

# Frequently Asked Questions

Katherine Mayfield

## **Why did you decide to write this memoir and share your story with others?**

During the seven years that I acted as the family caregiver for my parents, most every time I talked about my experience, other people revealed that they also felt manipulated and demeaned by their parents. We were victims of what Martha Beck refers to as “Spider Love”: a love that’s consumptive and draining, rather than giving.

I’ve known many people who have endured “Spider Love” in their families of origin, and most of them are still stuck in the darkness and despair that comes from unresolved emotional stuff. I wanted to tell the story of my process of healing from the trauma and moving into a much more authentic life because I believe reading about someone’s experience of healing helps others to take the first steps into their own journey of healing from the past.

We all need validation, especially if we’ve suffered in life due to a difficult childhood. It’s my hope that *The Box of Daughter* will offer validation and healing to everyone with a painful past.

## **Where do you get your ideas?**

I have file folders full of ideas! Because of my history, I have a different way of looking at the world than most people. I seem to make connections with information through my emotions and intuition as well as my logic, so I can see under the surface of the “rules” we follow in society, and the ways in which we conform. Our society doesn’t really walk its talk about independence – there’s a lot of pressure to move with the mob, and expressing individuality is not often valued (except in the case of stars and celebrities). And so much of life is distorted because we value money, success, and organizational structure over feelings, art, and intuition. When you look under the surface of life and search for deep truth, there is so much richness – an abundance of insight and understanding that’s not validated in our society. My ideas probably come from a blend of my intuition, my perspective, and what I like to call the Divine Creative Force.

## **Have you ever experienced writer's block, and if so, how do you overcome it?**

Yes! When I get blocked, it usually means that my inner critic is trying to make everything perfect before it even gets out on the page. Sometimes it means that I'm "keeping myself small" in order to please someone else, as if I'm following the old rule that I'm not supposed to express myself. That comes from my personal history.

The best way I know to overcome writer's block is to tell the inner critic to go away, and just blurt words onto the page – just write whatever comes to mind. Sometimes the source of the block will reveal itself if the writer starts writing about what he or she is feeling about the block. I often think that "writer's block" is another way of saying, "Somebody in your psyche is getting in the way of you being able to express yourself."

There's a great book called, *Writing from the Inside Out*, by Dennis Palumbo that is specifically targeted to the psychological issues that writers face. I highly recommend it for every writer.

The other thing I do to overcome block is look up writing prompts online. Prompts often get my creative juices flowing. Many of my blogs on dysfunctional families and caregiving were written after reading a prompt.

## **What was the most challenging aspect of writing *The Box of Daughter*?**

The most challenging aspect for me was the process of reliving the old painful experiences deeply enough so I could write about them honestly. I didn't want to just "complain," and as a writer I believe that writing a scene brings the reader more fully into the writer's personal experience than reflection does (although *The Box of Daughter* includes a fair amount of reflection). So, in order to write each scene, I had to dig deep into the memories and uncover not only the circumstances, but the through-line of my feelings as a child.

There were times in the writing process that I thought I was going to just lose it. Writing memoir is a tough balance between getting lost in the feelings and getting them on paper. You have to keep part of yourself outside the process, almost like a witness. It was a very cathartic process – but I would encourage anyone who's going to write memoir to have someone help them work through feelings that surface as they write. That's how I made it through.

## **In what ways do you think writing your memoir changed you?**

The most profound change I experienced was achieving clarity not only on my own self-image, but on the issues my parents faced as well. When I focused on writing with compassion, I began to understand that I couldn't just blame my parents for my upbringing – they had issues of their own which intensely affected them. They were very good people in many ways, yet they were extremely unkind to their children, and used both my brother and me to meet emotional needs that weren't getting met in their marital relationship.

As I delved into the memories, I uncovered the truth of my family, and I finally realized that the problem wasn't that I was defective and incompetent, the problem was that I had been given so many negative messages as a child that I had learned to identify with them. And I think my parents experienced exactly the same thing in their childhoods. As I became able to see the criticism and belittling for what it was, and not take the criticisms on as part of my identity, the layers of "self" that were not really me began to peel away. Then my self-esteem could grow to a normal level.

## **How has your life's journey contributed to your writing process?**

When I began to discover in therapy how horribly dysfunctional my family of origin had been, I started journaling as a way to get all the feelings that swarmed up from within outside of me onto paper. When I didn't want to face what was coming up from my unconscious mind, putting it on paper helped me feel as if I had begun to let go of the grief, the anger and the pain. I wrote poems furiously in an effort to express my deepest feelings in a way that didn't hurt me or anyone else. And during the seven years I was caring for my parents, especially in the last year when my health began to decline, journaling offered me the opportunity to put my feelings into words, to reflect on what I was going through, so that I didn't overburden all of my friends with seven years' worth of complaining – though I have to admit, everyone I knew was extremely supportive during that time. All of that journaling eventually turned into my memoir, *The Box of Daughter*, along with some short stories about those caregiving years, like *The Last Visit*.

The process of journaling over so many years helped me learn how to clarify a feeling or insight and to choose very specific words and phrases to express exactly what I want to communicate. That has become a foundation in my writing: specificity about feelings and situations that hopefully leads to clarity and a deep understanding in my readers. I want to validate other people's feelings, and the more specific I can get in my writing, the better I can do that.