

Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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Mistakes, Missing Links, and Other Wonderful Problems



Oops!

I was carving a linoleum block at a summer art class. Everything was going great, but suddenly the knife slipped and I made a mistake.

Ugh! Now the whole thing was ruined!

Then the instructor hurried over with some words of wisdom--words I've turned to again and again in my writing life.

The mistake, the problem, doesn't *ruin* the work of art, she said. In fact, addressing the problem is what art is all about. The problem *is* the art.

At the beginning of the project that became my book, *We Are Here*, I interviewed my uncle about his experiences in a Lithuanian ghetto during the years of the Holocaust. When my uncle revealed a shocking secret about his life in the ghetto, needless to say I was eager to learn more. The problem was, my uncle wasn't eager to talk. Having told what he'd told, he was inclined to retreat back into the silence that had served him over the past sixty-some years.

I could have pushed for more. But I could feel my various identities – niece, researcher, writer, member of a successor generation after the Holocaust, moral being – clashing inside me.

Forcing my uncle to confront the past was a kind of aggression I decided I didn't want to engage in. If leaving my uncle in peace meant I didn't learn everything there was to learn, so be it.

But without his cooperation, my story could not go forward. Or could it?

As it turned out, my uncle's reluctance sent me in another direction – in fact, in many different directions.

I went looking for information in far-flung places, including archives, libraries, and kitchen tables on both sides of the Atlantic. The overlapping and sometimes conflicting truths I turned up all became part of my narrative.

Sometimes I had to work with translators and interpreters. My interactions with these people often yielded fascinating experiences and vital information in themselves.

And my reflections on the moral dimensions of talking, or not talking, with my uncle became central to the thrust of the book.

In other words, the obstacles to telling the tale turned out to enrich the work beyond measure. Those obstacles, in some ways, turned out to be what the work was about.

My colleague Julija Sukys had a similar experience with her book.

Epistolophilia is the story of Ona Šimaite, a Lithuanian rescuer of Jews.

Šimaite was captured and sent to a concentration camp. But try as she might, Julija couldn't find out anything about this important part of Šimaite's life.

Faced with this intractable problem, what could Julija do?

"In the end," Julija told me, "I decided not to try to fill Šimaite's silence, but to write around it, and give an image of how her camp experiences echoed throughout the rest of her life. The book traces the limits of that experience, but doesn't try to fill in the void. I chose to respect her right to silence, and to consider silence itself as a subject worthy of contemplation."

The “hole” in Julija’s research couldn’t be filled the way she’d hoped. But the literary strategies she invented to fill that hole made her book unique.

Count on it: In our writing projects, we’ll never have at our fingertips every piece we’d like to have. Facts we ardently wish for will be beyond reach. Something will always be missing. Something won’t quite fit.

But don’t despair. Those missing pieces may turn out to be very the heart of the matter. Instead of weakening your work, they might turn out to be exactly what makes it great.

Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all of her Writing Tips, visit her website at www.ellencassedy.com.