

Memoirs from Photographs: Creative Writing



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Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

Participants will look at selected photographs, not necessarily from their own lives or families, and write episodes of memories related to the content or subjects of the photos. The goal is not to increase knowledge of the photos or pin them down in time or space, but to stimulate the participants' recall and recording of events, times, or places in their own lives. This frees participants from the anticipated burden of writing a lengthy narrative beginning with parents' background and birth, and the fates of siblings, instead aiming at a complete and thorough narrative. The purpose is to recall and retell one small episode with as much detail and clarity as possible. It is valuable to note that for people with age-related memory issues it is short-term memory loss that often is most affected. Things that happened yesterday or an hour ago are harder to recall, but things that happened ten years ago or in childhood are more easily remembered.

TIME:

One hour per session. This activity can be done repeatedly with different prompts over an extended period of time, but each session should be an hour or less, allowing each participant to attempt two or three brief episodes from his or her own life. Editing and sharing of work by participants would add multiple sessions and could lead to a series of activities that span several months, involving the different stages of editing and reproduction. This will vary depending on the interests of the participants and the plans of the program.

MATERIALS:

- Paper
- Selected photos from the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains* (This book has many appropriate photos and good samples of personal recollections in response to the photos.)

(Recommended optional publication: *It Seems Like Only Yesterday: Memories from the Residents of Hill Top Home of Comfort* by Dr. David Solheim, Vicki Pennington, and Stacy Lemke. Dickinson, ND: Hill Top Heritage Foundation, 2007. This publication features the creative writing of residents at an elder care facility.)

“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

This activity would aim primarily at reducing loneliness. Most will find comfort in recalling the events of one’s life, and might also feel some empowerment in the sharing and possible reproduction of lived episodes. If editing and reproduction develops, participants will be working in groups to select and reproduce some of the pieces of writing developed from their recollections. By focusing on a long-term memory, as compared to a short-term memory that some people with memory issues may have a difficult time recalling, a sense of helplessness is positively addressed.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:

“This study evaluated the impact of oral history interviews on life satisfaction of older adults who were interviewed by college students enrolled in a gerontology course. Using an experimental, pretest–posttest design, baseline life satisfaction scores of elders in the intervention group were compared to those in the control group immediately following three one-hour oral history interviews (posttest) and again 10 weeks later (retest). At posttest, no differences in life satisfaction were found between groups, but differences approached statistical significance at the 10-week retest indicating that, over time, oral history interviews may contribute to improved quality of life among elders.” [Abstract]

--Ligon, Mary, E. Ayn Welleford, J. James Cotter, and Marco Lam. “Oral History: A Pragmatic Approach to Improving Life Satisfaction of Elders.” Journal of Intergenerational Relationships 10, no. 2 (2012).

Cover photo: Poet Dave Solheim, as a young boy, on a snowbank along Highway 3 between Steele and Tuttle, ND. (Photo circa 1950.)

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Activity Plan

SESSION 1 (1 HOUR):

1. The activity can begin by showing participants a few photos and asking them to think, then talk, then write about personal memories related to the photos. The blizzard stories in Chapter 3 (pages 57-85) of the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers* have excellent examples of photographs from several different time periods. “The worst snow storm I can remember . . . ” would make a good prompt for photos from that section. A specific focus is helpful for promoting recollection. Again, the purpose is to recall and retell one small episode with as much detail and clarity as possible.

Other variations or topics with visual cues from the book might include:

- “The first day of school,” with the photo in Chapter 10 (page 258) of the fox and geese game in the schoolyard serving as a good visual prompt for this topic.
- “My childhood home” or “the first house I remember,” with photos of old houses to encourage the participants’ recall and writing.
- The photos of folk arts could begin topics such as being taught how to do specific skills, or stories about people the participants knew who were artists or craftsmen.
- Foods and cooking are also related and similar topics are illustrated throughout the book.
- Hunting and fishing stories also are well-illustrated in Chapter

9 (pages 223-253) of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, and will likely work to promote similar recollections from new participants.

Note: In elder care facilities, the male residents oftentimes are less likely to participate in art activities. Thus, to encourage their participation and to help positively influence their quality of life through such activities, it is important to be conscious of selecting topics with which men can readily identify, such as fishing and hunting.

2. A focusing prompt is very useful as a beginning, but doesn’t have to be strictly followed. The emphasis should not be on the factual background for the specific photographs, but to encourage participants to remember experiences from their own lives related to the details, situations, or emotions captured in the images.

3. Participants should try to write brief episodes of only one to three paragraphs in length, not extended narratives that are all neatly wrapped up. (A very good effect on readers results from reading multiple brief episodes.) *Sundogs and Sunflowers* has many photographs that should help to prompt participant memories, as well as many written examples of responses related to the topics.

Following is an example of my earliest memory and another from my grade school recollections, both of which have to do with winter snowstorms. The memories were prompted by the associated images.

FAMILY ALBUM

All three of us in the car following a snowplow the day after a blizzard. One lane going north. We must have rested near my grandfather's farm or had to wait for the plow. My parents have a picture of me in a snowsuit and knitted helmet sitting on a snowbank by the roadside. I am the tallest thing on the horizon. Taller than my parents, I'm even above the roof of the car. The only thing, near or far, rising out of the white world.



*Poet Dave Solheim, as a young boy, on a snowbank along Highway 3 between Steele and Tuttle, ND.
(Photo circa 1950.)*

GRADE SCHOOL BLIZZARD

Two days home from school, I watched the drifts build. Our yard filled up with tunnels, a maze of burrowing. I was safe in boy-size tunnels. They had dead-end passages to elude followers and little side rooms to turn around in, to listen, to wait. I was a field mouse too smart for foxes. No clawed feet burst through the roof to impale me in my craft of safety.



Dean Solheim in the early 1950s pulling a sled.

AUTHOR • DAVE SOLHEIM:

Dave is a Professor of English at Dickinson State University, Dickinson, North Dakota. He holds English degrees from Gustavus Adolphus College, Stanford University, and the University of Denver. He is a veteran of the North Dakota Council on the Arts' *Artist in Residence Program*, participating frequently since 1974. During the 1990s, he regularly conducted creative writing activities at the Hill Top Home of Comfort, an elder care facility in Killdeer, North Dakota. Dr. Solheim has taught creative writing to students as young as the primary grades, to secondary and college students, up through graduate students and octogenarians. In 1989, he was chosen to be the North Dakota Statehood Centennial Poet, and is a North Dakota Associate Poet Laureate. Solheim is the author of five books of poetry: *On the Ward* (1974), *Inheritance* (1987), *West River: 100 Poems* (1989), *The Landscape Listens* (1999), and *Green Jade and Road Men: Translations, Commentary, and Poems of China* (2011). Samples of participants' work from writing workshops have been published in three anthologies: *Voices North in Dakota* (1976), *Plainsongs* (1978), and *It Seems Like Only Yesterday: Memories from the Residents of Hill Top Home of Comfort* (2007).

(Photos provided courtesy of Dave Solheim.)

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