

Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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What Makes You Smile – and Why It Matters



It all began with a clarinet.

I played the clarinet when I was a girl, but after I auditioned for my college orchestra and didn't get in, I put the instrument away in a closet (a series of closets, actually) and didn't touch it again for three decades.

Then one day a friend of mine told me he needed a substitute clarinetist for his daughter's bat mitzvah. Could I fill in?

I went looking for my clarinet in the closet and brushed the dust off the case. I screwed the barrels together and moistened a reed. I put my fingers on the keys and blew. A sound came out.

The bat mitzvah performance lasted about five minutes, and I wasn't as nervous as I expected to be. In fact, I kind of had fun.

Then the same friend asked if I'd join him and his wife at a weeklong music camp. We chose quite a difficult piece, a Brahms trio, and worked hard on it. Playing that glorious music was absolutely thrilling. One day at the camp I looked in the mirror and noticed a huge grin on my face.

I thought I knew what was going on. "Playing the clarinet is so much fun because I don't really care about it," I explained to myself. "I'm not weighed down by standards or obligations. I can just let go and play."

Maybe that carefree feeling was part of it. But maybe not all of it. I decided to pay attention to what was producing that grin. And when I did, I found my writing career utterly transformed.

I realized that although my work as a writer – as a speechwriter, a newspaper columnist, and a writer of political materials like campaign leaflets – was meaningful and satisfying, something was missing. These jobs gave me little opportunity to express certain parts of myself -- my love of words and languages, my passion for history, my sensory observations, and more.

Judging by the grin I saw in the mirror, when I put the clarinet in the closet, I'd put some other other things aside, too.

Soon after, I stumbled across a diary kept by my late aunt and found myself mesmerized by it. Could I turn her words into a play? At first this project seemed to take me far afield from the serious concerns -- political and otherwise -- that had guided my adult life. But as the project went forward, I recognized it as a powerful vehicle for values that had always mattered deeply to me.

My next writing project, too, involved letting go of preconceptions about what "really mattered" -- what "should matter"-- and instead allowing myself to explore what truly engaged me. The result was my book, *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust*, which changed my view of the past, changed my view of the future, and changed me.

The clarinet, and the smile that followed, opened new doors for me as a writer.

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