

Writing Down the Soul

This intense, nine-month certificate program combines the science of psychology with the art of memoir writing.

You've lived a full and rich life, and now you want to write about it. How much of a commitment are you willing to make in order to learn how to craft a memoir that truly reveals your inner self?

Unless your answer is “as much as it takes,” then Pacifica Graduate Institute’s Writing Down the Soul probably isn’t for you.

The Santa Barbara-based, nine-month, non-MFA certificate program is an intensive immersion covering multiple aspects of memoir writing. Though most of the program is spent working online, students also have two on-campus residencies: once at the beginning of the program and once again at the end.

Why devote so much time and thought to this particular genre? “There’s a quote by Carl Jung where he talks about one of the most important questions that you have to answer for yourself: ‘What myth are you living?’” says Dr. Jennifer Selig, an oft-published author and one of the three instructors coordinating and running the Writing Down the Soul program. “Part of what we do in the program is try to help our participants discover the mythic patterns of their lives.”

According to Selig, Pacifica is the only school offering Ph.D.s in depth psychology in the United States, and from that psychological emphasis, the memoir program emerged.

“Someone said that memoir has been called the genre of our age... There’s a real connection to depth

psychology, because depth psychology is very interested in how people story their lives and the ways that the stories that we tell are both functional and dysfunctional to our own psyches.

Depth psychology believes that we live our lives in mythic and archetypal patterns, and that the memoirs that do the best and are the most evocative are ones that focus on the particularities of someone’s story, but also have an archetypal or mythological element so you can see yourself inside that story pattern. There are a lot of tools that we can bring from the [depth psychology] field into looking at our own particular stories.”

Selig arrived at Pacifica as a depth psychology student in the late '90s and joined the faculty in that department in 2005. “I’d personally never been drawn to using depth psychology to become a therapist,” she says, “but there’s something obviously very therapeutic and healing about creativity and writing in particular. And part of my background is as a creative writer.” She created a Master’s program called Engaged Humanities in the Creative Life at Pacifica, and from that program Writing Down the Soul was born.

So why would a student choose this path rather than the more traditional MFA?





“The distinction I would make with an MFA program is that we are not here to critique the writer, per se,” Selig says. “Certainly we have an aspect of that online, and every month there’s a feedback group where you submit some pages and get some feedback on it. But it’s not just about judgment and critical assessment of someone’s work. It’s much more about the process of discovery and recovery, to a large extent, of a person’s own soul.”

As there is no academic reward for completing *Writing Down the Soul*, prospective students need not meet the same criteria that MFAs require: “There’s just the desire of the person to be in the program.” As a result, she says, “Our students – as all are who come to Pacifica – are an eclectic bunch. We have people in their 20s up until their 70s in the program now.”


“It’s been a real blessing to have this combination format,” Selig adds. She and co-presenters Dr. Maureen Murdock and Dr. Daphne Dodson focus on different components of the

program. “When we have students come onto campus for a long weekend, they are [studying] with Maureen, who’s written books on memoir and has written memoir herself. She works with the students [during] the first weekend and goes through the elements of memoir writing with exercises on the kinds of stories they might want to tell and what makes stories evocative. Daphne brings something unusual to the program in her work with memory. She did her doctoral dissertation on something she calls *Imaginal Remembering*, a way of going into a meditative space and allowing a memory to come up and then entering into the memory and walking around inside of it and working with it.”

The goals of the program are several, Selig says. “We hope they’ll become more conscious of new kinds of unconscious patternings in their lives. Certainly the potential for healing from some of the upset and the trauma of the past would be another goal. More self-awareness is another

one. I’m finding that people build community; there’s a sense of not being so alone – sometimes we get trapped in the past and feel we’re the only ones who’ve been through these things. There’s a real sense of healing inside community. We’re looking at how you take an idiosyncratic person’s story and make it more appealing.”

Often, Selig has found, students find truths about themselves from the beginning. “Even within the opening weekend there are lots of tears and lots of laughter,” she says. “Part of what happens from being online is that people share their stories and then other people come in and resonate with those stories and add their own. People are having insights left and right about their lives and their patterns. It’s really beautiful.”

For information on Pacifica, its programs and retreats, visit retreat.pacifica.edu. 

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