

Constellating

Constellating: (See Ch. 14 of Writing the Natural Way, 2nd ed).

Natural writing happens when you tap your pattern-seeking right hemisphere and let ideas spill out. I suggest that, for a period of weeks or months you write clustered vignettes, each taking no more than 2-5 minutes. When you have a bouquet of vignettes, you begin to shape them into a constellation. I write in WTNW:

A vignette is a "tendriled vine," containing all the attributes of the mature vine. .

. . Constellations are a number of stars considered as a group—or it could refer to a group of people, or related thoughts. For us, wanting to write, we connect many of our vignettes into a larger whole. The whole is in the part; a constellation is a story-sized chunk which wants to be re-designed because our lives are not fixed but open-ended, made up of smaller stories. Natural writing is done in clusters, in chunks, in fractals, in holograms, so that the whole is evident in every part. Meaning happens, according to James Olney, only "when the elements that go to make up that thing" show an emerging pattern. Two examples below are two-minute Autobiography "vignettes"; the writers don't know yet where the big picture is taking them:

Drill (2-minute Autobiography)

"Drill" to me is a nightmare. I never minded arithmetic or grammar drills in school; I could do them, and they gave me a sense of security. But I can't think of those drills without a crowd of other images bursting forth. I see my father, bending close to my face, say with horrible enunciation, "can't you drill that into your thick skull?! For someone who's supposed to be so intelligent, you sure are stupid!" At the same time I see an overlaid image of a real drill, drilling into plywood and showering sawdust everywhere. And I see, too, my brother is green marching endlessly with a composure of my father and my high school P.E. teacher barking orders at him. For good reason the word drill rhymes with kill. --Nancy

My Story (2 minute Autobiography)

All winter long I have been collecting bits of smoothly polished glass that the ocean has deposited on the beach at Rio del Mar. I'm careful to choose only the very smooth ones — no sharp edges and no shiny surfaces. This collecting process will have taken me approximately eight months by the time June arrives. It has taken the ocean at least several months to turn out the finished product.

In June I intend to go down to the beach and create what will undoubtedly be a remarkable work of art. Having first dug an appropriate hole, I will arrange the bits of glass in whatever pattern pleases me. Over this will be poured plaster of paris mixed with sea water. After covering it with a damp layer of sand to prevent very rapid drying, the sand casting will be ready to dig out in about three hours.

In the space of three hours I will have captured time belonging to the eternal ocean and the changing seasons. --Student

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Example Two is a completed Autobiography, fashioned from 12 weeks of writing 2-minute Autobiographies, now tied together with a focus and a frame:

A Musical Tragedy

She killed the violin,
The honey-colored frame
Shattered. The strings
Hung limp, impotent.

She had to kill the violin.
They needed her to do it
To preserve their fear of the unknown
Intact
The violin threatened the delicate balance
Where no one exceeded the boundaries
Of modest ambition.

She killed the violin.
 It affronted her father's wallet,
 Occasionally soothed by embarrassed
 Pride in her public accomplishments,
 He bought the pretty picture:
 The ruffled dress, the Mary Janes,
 The long curls, and the violin.
 Charming on a little girl,
 But adults don't play violins.
 Its presence made him uncomfortable as she grew.
 He expected her to be entirely conventional.
 Better she should learn to type.

The violin frightened her mother
 who knew from experience
 That ambition can only hurt,
 Who dedicated her life to
 Protecting her children from pain, and
 Who knew that women who expressed themselves
 Outside of their families

Became brittle part-people
 Who never knew the joys of suffering
 On behalf of their children.
 Better she should learn to cook.

The violin angered her brother
 Who never could catch up to her
 In anything,
 whose attempt to play the oboe
 was a tragicomic event
 In the family's history
 If only she would slow down,
 Give him a chance to shine.
 Better she should get married
 and go away. --Student

Three Days and Three Nights

Duc Trinh had written several vignettes which he then wove together into a "vine." The secret of moving beyond a vignette is to realize that all vines begin as vignettes. When we organize our vignettes into a constellation, we achieve a sense of completion in a life experience you've had that you will not forget. Here you give this experience shape and form. Duc Trinh (18 years old) (after the painting Under the Wave off Kanagawa) Day of new chapter: Fleeing was what I did, eight years old. What did I know? Father and brother I fled with. Boat was what we used. Spaces we had to share. People I never met. Ocean I never knew. Pitch black it was in this wet. How sad it was, I thought, country you once knew was now in the past. Day two of new chapter: Hot it was in the day. Foot was nowhere to be found. Waves were so rough, I vomited so much. Water was only so little. I had only that much. Body began to get weak, mouth was so dry. Lying was all I did. The night was beautiful, stars were so bright, but I couldn't see-- vision was beginning to fade. Day three of new chapter: "Food and water," I cried. Still, food wasn't there. Water I needed to live, just a small swallow to drink, not even filling my mouth. Energy, depleted, I couldn't stand, legs giving out, arms could lift. Is this death? Am I close to seeing the light? "Heaven," I thought. Mother I wanted to be with. "Land!" was what I heard. Food and water came to mind. At last I lived again. Freedom I won at last.