

Islanders Share Stories of Lives Lived And Lessons Learned in Their Memoirs

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photo by Jaxon White

Master storyteller Susan Klein introduces memoirists from her popular workshops.

J.M. Barrie, the author who gave us Peter Pan, that fictional boy who never aged, knew there was one way in which we all never grow older. "God gave us memories that we might have roses in December," he wrote.

And at the Tisbury Senior Center last Sunday, the roses of memory were in full bloom. Susan Klein's memoirists were giving readings of their work.

There were 11 of them, a representative sample of the 60 who have gone through the memoir-writing program run by Ms. Klein, the Vineyard's own master storyteller and miner of memory.



The Rev. John Wilbur reflects on the past.

The eight-week program — she has done three here and others in other parts of the country — teaches how to go about trapping your memories and recording them, distilling the many years of joys and sorrows, even things which, on their face, seem trivial.

When we think of memoirs we tend to think of books by people who have lived large lives, made big decisions, been present for great events.

But that is not the essence of memoir. As Ms. Klein said, it is really about coming to better know yourself and making yourself better known to others.

“You don't know anyone until you know their story,” she told the Sunday gathering, quoting an old piece of folklore. And later, she quoted Socrates: “A life unexamined is not worth living.”

This should not be mistaken for some kind of psycho-therapy; that kind of emotional indulgence is not encouraged at all. Nor are all the stories light — some, as you will see, are very dark — but the premise of the workshops is simply that “by telling our stories we see how we became who we are,” as Ms. Klein put it.

And what stories these people had to tell each other and the 30-odd other folks in the audience in their five-minute memoirs on Sunday. How revelatory. How varied.

At one end of the spectrum there was Else Membreno, who laid out her memories of having spent three-and-a-half years under Japanese occupation in Indonesia during World War II.



Judy Miller remembers her brother.

It was a harrowing tale, yet told in an almost impassive way, without trace of self-pity.

“It’s my Dutch background; we were taught not to be too emotional,” she said later.

She was put in an internment camp among 1,200 women and girls. Any girl over 10 was considered an adult; at 11 she was put to work chopping wood, first with a machete and later with an axe. She recalled the deaths of the babies from malnutrition, the total lack of medication, the three years without even soap to wash, the fact that they were not taught any history or geography, for both were being redefined.

She remembered that at the war’s end, when they were liberated from the remote rubber plantation, no one cheered and many cried. “No one knew what freedom meant,” she said. And then she met her father again.

And horrible as the experience was, it taught her something valuable — not to judge people by wealth, status or race, for in extremis, these things mean little.

People had been telling her for years she should write it down, and it was to satisfy those urgings from family and friends that she went to the first memoir-writing workshop.



Jacqui Renear recalls a Vineyard childhood.

“But now I do it more for myself than anyone,” Ms. Membreno said.

She has not stopped writing since. Apart from the memoir she’s done an essay on the meaning of war, and is working on another on freedom.

At the other end of the spectrum was a recollection, in verse, of idyllic childhood on Martha's Vineyard. In contrast to Else Membreno's matter-of-fact account, Jackie Renear's paean to place sparkled with childlike enthusiasm for activity, like drip castles, clamming and fishing, and discovery, like starfish and tern rookeries, and the simple practicalities of life back then, like gathering seaweed to mulch the garden.

And between these extremes came all sorts of snippets of human existence.

There were varying motivations on display at the reading. Some authors set out to explain themselves. Judy Miller told a story about how a crisis involving her own wayward brother — “a high school dropout, marine and truck driver” — had informed her progressive views on teaching, learning and particularly discipline. How in the process of preventing him from going after a rival with a tire iron, she had learned the value of calm reason instead of confrontation.



photo by Jaxon White
Bob Hayden recalls family history.

The Rev. John Wilbur related the story of an Episcopalian bishop who was asked to attend the 100th anniversary of a Kansas church. The bishop demanded he first be sent a narrative of those 100 years, then refused to go because he found the narrative insufficiently compelling. It served as contrast with Mr. Wilbur's determination to attend the 25th anniversary of a housing facility he helped build through his church in Beverly.

Only one author, Robert (Bob) Carter Hayden, wrote about someone other than himself, although he did it as a means of explaining how he came to be who and where he was.

Mr. Hayden's remarkable tale was about how in 1886 his great-grandfather, Robert H. Carter, became the first African American to legally practice pharmacy, in Massachusetts.

The story is that as a young man his great-grandfather did work for a pharmacist, doing various menial jobs. One day, while shoveling snow, he found a wallet, containing \$400, then a huge sum. After wrestling with his conscience, Mr. Carter handed it over to the pharmacist, who in turn returned it to its owner, George Howland, president of the New Bedford Five Cents Savings Bank.

The banker gave him no reward, but some months later, his employer did, citing his honesty as a reason for taking him on as an apprentice.

Others harked back to remarkable events, and the war was naturally, given the demographics of the group, a recurring motif in the memoirs.



Susan Klein Remembers.

Clara Kennedy was 15 in 1938 when she, her sister and mother embarked on the grand tour of Europe. They shared cafés with Nazi soldiers, but when the Führer appeared in an open-topped car, and all other arms raised “Heil,” young Clara’s didn’t.

But it was not always the horrors of that time which resonated all these years later. Olive Tomlinson remembered the “innocent years” of the Bronx, before the drugs and violence, when people of different hues and faiths got by passably well. She was black, her friends were Jewish, no problem. War meant whistle while you work. Her greatest fear was that her dog, Skippy, might be drafted to serve, like those dogs she’d seen in the pictures in Life Magazine.

Ms. Kennedy’s five-minute memoir, and Ms. Tomlinson’s even more, were poignant memoirs, equal parts childish innocence and adult understanding.

Others were recollections of love, of one sort or another. Ed Housman spoke of a camping trip with his daughter, and of finding a huge boulder with a piece missing. Together they searched for and found the complementary piece. A nice metaphor for the way one can complete another.

Others, though, were just plain funny. Like the account of the very young Doris Housman, playing hide-and-seek with her best friend, accidentally locked in a closet, their shared intimacy in the face of imagined suffocation, their attempts to gain rescue.

And Dorothy (Skip) Winnette’s narrative of her reluctant attendance at summer camp, descriptive to the most minute detail of the transport, accommodation, food, uniforms, everything, was a comic gem.

A couple of sample lines: “Rousted out by the early morning bugle, we straggled sleepily up the hill to dance our calisthenics on the spiky stubble of freshly mown hay. Now widely awake we charged down the hill to plunge into the lake which shimmered in the morning sunlight like a giant platter of ice cubes.”

It was all more evocative for her possession of a couple of the letters she had sent home to her mother, which illustrate both her nascent sense of humor and her nascent adolescence. The first pleads for money for candy; the second thanks her mother for preparing her for the arrival of her first period.

“They made me stay in the infirmary (sic) overnight. I am now a real, grown up live girl.”

Oh, how they laughed at that one, on Sunday at the Senior Center, transported on Ms. Winnette’s coming-of-age tale.

Roses in December.