

Spiritual Memoir with Patricia Charpentier

What is spiritual memoir?

- **memoir** - a slice of life, one or more aspects of a life story
- **spiritual** - pertaining to the spirit, not the physical, non-material; the search for the sacred
- **Philip Zaleski**, editing of the anthology, *Best Spiritual Writing*, defines **spiritual writing** as “poetry or prose that deals with the bedrock of human existence—why we are here, where we are going and how we can comport ourselves with dignity along the way.”

Characteristics of spiritual memoir:

- pays attention to the mysteries of life, the unexplainable
- places your life in the context of something larger, greater
- reveals the author’s definition of spirituality
- intensely personal and private
- the writing of it often promotes spiritual growth in the author
- can provide hope, encouragement, and understanding to others when shared

A sampling of spiritual memoirs:

- **Search or quest** – hunger or longing for something that compels a person to seek something - *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert – a search or quest to learn more about herself across three exotic locations—Italy, India, and Bali
- **Religious** – accounting of a religious life, faith, experience, possibly conversion experience - *Undertow: My Escape from the Fundamentalism and Cult Control of The Way International* by Charlene L. Edge - talks about her conversion to, participation in, and escape from this organization
- **Flash of lightning** – the *ah-ha* moment, what was cloudy becomes clear
- **Moment of insight** – a quieter *ah-ha* moment, one of recognition, awareness
- **Opposition** - man against man, against nature, against self, against supernatural, etc. - *A Match to the Heart: One Woman’s Story of Being Struck by Lightning* by Gretel Ehrlich – the struggle to live and later recover after being struck by lightning for the second time
- **Transformation** – change from one way to another - *Drinking: A Love Story* by Caroline Knapp – follows her transformation from being an alcoholic to that of a recovering alcoholic
- **Journey** – details the going from point A to point B – could be a physical, emotional or mental journey - *Virgin Time: In Search of the Contemplative Life* by Patricia Hampl – physical journey as well as a spiritual one, pilgrimage, return to her Catholic roots
- **Rags to riches or riches to rags** – story of not having to having or having to not having – doesn’t necessarily have to be something material - *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts* by Neil White – while

imprisoned for bank fraud in a leprosarium, White learns what truly matters in life.

- **Redemption** – story of salvation, being saved from peril, death, destruction – being redeemed, rescued, delivered - *Praying for Strangers: An Adventure of the Human Spirit* by River Jordan – story of how praying for others redeemed her from the despair of her two sons being deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan
- **Sense of place** - connection to a particular geographic location, experience of belonging to a place - *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* by Kathleen Norris – story of moving from New York City to the home where her mother grew up in an isolated town on the border between North and South Dakota
- **The unexplainable** – coincidences, miracles, unexplained encounters, the supernatural - *Expecting Adam: A True Story of Birth, Rebirth, and Everyday Magic* by Martha Beck – story of all the unusual, unexplainable things that happened in her life while she was expecting a son with Downs Syndrome
- **Triumph** – prevail over adversity, hardship, misfortune, accusation - *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt - survives a horrendous childhood of desperate poverty, painful, tragic, and often funny events in Ireland, comes to the US, become a teacher and author, finds beauty and meaning in his experience
- **Parallel experiences** – experiences in two or more realms tracked simultaneously - *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* by Terry Tempest Williams - story of her mother's cancer told in conjunction with the flooding of the Great Salt Lake in 1983 and its impact on the wildlife there

Tips on how to write spiritual memoir:

- **Document your journey** - gather information on your spiritual journey don't expect you will remember, especially the smaller moments
- **Start small** – focus on a moment, one instance, one topic, fill a one-inch frame
- **Be specific** – take what is general and make it specific, power of writing in the specific details, not generalized statements
- **Use vivid language** – use strong verbs and concrete nouns rather than adverbs and too many adjectives
- **Use sensual details** – don't rely only on the sense of sight, allow the reader to see, feel, hear, feel, taste the experience
- **Show more than tell** - readers believe more of what they see rather what they are told, set the stage and let the action happen, create a movie in the reader's mind
- **Don't over explain** - let the readers share your experience, allow them to find their own meaning in your experience, trust your writing