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Replacement Child – A Memoir

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Guest Post –

Writing a Memoir Poses Difficult Decisions and Startling Discoveries

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When I started writing Replacement Child, I thought it would be a pretty straightforward task of remembering, writing, organizing—and hopefully making sense of my life until now.

I had no idea.

The best thing I did to jump-start my writing was to join a writing workshop. It gave me a deadline to have something to read each week, and helped me put a writing regimen in place. I started each day writing for at least two hours and up to four hours. I noticed that after that time, my writing suffered. Sorry to say that I worked on my corporate client writing in the afternoons. Sorry guys.

My workshop pals were the first to encourage me, and to make me work harder at my craft. I am so grateful for their insight and honesty in those sessions.

Memories—What Memories?

At first, I thought I had no memories at all. I couldn't remember a thing about my childhood or growing up. Maybe I should have realized that this was part of my reason for writing the story, at the risk of being cliché—to find myself. Then, after at least six months of mining my memory, I couldn't stem the flood of stories.

My writing came in the form of scenes. I almost thought about them as movie shorts. There was no order to my remembering, so my writing had no cohesive structure for a very long time. It was a series of seemingly unrelated moments in my life—until I took a look at them as a whole and started recognizing themes. Even then, I reorganized my chapters at least five times. If it wasn't in printed form, I would probably still be doing that!

Honesty is Hardly Ever Heard

As I wrote the scenes and episodes for Replacement Child, I came smack up against the things I didn't want to remember: resentment that I denied my whole life; feelings of being outside of my family; anger at my father; my failed marriages. Or, I didn't want to delve into my feelings about those times. I would initially gloss over those parts, but reading them in workshop, and getting feedback from my group, I saw that those were the very topics I needed to explore and expand on if I was going to write an honest memoir that would uncover the truths I needed to discover.

Am I a Replacement Child?

Coming to realize that I was indeed a “replacement child” for my sister who was killed in the plane crash, was the most difficult—but beneficial—truth I was to uncover. It has explained to me many of my life decisions, my attitudes and my conflicts. I also truly believe that this understanding has helped me forgive—especially my father. Talking with other replacement children recently, I'm finding that none of us thinks of ourselves this way until the facts are laid out for us. In my case—I did it myself. Then, the commonalities of our experiences are startling.

Who's Story Is It Anyway?

Then there were the questions of how much to tell. In my case, I struggled with how to fulfill the responsibility to my parents to tell their true story and be faithful to their memory. And, there were things I unearthed about my parents that they may not have wanted told. How to handle that? Until her sudden death this past summer, my sister Linda was my touchstone on many of these issues. But, even we didn't agree on all of it. Being older, she knew more than I did about my parents—and it took her a long time to clue me in.

My other hurdle in writing Replacement Child was that because I always felt I was an insignificant part of the story, I had to work hard to find my role. This was not unlike my real-life conundrum of figuring out who I was in this family drama—a common problem for a “replacement child.” In this way, my four years of writing was a journey of self-discovery.