

KNOW THYSELF

I Am From

I am from Avis and Frank, Agnes and Fred, Glessie May and Mark.

From the Ozark Mountains and the high plains of eastern Colorado,

from mountain snowmelt and southern creeks with water moccasins.

I am from oatmeal eaters, gizzard eaters, haggis and raccoon eaters.

I am from craziness, darkness, sensuality, and humor.

From intense do-gooders struggling through ranch winters in the 1920s.

I am from "If you can't say anything nice about someone, don't say anything," and "Pretty is as pretty does" and "Shit-muckely brown" and "Damn it all to hell."

I am from no-dancing-or-drinking Methodists, but cards were okay except on Sunday, and from tent-meeting Holy Rollers, from farmers, soldiers, bootleggers, and teachers.

I am from Schwinn girl's bike, 1950 Mercury two-door, and *West Side Story*.

From coyotes, baby field mice, chlorinous swimming pools,
Milky Way and harvest moon over Nebraska cornfields.
I am from muddy Platte and Republican,
from cottonwood and mulberry, tumbleweed and switchgrass,
from Willa Cather, Walt Whitman, and Janis Joplin.
My own sweet dance unfolding against a cast of women in
aprons and barefoot men in overalls.

When I researched *The Middle of Everywhere*, I asked refugees to write "I Am From"-type poems as they struggled to find themselves in a new country and language. They followed a formula with each line beginning with "I am from." Writing this kind of poem is a way to experiment with identity issues. The poem must include references to food, places, and religion. You might want to give it a try.

If you look back on your life, most likely you will be able to trace a trail from the present to deep into your past. Pivotal events shaped your core values. Certain people and experiences interested you. You had talents, and ways you spent your time. Most likely, you cared about certain things—school, sports, animals, politics, religion. The trail into your past may be linear or meandering; or, at some point, it may have taken a sharp right turn.

You possess an innate temperament, a belief system, and a work ethic. By now, most likely, you have a sense of your weaknesses as well as your strengths, your blind spots as well as your unique gifts. You know what people like and dislike about you. All this self-knowledge allows you to write with your own grand themes, your

own passions, even your own flaws, at your service. As Willa Cather wrote, "An artist's limits are quite as important as his powers. They are definite assets, not a deficiency, and go to form his flavor and personality."

Our writing comes from our being. The deeper we explore our souls, the deeper and therefore richer will be our writing. Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön writes that the Buddhist conception of equanimity is "a banquet to which everyone is invited." She is referring to an open acceptance of all experience, both our inner experiences and experiences we have in the world outside ourselves. Our sensibilities, our moral outlook, and our point of view are what we writers have to offer the reader. Only when we know who we are can we fully offer this gift. Keep in mind that fuzzy thinking leads to fuzzy writing. With inner clarity, we present readers with reflective, honest work.

Of course, the road goes both ways. Writing can teach us who we are. Certain issues and life themes persistently emerge in our work. After writing seven books, I realized that two themes over-arched each book's theme. No matter what I selected to explore, I returned to my consuming interests—the passing of time, what things change and what things remain the same, and the effects of culture on relationships and mental health.

Just as my childhood colors all my writing, so your past will color yours. As you read my story, I hope you will want to take inventory of your own early lessons about the world, your hopes and fears, your life themes, even your sense of calling. You might consider tackling a short autobiography about how you came to be who you are today.

We are all a paradoxical bundle of rich potential that consists of both neurosis and wisdom.

—PEMA CHÖDRÖN

I was the oldest child in a big, complicated family. My father, Frank, was from the Ozarks; my mother, Avis, was from the high plains of eastern Colorado. They met when both were stationed in San Francisco during World War II, and they got married in Muir Woods wearing their Navy uniforms. Both grew up poor during the Depression, but while my mother's family was puritanical, serious, and intellectual, my father's was earthy, fun-loving, and emotional. My parents had a lot of nerve thinking they could get along for a lifetime.

When I was a girl, Mother worked as a doctor in small towns in Nebraska and Kansas. At various times, Dad worked as a lab technician; raised pigeons, geese, and hogs; and sold livestock feed or life insurance. Dad's mother lived with us some of the time. Cousins came for the summer. Other relatives visited and stayed for weeks at a time.

I slept on a daybed just off the dining room. At night, I lay awake and listened to grown-ups joke and laugh. I heard political arguments, shop-talk, and gossip. Around midnight, the adults would grow sleepy, and Dad would bribe them to keep talking or play cards by asking, "If I fried up some steaks and cut the pies, would you stay up?"

Most of my family was rural poor. Only Aunt Margaret and Uncle Fred, who lived in Los Angeles, had money and could be

called wealthy. My other aunts were schoolteachers or homemakers, and Uncle Max sold Dr Pepper, Uncle Otis ran a general store, Uncle Clair farmed, and Uncle Lloyd hunted elk and cut down timber in northern Idaho. Some were deeply religious, some not. I heard many theological arguments from family members who were Church of Christ, Southern Baptist, Methodist, Unitarian, or who simply liked to sleep in on Sunday morning.

From this opinionated group, I got quite an education on point of view. Aunt Betty's children had to be in bed by 7 p.m. They were not allowed to play cards, dance, or listen to rock 'n' roll. When my cousin Stella was twelve, her dad told her not to get "knocked up," but that if she did get knocked up to come tell him. He had a shotgun ready. Other parents were more lenient. Cousin Anna wore makeup and skimpy tops that revealed her ample bust. She flirted outrageously with the skinny boys who came to read comics and play marbles with my brothers.

Dad subscribed to *Human Events*, an ultraconservative magazine, and he even considered joining the John Birch Society, which, fortunately, Mother vetoed. Yet both my parents were unflaggingly generous. Dad's friends learned never to admire anything he owned or he would insist on giving it to them. Mother offered free medical care to anyone who needed it, and she sent money to my school so that all the children could receive *Weekly Readers*.

Grandmother Agnes was a Democrat, Grandfather Fred a Republican, and Grandmother Glessie worked for "the independent party of biscuits and gravy." Meanwhile, when my liberal aunt Margaret visited she would invite me to accompany her on errands so that she could explain to me what a conservative idiot my

father was. She would scowl and say, "Don't listen to a thing your parents say about politics. The sooner you lose their ideas, the better."

Growing up in such a family, I was constantly asking why. Why did this aunt marry that uncle? Why was one cousin so gentle, another so rough and mean? Why did some adults hate FDR and others love him? Why was the God of one side of the family so tolerant and forgiving and the God of another side so willing to let children burn in hell if they have not been properly baptized? Why did one uncle advise me to pursue my education, another warn me to avoid college if I hoped to marry? For that matter, why did almost all my relatives pour gravy over their food, while my aunt Margaret served it under hers and called it sauce?

I feel lucky to have been born into a family that passionately expressed such divergent points of view. All I had to do was lie in bed and think over the day's conversations to understand that there were no absolute truths, only the truths of many well-meaning but humanly flawed people. Also, I was fortunate there were no really mean-spirited people in my family. People may have been misguided, confused, foolish, or just plain wrong, but nobody robbed or deceived anybody for money. In fact, money had almost nothing to do with anything when I was growing up. Everybody focused on food, religion, politics, good times, and stories.

From the perspective of fifty-eight years, I can see that my life has been a series of stories. I listened to my grandmother's stories while still a toddler. As I biked around Beaver City, or sat under the elms in the park at night with my friends, I was on the lookout for stories. My mother spun out stories as we drove to the small-town hospitals where she visited her patients. She told me stories

as we drove snowy country roads making house calls, or followed Highway 24 to Flagler to visit her folks. She described life on a ranch during the Dust Bowl and Depression. And she fashioned narratives from the great web of history—Joan of Arc, Marie Antoinette, Napoleon, Czar Nicholas and his family. She described movies she loved: *Dark Victory*, about a selfish woman who changes as she loses her eyesight; and Alfred Hitchcock's *Lijebock*, about a sinking rowboat that has to be emptied of its passengers one by one so that it can stay afloat. Mother favored intense stories that turned on character. She was interested in moral choices, and in what William Faulkner called "the heart in struggle against itself." So am I.

Uncle Otis spent his days in his general store sipping orange sodas and spinning yarns in front of the potbellied stove in winter or on the porch in summer. While my aunt Grace rang up groceries, pumped gas, and operated the tiny post office in the back, Otis chatted with his pals about fishing trips, mule and cattle trades, bootleggers, and men from the IRS.

This was a pre-television world, and people were accustomed to entertaining each other. As Grandmother Agnes and I did dishes, she told me stories about her mother, who came to America as a bond slave from Scotland, and about my grandfather's family, many of whom died of cholera in Iowa. Neighbors shared stories, as did my mother's patients. As I worked at her clinic, counting pills into bottles and sterilizing gloves and surgical packs, I heard plenty.

I always could invent stories to entertain my friends. I would narrate them as we lay in the hayloft or under the stars, or as we passed the time on porches on rainy summer afternoons. When I

was alone, I cut out the models from our Monkey Wards' catalogue and organized them into families. I would even invent stories while hanging up the clothes, having one pair of underpants marry another, then hanging little sock children with cute names beside them.

One of my earliest photos shows me asleep in the crib with a magazine on my face. I "read" in bed even then. As a young child, I had a stressful life because of Mom being in medical school and Dad fighting in Korea. When I wanted attention and nurturance, books were soothing. They helped me sleep when I was afraid of the dark. Later, they stimulated me when I was bored, and kept me company when I felt lonely.

Grandmother Agnes always asked me what I was reading and if I would read it aloud to her. She admonished me, "Choose your books as carefully as you choose your friends." In junior high, my English teacher unfolded and passed around yellowed letters written by soldiers during World War II. Several wrote to say that the poems they had memorized in her class kept them from going crazy during the long nights of shelling. "You see, students," she would intone, "poetry can save your life."

By late elementary school, I had read every book in the children's section of the Beaver City library. That wasn't as ambitious as it sounds, the entire library being no larger than most living rooms. I loved stories about heroic children. I devoured the biographies of Helen Keller, Joan of Arc, and Eleanor Roosevelt, who, like me, was an ugly duckling and not popular with boys. I cried reading *Death Be Not Proud* by John Gunther. I earnestly tried to live up to the ideals set forth in Pat Boone's *Twist Twelve and Thirty*, my first self-help guide.

I wasn't much for romance novels, although I did read Helen Wells's cheesy Cherry Ames, Student Nurse series, in which Cherry falls for one good-looking young doctor after another in one exotic medical setting after another—cruise ships, Alaskan mountain towns, and hospitals on tropical islands. I even read the Vicki Barr, Flight Stewardess series, also by Helen Wells. It completely miseducated me about the nature of airline travel, something I was to learn about later in life.

My favorite novels were *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, about a sensitive yet strong Irish immigrant girl, and *The Silver Sword*, the story of a heroic Polish girl who cared for her younger siblings and other children after her parents were taken away during World War II. I even choreographed a *Silver Sword* game for an entire summer for the neighborhood kids, transforming our root cellar into our shelter in Warsaw. Of course, I played the older sister who taught school and kept the other children safe and secure.

By junior high, I was an archetypal bluestocking nerd. I religiously studied a book called *How to Build a Better Vocabulary*. I wrote down words I read or heard and looked them up. I memorized definitions, but, sadly, not pronunciation, and like many readers I mispronounced many of the words I had read but never heard spoken aloud. In high school, I tried to organize a great books club that would meet after school and discuss Euripides, Plato, Shakespeare, and John Stuart Mills. No one joined.

From all this reading, I discovered how differently things were done in other places. I came to see that, everywhere, life is made up of choices, and that people can either behave well or poorly no matter what the circumstance.

I inhabited the kind of roomy childhood that almost no

children today do. In the early 1950s, in Beaver City, Nebraska, children were blessed with an abundance of time and space. I had some responsibilities, but mostly I was free—free to read all day in our clubhouse, which was the attic above an old car shed; free to ride my bike out to Beaver Creek; free to climb trees, or just lie in the grass and watch clouds; free to peruse comics and charge vanilla phosphates at the drugstore.

I did not have dance or drama lessons, and I was not on the soccer team. But I was stimulated by my Beaver City universe, with its cast of characters as diverse and tragic as any play by Shakespeare. Since my parents didn't chauffeur me anywhere, I met the world unmediated by them. I formed my own relationships and my own opinions. I learned to depend on myself for entertainment and stimulation in a way that television-raised children cannot understand. And I learned conversational skills from a generation who knew how to talk.

My inner cast of characters hasn't changed much over the years. Many of my people are gone now, but I meet others who seem to have something of my mother, my grandmother, my best friend, or my mean and stupid physical education teacher in them. And when my own children grew up and moved out of state, I found young people who seemed to possess "essence of Zeke" or "essence of Sara." Primary relationships create our ways of understanding the world. And language mediates these relationships.

I hope you will attempt to walk down your own trail into the forest that is your past. Perhaps you will construct a timeline, beginning with the story of your birth, then slowly adding the milestones of your experiences. You may want to organize your story

by place, by defining moments, by life themes, or with an account of your struggle to answer certain questions: Am I good? Am I worthy of respect? Am I crazy? Am I understood? Or perhaps you will choose to build your narrative around relationships in your life, or even by such domains as work, religion, food, or play.

We all have stories to tell. However, we do not necessarily know what they are and why they are important. Writing can help us see why our stories matter, and why we feel a sense of urgency to tell them. Carefully considered, our stories can shed light on our moral assignments.