



# free-range THINKING™

free-range thinking™ is a monthly journal of best practices, resources and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact

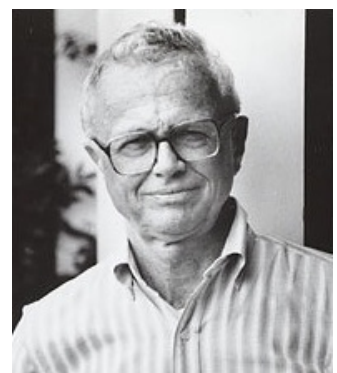


## When Telling Your Story, Think Small

Take a moment to consider this question: *Why do you do what you do?* (If you reflexively answered "To make money," this newsletter may not be for you.) For people working in the public interest sector, how you answer this question is critically important. If you wish to lead change, someone has to follow you, but first they will insist on knowing what you're all about.

Marshall Ganz has a name for this answer: the "story of self." To tell this story properly, Ganz says, "is a matter of drawing on those moments and experiences you can share [so] others can begin to see you...why you're here doing this, what you care about." This can be harder than it looks. When The Goodman Center helps individuals tell their story of self, we often hear sweeping birth-to-the-present epics that drown an audience in details rather than spotlighting those defining "moments and experiences." And our experience is not unique.

William Zinsser, the renowned journalist and author, taught memoir writing for more than twenty years and often encountered a similar problem. It motivated him to write an essay, "Who Would Care About My Story?" for *The American Scholar* in 2011. In it, Zinsser offers the most elegant argument we've seen for thinking small when telling one's own story - in fact, it's excellent advice for telling just about *any* story, so this month we present his essay in its entirety [here](#). *Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.*



William Zinsser

## Who Would Care About My Story?

by William K. Zinsser from *The American Scholar*, September 30, 2011. Copyright © 2011 by William K. Zinsser. Reprinted by permission of the William K. Zinsser Trust.

Every September they come out of the New York night - 20 adults, mostly women, who have signed up for my course, at the New School, on writing memoir and family history. This is my 20th year of teaching the course, heading out into the night myself to meet my students and help them wrestle their life narrative onto paper. The women are almost paralyzed by the thought of writing a memoir. How can they possibly sort out the smothering clutter of the past? But mainly it's fear of writing about themselves. My suggested cure always comes down to two words: think small.

They don't want to think small. They are writers, novitiates in the literary enterprise, duty bound to obey its rhetorical rules and admonitions. I don't want them to think of themselves as writers. I want them to think of themselves as people - women who lead interesting lives and who also write, trusting their own humanity to tell plain stories about their thoughts and emotions. Why do they think they need permission to be themselves? "Who would care about my story?" they say. I would. I give them permission to write about the parts of their lives that they have always dismissed as unimportant.

One woman in my current class, in her late 60s, is from a prominent Christian family in Cairo. In 1953, when she was 10, the family left for America; her father, a former member of the cabinet of King Farouk, was out of favor with the new Nasser regime. They packed only their winter clothes, not wanting to reveal that they were leaving forever.

In America the girl from Cairo would have a long and successful career in broadcasting. But that really wasn't her story; thousands of immigrants before her had lived the same dream. Her story - the emotional core of her life - was the privileged girlhood in Cairo and the jagged rip that one day tore the whole fabric apart. I asked if she had ever written about those years; she deeply wanted to and was upset that she couldn't.

"I don't know enough about the political history of modern Egypt," she said. "I'd need to do a lot of research first." I told her she isn't Thomas L. Friedman and I'm glad she isn't. There is no shortage of pundits who will write sober books about the Nasser era, but none of them can write her story, and it won't need scholarly bolstering. If she just tells the story of one Egyptian family she will also tell the story of many other families under duress.

That idea had never occurred to her. Her gloom lifted. She was free! The following week she left me a brief manuscript called "A Fragment." Its sentences were dead simple:

At last it's time to leave. We're at the gate in front of the house and the Buick is ready to go. My brother and I have been ready for hours, or so it seems. I tug at my Mother's hand, but she's elsewhere, awash in tears. I really can't think why. We're off on an aeroplane - what could be better. But Mom doesn't see this journey my way at all. She has already wept her way through the house and checked that all the furniture is covered with white sheets. Covering the furniture with sheets to protect them against Egypt's wicked sun usually means going to Alexandria for the summer. I've loved everything about those summers except for the endless naps we children have to sustain until we can go onto the beach again.

But this trip isn't to Alexandria. There has been endless talk in the house of "America." And I know it's serious because whenever it comes up, Mom develops an errand for me to run. ...

Every one of those seemingly small details is recognizably true. What child hasn't heard adults whispering of plans not meant for children to hear?

I asked the woman from Egypt if she had ever written anything like that before. She never had. Amazing! Why did it take almost 70 years? She was not a timid person; she told our class that she had recently bicycled from Berlin to Copenhagen. Why doesn't that confidence carry over to writing?

Dare to tell the smallest of stories if you want to generate large emotions.

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## Upcoming online classes at The Goodman Center

GIVE PRESENTATIONS

Why Bad  
Presentations  
Happen to Good  
Causes

September 9 & 10  
11am - 12pm PT

PLAN CAMPAIGNS

Strategic  
Communications:  
Cutting Through  
the Clutter

September 18 & 19  
11am - 12pm PT

LEAD WEBINARS

The Webinar  
on Webinars

September 20  
12pm - 1pm PT

Click on the class title to read more!

### About Us

*free-range thinking* is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Celia Hoffman. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit [www.thegoodmancenter.com](http://www.thegoodmancenter.com).

To reach Andy directly, please call (323) 272-4737 or send an email to [andy@thegoodmancenter.com](mailto:andy@thegoodmancenter.com).

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The Goodman Center, 251 S Norton Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90004