

Finding Family – July 2018

Becoming an 'Anthropologist of the Self'

By Michael Spencer Herzog

The Napa Genealogy Society is all that you might expect from an organization with that name. It is a group of individuals interested in family history research which supports that interest through the use of materials at their stand-alone library, classes in how to research, general interest programs, one-on-one coaching, and the encouragement and society of company of like-minded individuals.

A well-researched genealogy is actually a story complete with names and dates and places. There is a small writing group within the society which focuses primarily on the story because each of us has a tale that only we can tell. Generations from now a genealogist can research the facts of our lives, the events and dates and places and relationships, but only we can write the story of who we are and how we arrived at this moment in our lives. Those stories shared are a great and generous gift to each other.

At a recent meeting of the writing group stories were shared including one person's experiences driving the church van and hearing the stories of his passengers, a continuing narrative of travels on the east coast, a recollection of bike-riding from first trike to grown-up bicycling to work, the human and humorous side of a lifetime of orthopedic surgeries, and the rich learning experience associated with being introduced to the seductively delicious drink called a Harvey Wallbanger.

The writing group also shares narrative genealogies. When a portion of family history research reaches some degree of completion it is possible tell the story as a story — put flesh on the bones of names and dates and places. The stories can include how people lived and earned a living and what they did for fun in an earlier time. Such narratives can make the people from the past come alive and often help to encourage more memories out of other family members. In addition to genealogies, there are numerous topics for personal essays, for example: a first real job, going to school, families, pets, the first kiss (that's fun to write about), travel, decisions made, changes in course . . . everything. We become anthropologists of the self. All experience is raw material for the writer. And, no one in the group has ever been heard to say that there's nothing to write about.

The group called WRITE NOW! began as a small group ministry of the Napa Methodist Church at about the turn of the millennium. They changed venue to the Genealogy Society several years ago in search of more writers. The members of the group do not attempt to edit or improve each other's stories, only provide an appreciative audience and the discipline of a regular deadline. Two of the charter members are still with the group and membership numbers fluctuate but currently stand at about half a dozen. The group meets from 12 noon to 1:00 PM the second and fourth Tuesday of the month at the Napa Valley Genealogy Library, 1701 Menlo Avenue, Napa. Stories are shared and appreciated. Visitors are welcome to sit in

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and get a taste of how the group works. No writing experience is necessary, only a desire to do what you always wanted to do -- to write your own story.