topic discussion. We've talked a bit about obits and such. One of the topics became a helpful prompt for injecting a touch of self-deprecating humor. The starter-idea is included next:

In the movie *Trainwreck* a rough-type father dies as he and his daughters try to repair their ruptured relationship. At his eulogy his daughter begins, "How many of you were pissed off by my dad raise your hand?" And all the hands go up. Then she asked, "How many found my dad one of the most interesting people you knew?" And again all the hands went up.

Could these lines be used at your funeral? And if not, what do you guess would be a funny way to start your eulogy or obituary?

Your humor does not have to be original. How about adapting a favorite saying? I eventually



Say MK, are you still reading the obit page?

Yes...here's one from a mime that reads:
There are *no* words.

Hmm, why are you so fixated on writing an obituary worth reading?

It feels like I'm cheating death's timeline a wee bit.

Ah, always the rebel...

Time is a great teacher, but it finally robs us of our favorite pupils.
I guess I can live with that...

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

added, “Martin always believed he could make *God laugh by telling him his plans.*” ** If you want some comedic prompting try going online for keywords *death* or *obituary humor*. Some will appeal as clever, while many are banal, and too many are tasteless. Another source can be found at: <http://www.greenberg-art.com/.Toons/Obits.html> Another angle involves searching for the phrases *humorous quotes* or *ironic quotes*. These more general terms can provide a broader base from which to draw comedic inspiration.

If you want to explore further how the comical can combine the spiritual there is no better title than *The Most Important Day of Your Life: Are You Ready?* Hospice counselor Rev. Maria Dancing Heart Hoaglund wrote this brief and poignant book. She deploys many different strategies in her book to help people release their fears and awkwardness around death. She relates the Buddhist-fireman’s observation made to her, “In Buddhism, birth is considered the hard part. Death is easy because we have the whole rest of our lives to prepare for it.” And as she explained later to me in an Olympia Death Café meeting, getting right with death might help in your earthly graduation to a higher level...and this can insure a much grander return trip. Whether you accept reincarnation or not, you will enjoy her book of stories. Most chapters end with a section entitled *Finding Humor In Death*.

FINISH BY BOOK-ENDING YOUR STORY WITH OBITUARY COMPONENTS

Between the book ends of birth and death lies the core of your life-review material. To give it that final obituary feel, it is important to finish off by adding a few standard introductory lines that include basic biographical information.

Try beginning with traditional sounding language like the following:

Your Name was born in YY, grew up in ABC, graduated from LMN and started a career in XYZ. (Your survivors will fill in the details.)

Some writers prefer to lead off with the death notice. Myself, I preferred to let it emerge in my story when I felt it was needed. These kinds of lines sound like the following:

Your Name passed away DD MM, YYYY at City, State. (Your survivors will fill in the details.)

At the other end of your obit, you might conclude with a summation of how you always wanted to be remembered.

Your Name always wanted to be remembered as/for...

I expanded on this notion when I wrote:

Martin believed he was born a hunter and gatherer of ideas. And now that he has pondered the questions that dominated his life, his essence has returned home to its cosmic star stuff. He lingers in the forever land, wandering, and still asking too many questions. Like you, he will return in some form to hunt and gather again.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

My wife's ends thusly:

Everyone will miss her ebullient and positive presence. She gave us laughter and taught us the wisdom of laughing at ourselves. Judy will be recalled as an entertaining storyteller and empathic listener.

Chris ended poetically by sharing his final decision:

When it came to deciding what was to occur with his remains, Chris was torn between his love for the sea or his lifelong commitment to military service. Chris chose to be laid to rest in a national cemetery with honors.

Laura, Chris's wife, leaves the reader with a good-bye moment for those who could not attend her celebration of life.

For those who cannot attend, Laura asks you to honor her memory by taking a moment to pause, look up into the trees, look out at the landscape, and breathe deeply, as you exhale, smile in Laura's memory.

Joy concluded:

Joy expressed the spirit of her name in meeting and connecting with people and in opening the world to her boys. She is forever in her happy place...

Lindsay offered up an advice line:

"...The things that make you unique are often what people criticize or ostracize the most. Pursue your passion, no matter what it takes."

And Carolyn Gilbert a professional obituary writer ends with the short and sweet lines:

She entered laughing . She lived. She loved. She really lived. She learned. She left...

When choosing how to start and end your obit the choice is wide open. It will never be perfect. It can always be revised later. What is important is that you got draft number one down on paper.

ONWARDS TO MORE RESEARCH OR EDITING AND REVISING

Voila, you've taken the first step towards generating a first draft!

This draft is just a starting point for this project. Any collection of words or images worth their salt merit your review, editing, and revising. An obituary always remains an unfinished work as long as you live.

Do you recall how you first approached completing a health directive before surgery or even writing a will? Wasn't it a bit creepy to ponder at first? Then you paid the lawyer big bucks, drew up your will, and perhaps wrote out a medical directive. And surprise—it turned out to be no big deal. In fact, if you have lived long enough, you probably have updated both documents without much creep factor involved.

And like your will or health directive, you can come back any time and update your obit. The pressure is off to get it right on the first draft.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

Now you are at the point of choosing two paths in the pursuit of your life-review obituary. You can begin carving out your first draft following the suggestions here in Part II. Or, you can go longer and deeper by heading into *Part III—Prompting A Deeper Life-Review*. Whatever you choose, whenever you finish draft one, everyone needs to stop by *Part IV—Drafting and Revising* to polish their apple. Mission completed!

RESOURCES

I do not pretend to share to be an exhaustive listing on the topics of death, obituaries, and life-reviews (which might require another book in itself). These resources schooled me well in the so-called dark art of reporting on a life well lived. I learned more than I can ever convey.

General Obituary Background Easily Found Online

This project began by searching the Internet with this keyword phrasing: *The Art Of The Obituary*. A second search lead off with keywords containing *Celebration of Life Events*. My favorite links are listed below in case you want to wander amongst the hyper-links in blue.

Walter Cronkite reflects on the nature of writing obits of the famous

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5353784>

Minnesota Public Radio asks the hard questions

<http://blogs.mprnews.org/newscut/2015/05/burmas-g-i-jill/>

Examples from Bob Collins Art of the Obituary Blog

<http://blogs.mprnews.org/newscut/2015/03/the-art-of-the-obituary-death-of-the-captain/>

Interview with Margalit Fox, a senior writer at the *New York Times*

<http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/09/23/the-art-of-the-obituary-an-interview-with-margalit-fox/>

Commentary by writers at the *London Telegraph*

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/9047401/The-Art-of-the-Obituary.html>

About The Living Wake in Australia

<http://www.distinguishabledays.com/2011/07/a-living-wake-is-a-celebration-of-life/>

and more at

<http://www.distinguishabledays.com/category/death-dying-living-wake-memorial-funeral/>

General Background About Changing Attitudes Towards Death

Denise Carson author of *Parting Ways, New Rituals and Celebrations of Life's Passing*

Blog is at:

<http://ourlifecelibrations.com/2012/04/living-funeral-the-grandest-life-celebration/>

The Canadian National Post magazine discusses our evolving attitudes towards death from new ethical questions, life extended online, the rise of the Death Cafes, cryonics, and new rituals.

<http://news.nationalpost.com/news/the-full-death-issue-how-we-die-now>

Death Café for cake and conversations. The meteoric international rise of 2350 Death Cafes across 31 countries speaks to changing views about death and life. This Cafe/Salon movement is popular with an entire range of folks from young to older. They meet for cake, conversation and

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

sharing thoughts about their mortality. These conversations encourage participants to make the most of their finite lives.

<http://deathcafe.com>

Online Resources About Life-Reviews

A short history about the evolution of using life-reviews with the elderly can be found here.

http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Life_Review.aspx

The University of Missouri-St. Louis has a well regarded gerontology graduate program. Their observations and methods are summarized on online at:

http://www.umsl.edu/~meusert/LifeReview/what_is_life_review.html

Wellness Through Reflection: Recalling the Past and Envisioning the Future by Lorie Roy is available from the Library Worklife web site. This excellent summary applicable to everyone at every stage. This document can be found at:

<http://ala-apa.org/newsletter/2012/05/05/wellness-through-reflection-recalling-the-past-and-envisioning-the-future/>

International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR)

For my purposes I found this to be the largest umbrella on the topic of life-review. They take an interdisciplinary point of view and share in the areas of practice, research, education, volunteer and individual application.

<http://reminiscenceandlifereview.org/>

Favorite Obituary Writing Resources Online

Society Of Professional Obituary Writers Here you'll find links to more books at:

<http://www.societyofprofessionalobituarywriters.org/books.html>

Obituary Guide.com has innumerable tips, resources, and the samples. I especially enjoyed David McConkey's article *Writing Your Own Obituary Offers Chance for Reflection* found at:

<http://obituaryguide.com/writing-your-own-obituary-chance-for-reflection.php>

Blog of Death

Jade Walker has created a blog most obituarists consult regularly. She spent time on the very popular New York Times *Portraits of Grief*. Her blog has published over 1,600 obituaries and 28,000 tributes. www.blogofdeath.com

Books and Papers I Highly Recommend

My personal obituary collection is book-ended by Atul Gawande and Denise Carson's titles at one end and Marylyn Johnson and Jim Sheeler at the other end. Gawande and Carson share a somber message about mortality and how end of life experiences have evolved. I also enthusiastically recommend Johnson's wildly humorous look into the world of obituary writing and Jim Sheeler's memorable accounts.

Parting Ways, New Rituals and Celebrations of Life's Passing. Denise Carson. 2011. University of California Press.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

Legacies Aren't Just For Dead People: Discover Happiness and a Meaningful Life by Creating and Enjoying Your Legacies Now! Robb Lucy. Engage Communications Inc. Vancouver, BC.2015. Lucy does a great job expanding on options for creating a living legacy. His chapter and thoughts about Legacy Letters is worth the price of admission.

Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End. Atul Gawande. Metropolitan Books. 2014. This 5-star book has moved many of its readers to a deeper understanding of the essential questions faced at the end of life. Gawande offers insights about living as autonomously and joyfully as possible with dignity to the end. One commentator wrote, *A clear-eyed, informative exploration of what growing old means in the 21st century.*

Celebrating Lives: The Art and Craft of the Obituary. Carol Klacik, 2011. A personal, well-researched, and engaging study worth everyone's time. You can write Carol for a PDF version by emailing her at emailforklaciks@comcast.net

Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure. Edited by Rachel Fershleiser and Larry Smith. 2008. Harper. This is perfect for those preferring a short, pithy, often humorous summary.

If You Lived Here, I'd Know Your Name: News from Small-Town Alaska. Heather Lende. Algonquin Books. 2006. Lende's popular piece describes the fulfilling and engaging work she discovered by writing obituaries in a small, close-knit, isolated town. In the process she meets with the families and reports on the larger story background of her subjects.

Find the Good: Unexpected Life Lessons from a Small-Town Obituary Writer. Heather Lende. Algonquin Books. 2015. Lende is one of my favorite writers—wholesome, funny, accessible. The title says it all, a well-reviewed book on Amazon and other sites.

The Dead Beat. Marilyn Johnson. 2006. Harper. Learn about the entire world of obituary writing. Johnson describes the emergence of our golden age of obituaries that now compete for readership with the front page headlines and the back page comics.

Obit: Inspiring Stories of Ordinary People Who Led Extraordinary Lives. Jim Sheeler. Penguin Books. 2007. This and his other book are solid resources and often cited by those who want to learn the art of writing an obituary. This title sits squarely in the middle of my obit library shelf. It ranks up in the top five books I have enjoyed in the last 20 years.

Other works by Kimeldorf

My poetry, play scripts, and titles related to photography, cooking, work and leisure, retirement, aging, humor and spiritual work can now be found at <http://www.martinkimeldorf.org/> I'm trying to keep everything free in my final digital potlatch. If interested in photography, you may also like to visit my Flickr site at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/martinsphotoart/>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This booklet emerged in final form after the editorial care and attention lavished on it by many hands. It will never be perfect but it perfectly suits my vision for this topic. Let me acknowledge the many people who helped bring this work to this point.

I deeply thank Judy Kimeldorf for her countless patience and constant guidance. Curt Rosler's and Jim Weber's early enthusiasm and critical feedback helped this project get born. The following people provided editorial feedback along the way drafting and revising this work: Sara Rucker, Bill Bailey, Sandy Spencer, Vicki Scannel. And my final two editors operated like midwives in the critical last moments: Barbara Cooke from Funeral Alternatives of Washington and Joy Lower, freelance editor.

Writing An Obituary Worth Reading

What ~~They~~ I Say About This Book...

This book was completely assembled at home—from covers to interior pages! I'm striving to retain the homemade look and feel and spirit in my final book.

I did not pay commercial editors to tell me how to make this book marketable, nor succumb to slick design templates. I did not buy "reviews-for-hire." You won't be able to *like* this book on a Facebook page, gather a tweet about it, or watch me in a cutesy YouTube promising how this book will make you richer, happier, or more popular. Do you see any endorsement and testimonials? Nope. All that counts is your opinion. Thumb the first few pages and if you like what you scan, take it out for a spin. You can read the first half for free at my website: martinkimeldorf.org → Soulwork (at top) → Writing An Obituary Worth Reading—Sampler (at bottom of page)

I'm proud my final title lays claim to an authenticity from a bygone era. After all, this book reflects the deep, rich tradition of obituary writing. Thankfully, the obit game has gotten a make-over. Many contemporary life-reviews employ a literary style that makes them worth reading. Today's obits are built with wit, conversational language, lyrics, and humble story telling. In the process, they become brief memoirs. Today's bios reveal how people have lived their lives and how they want to be remembered.

Today's renaissance in the life-story sketch will eventually make the obituary page as compelling as the comics. This book includes obituaries written by my neighbors and acquaintances. I believe my friends' stories demonstrate that ANYone can write an obit worth reading. Come join the ranks of these lively contributors, ranging in age from 19 to 80+. Come and join us in conducting a fulfilling life-review.

About Martin Kimeldorf

Martin began writing 60 years ago, publishing his first work with a mimeograph machine and stapler. He went on to sign publishing contracts about BBQ cooking, photography, romantic poetry, workaholism, drama, career portfolios, volunteering, journal writing, and aging. He has won teaching, and writing awards on various topics.

He enjoys performing magic tricks, painting, playing a blues harp, and taking long walks with his wife Judy and dog Franky in Tumwater, Washington.



I GIVE, YOU GIVE

Draft #4

I try to give the digital form of this booklet away for free whenever possible. If you want to enjoy the free version of this book please make a contribution in your name and mine to either of the two non-profit groups listed next.

As long as I have time and ability to respond, I will send you the remainder of the book after you make a contribution. **Before** contributing, **first** write to me and explain the kind of proof of donating you will send me. Write me at: Kimeldorf@comcast.net



I'll respond using another email address and tell you if I can send you the remainder of the book. Then you can make your donation.

Martin Kimeldorf

The Little Red School House

My wife helps run this nonprofit group who support kids returning to school each fall. They collect clothing and school supplies for these prospective students.

See: <http://www.redschool.org/WhoWeAre.php>

Make checks payable to *Little Red Schoolhouse* and address them to:

Little Red Schoolhouse
P.O. Box 6302
Olympia, WA 98507

The Public Library System In Gander Newfoundland, Canada

I want to support the generous spirit expressed during Operation Yellow Ribbon on 9/11 by the people of this remarkable city. The people of Gander opened their hearts and small town to passengers from all over the world when 40 international flights had to be emergency landed during the terrorist attack in the US. Their spirit stands in stark contrast to the mean-spirited times we live in today. An article giving background can be found at:

<http://mentalfloss.com/article/31491/september-11th-and-hospitable-people-gander-newfoundland>

Please direct checks and inquires to:

Divisional Librarian
Central Division, Newfoundland and Labrador Public Libraries
6 Bell Place, P.O. Box 3333
Gander, NL A1V 1X2