

Blood Memory

What Family Story Do You Have Inside Waiting to Get Out?

Marlys Cervantes, OSUWP, Teacher Consultant
and Director of Creative Writing Program, Cowley College,
marlys.cervantes@cowley.edu



Kiowa author and artist N. Scott Momaday engages the idea of blood memory in both his fiction (like his Pulitzer prize-winning novel *House Made of Dawn*) and non-fiction (his stories about his grandmother, such as *The Way to Rainy Mountain*). The complex idea is that memory is passed genetically through the blood from generation to generation, resulting in our history living through our bodies, blurring distinction between storytelling and personal narrative.



Step 1: Find Skeleton Story

- First, you need a story, but just the skeleton of the story. Maybe you never even met the family member. That's great-- because you will flesh it out (pun intended). You want room for creative exploration.
- If you don't yet have a story, go on a walk with your family. It's a great time to explore ideas with them. Have fun and talk. These stories can be serious, they can be fun, they can be one single moment in time. Don't make this difficult. My favorite storytelling game is simple. Just take turns asking the question, "Tell me a story about..." You can finish that with...the wind, your favorite childhood toy, first memory of your grandpa, the color blue, and so on. There's no wrong place to begin.
- The best story is something diverse, something unexpected, something that seems unlike your family now. It allows for more interesting creative freedoms.

Step 2: Find Your Writing Space & Nature's Muse

- Second, find your writing space outside, and find an element in nature, something physical to bring insight to your story. If you can find that space and inspiration to write and explore your thoughts outdoors, that's your best bet. Walk, take photographs, and contemplate. Listen to nature!
- If not, take pictures to bring inside to view while you write. I have elements for people who are important to me. Trees are my dad, one set of my grandparents is sand, another grandmother is anything bright red, a grandpa is the eyes of wild animals, and so on. I can find places to meditate and write and recall these important people, bringing back feelings I need when I want to do so. Make your associations to keep people or events close as you write.
- When you are writing about someone you don't know, you have not met, which is best for this exercise, select something that comes to mind when you've heard that skeleton of a story. Make your own inspiration.

Step 3: Let's Write!

- Next, let your feelings flow, and I do mean feelings. Don't fixate on the details of dates and places. They aren't as important for this writing experiment, especially initially. Let's get the emotion of what is being felt down on paper!
- Write in first person/"I". Let yourself feel the experience fully as you write about it. You are writing this using Momaday's "blood memory" concept, as if you can feel it all as it's happening. Allow yourself to write the experience in that manner. Use every ounce of empathy you can.
- Then you can go back and revise if you want to pull in any facts that you believe will make your piece better. It's up to you. You may not even want to do so. But, don't begin with the facts—they'll pull down the emotion. Instead, let yourself be in the place of the person, imagining the moment, the experience.

**Storytelling is powerful, especially if you share!
Share yours with family and friends. Email me. #writeout**