

Core Book

# TELLING YOUR STORY

A Writing Guide by Nicole Mazzarella  
Inspired by Daniel Nayeri's *Everything Sad is Untrue*



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*For Christ & His Kingdom*

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## RESPONDING TO STORY WITH STORY

*“If we can just rise to the challenge of communication—here in the parlor of your mind—we can maybe reach across time and space and every ordinary thing to see so deep into the heart of each other that you might agree that I am like you.” - Nayeri*

This year our campus will read together *Everything Sad is Untrue*. First, we learn to listen to the story of Khosrou / Daniel Nayeri. We hear his lament that a “patchwork memory is the shame of a refugee.” As he attempts to recover the stories severed upon leaving his extended family and his home, we attend to what it means to be a refugee. We accept his invitation to not only listen to his memories, but also to consider our own experiences, whether as a fellow refugee or as one attentive, unsympathetic, or unaware in our response to refugees .

After we sit with and respond to Daniel’s experience, we may find ourselves wanting to consider our own experiences or imagine other’s experiences through writing. This is often the case with powerful stories. In *A Circle of Quiet*, Madeline L’Engle reflects on our impulse to respond to art with art: “A great painting, or symphony, or play, doesn’t diminish us, but enlarges us, and we, too, want to make our own cry of affirmation to the power of creation behind the universe. This surge of creativity has nothing to do with competition or degree of talent. When I hear a superb pianist, I can’t wait to get to my own piano, and I play about as well now as I did when I was ten. A great novel, rather than discouraging me, simply makes me want to write. This response on the part of any artist is the need to make incarnate the new awareness we have been granted through the genius of someone else. . . It is beauty crying out for more beauty.”

This writing guide offers a series of writing prompts inspired by *Everything Sad is Untrue*. As you write your story or imagine the stories of others, consider finding a small group of fellow writers with whom to share your stories. As the narrator says, “I am ugly and I speak funny. I am poor. My clothes are used and my food smells bad. I pick my nose. I don’t know the jokes and stories you like, or the rules to the games. I don’t know what anybody wants from me. . . Like you, I want a friend.” At the core of our stories is a reminder that God has uniquely created us and also given us a desire to discover the people who say, “Ah! You too! Tell me more.”

## WRITING OUR MANY SELVES

Khosrou or Daniel.

Iran, Dubai, Italy, or Oklahoma.

Our pasts hold many selves. Perhaps like Daniel you have changed your name and/or the location of your home. Perhaps this feeling of many selves leaves you experiencing a complexity in your story that you find difficult to explain, wanting to say with Khosrou, “Khosrou. That name ain’t for your mouth.”

*“In one version, maybe I’m not the refugee kid in the back of Mrs. Miller’s class. I’m a prince in disguise.”*

*- Nayeri*

Or perhaps you return to the same house where you grew up and hear your given name when greeted, but you still feel a sense of divided selves. Jerome Stern tells writers that “The idea of ‘you’ is complex in itself. . . yourself is made of many selves. . . not only persons you once were, but also persons you have tried to be, persons you have avoided being and persons you fear you might be.”

For this writing exercise, you may want to begin by drawing a patchwork quilt on a page to visualize your many selves. Whether this is divide by age, location, or experiences. You may also take the approach using Stern’s quote by filling in the blanks: “the person I tried to be \_\_\_\_\_,” “the person I avoided being \_\_\_\_\_,” and “the person I feared I might be \_\_\_\_\_.”

Choose one of two of these parts of yourself and select one memory when you most experienced this aspect of yourself. As you describe this memory, slow your writing to include any remembered dialogue from the moment and any embodied, sensory descriptions.

## WAYS OF WELCOMING

*“Back then we didn’t know that if you wanted water in American homes, you had to ask for it. “*

*- Nayeri*

Daniel sets various tables throughout his stories prompting us to consider if we forget to offer water or if we lavish dishes of welcome, such as when “...the dinner carpet was full with trays of kebab, grilled onions and tomatoes, platters of fresh chives, green and purple basil, cilantro, radishes and dill... A stew of chickpea, lamb, crispy shallots and fried mint was the khan’s favorite.”

As you consider the various tables in the prompt below, try to include particular details that help readers experience the table by what it holds or doesn’t hold; by what was said or left unsaid; by what you remember or what you can’t remember. Invite readers to taste, see, hear, smell, and touch this moment with you.

### I REMEMBER THIS ABOUT A TABLE WHERE...

- I was welcomed / I was not welcomed
- I welcomed / I did not welcome
- I lingered. \_\_\_\_\_
- I left \_\_\_\_\_
- I listened \_\_\_\_\_
- I learned \_\_\_\_\_
- I broke bread \_\_\_\_\_

## COUNTING THE MEMORIES

You may already know your first memory. You may have told it enough times it has hardened into fact, making it a little less true. For this writing exercise, you'll begin a catalog of counting memories. Don't try to do this in one sitting.

Begin with a memory that you can easily access. Linger in the memory and write down anything you remember. Now allow yourself to imagine sensory details. What might it have smelled like? What might have been sounds surrounding the moment? What textures might you have felt? What tastes do you associate with that time of life? What are random colors or objects or details that fill in this memory? What are some of the emotions you felt in this moment? What do you remember thinking in the moment (not the interpretation you later brought to the moment)? What did you long for in this moment? What did you fear?

*“That was when I realized I had to write down the memories and myths and the legends -- and even the phrases and the jokes. Or I'd lose everything. Maybe even the recipes.” - Nayeri*

Once you've identified a longing or a fear or another strong emotion, allow yourself to imagine earlier moments when you felt something similar. Avoid trying to force connections. Consider where you felt the emotion in your body and allow yourself to float back to another time that you experienced the embodied emotion in a similar way. Try to float back as far along this river of this embodied emotion and land in the earliest memory you can access. Now describe

that memory with the same sensory questions as above. Rather than shutting down the memory by focusing on what you can't remember, dwell with the details that you do remember to see if any other aspects of the memory opens.

Consider ways of immersing readers in the feeling of a sensory experience rather than attempting to name a particular sense. For example, on page 241, “Opium is a smell I can't and won't describe. Instead, imagine the smell of flowers but sweeter, and with broken glass in it.”

*Note: If your story holds unprocessed trauma, please consider doing this exercise first with a therapist or spiritual director.*

## THE LAST TIME

*“But I had Mr. Sheep Sheep and a pocket full of Orich bars...I ate the last one, and that was the last Orich bar I ever tasted.”*

*- Nayeri*

We don't often know when we'll taste our last Orich bar.

Reread the brief scene on page 223 about the last Orich bar that Daniel ate, consider if there are any lasts from your childhood that you didn't realize were the final experiences:

### THE LAST TIME I....

- went to \_\_\_\_\_
- played \_\_\_\_\_
- ate \_\_\_\_\_
- saw \_\_\_\_\_
- listened to \_\_\_\_\_
- believed \_\_\_\_\_
- visited \_\_\_\_\_
- spent time with \_\_\_\_\_
- considered \_\_\_\_\_
- held \_\_\_\_\_

Describe in a brief scene the last time, but write from the perspective of your younger self who doesn't know it's the last time. Once you've invited readers into the immersive memory, then write a reflection about when you realized it was the last time.

# WRITE WHAT YOU HAVE FELT

*“The only part anyone told me...” - Nayeri*

It’s common writing advice is to “write what you know.” This advice anchors writers in embodied experiences to immerse readers in believable experiences. Yet fiction writers understand that sometimes we tell a truer story by exploring what we have felt through the lives of fictional characters.

As Dr. Tiffany Eberle Kriner notes in the reading guide for *Everything Sad is Untrue*, “Some parts [of this novel] are made up (like the story of Ellie, pages 121-130). To what extent do these made up parts offer truth? What truths do they offer?”

This prompt leads you through a process of imagining a character and exploring the development of that character through what you have felt rather than focusing on what you know.

## **Part One: The Only Part Anyone Told Me**

Begin with the shadow of a story you’ve heard from others. Your version of “The only part anyone told me was that Ellie found a lover. They decided to kill her husband, and run away together.” Is there a family story that never made sense or that felt incomplete?

## **Part Two: Wonderings**

Make a list of “wonderings” related to this shadow story. What do you wonder about this person’s life, this person’s choices, this person’s longings?

## **Part Three: The Open Terrace**

“After dinner the family would sit in the open terrace with bowls of dried apricots, and pistachios, sugar candies, and a big samover of black tea.” To begin imagining this character’s life, it may help to focus on a particular aspect of the character’s experience that reveals rhythms and relationships in the character’s life.

(continued)

## WRITE WHAT YOU HAVE FELT (continued)

Imagine the person from your shadow story in an everyday moment. What is part of this character's routine, who joins the character in this routine, where does this routine take place? Imagine specific objects that fill this routine.

"Now phrase this as one sentence, following the model of Nayeri's sentence: "After \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ would \_\_\_\_\_ in the \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_."

### Part Four: Cast Forward

"Later in her life, Ellie would go crazy. She believed mysterious people were trying to kill her with alien sound wave machines, so she would sleep in a tool shed to hide herself. But for now she was brave."

Reread your wonderings. Choose what most interests you. Now imagine the character twenty years later. What might happen to the character? After you imagine what might happen to this character, conclude the brief paragraph with a statement of who the character is in the earlier moment of time, hinting that it will change.

### Part Five: Write What you Have Felt

"The little window of time you aren't in pain can seem like happiness."

The impact of this line comes not from our imaginings of Ellie, but in the ways that it allows the narrator to name a greater truth about his experiences.

Through the story you've begun to imagine, consider how a longing/desire or fear/dread that you currently feel might also be felt by the character who you're imagining. How might this character reveal or wrestle with this longing or this dread in this midst of the routine you imagined?

## A RAINBOW COW

*“And even though everybody was willing to believe a rainbow-cow story, for some reason, they won’t believe miracles when they happen in offices and airports.” - Nayeri*

What is a spiritual experience that you rarely share?

First take the time to write the story of this experience.

Include all of the details of the particular moment. Immerse yourself in the sensory details of the moment. At this point in the process avoid an analysis of the moment and simply describe in detail the moment as it happened.

Next reflect on the ways this experience increased faith, hope or love in your life. What did it affirm about the nature of God as He is revealed in scripture?

Next reflect on why it’s difficult to share this experience or miracle with others.

# IMAGINE

*“Suddenly it’s all that stuff you’ve left undone. All the kindness you could have given. All the excuses you gave instead. Imagine that for a minute.” - Nayeri*

“Imagine you’re evil.

Not misunderstood.

Not sad.

But evil.

Imagine you’ve got a heart that spends all day wanting more.

Imagine your mind is a selfish room full of pride or pity.

Imagine you’re like Brandon Goff and you find poor kids in the halls and make fun of their clothes, and you flick their ears until they scream in pain and swing their arms, and so you pin them down and break their fingers.

Or you spit in his food in the cafeteria.

Or you just call him things like cockroach and sand monkey.

Imagine you’re evil and you don’t do any of those things, but you’re like Julie Jenkins and you laugh and you laugh at everything Brandon does, and you even help when a teacher comes and asks what’s going on and you say nothing’s going on, and he believes you because you get A-pluses in English.

Or imagine you just watch all of this. And you act like you’re disgusted, because you don’t like meanness. But you don’t do anything or tell anyone.

Imagine how much you’ve got compared to all the kids in the world getting blown up or starved, and the good you could do if you spent half a second thinking about it. Suddenly evil isn’t punching people or even hating them.

Suddenly it’s all that stuff you’ve left undone.

All the kindness you could have given.

All the excuses you gave instead.

Imagine that for a minute.

Imagine what it means.”

Imagine....

## HOW YOU SPEND YOUR DAYS

*“Another way to say it is that everybody is dying and going to die of something. And if you’re not spending your life on the stuff you believe, then what are you even doing? What is the point of the whole thing?” - Nayeri*

Daniel’s reflection on his mother’s choices brings to mind Annie Dillard’s claim, “How you spend your days is, of course, how you spend your life.”

Consider the past few weeks of your life. Make a list of the ways you spend your days. You might end your day by listing activities from your day, or you may also want to trace patterns by looking back on the last week and considering the following questions:

- When do you wake?
- What do you eat?
- Who do you spend time with?
- Where do you exert energy?
- What activities consume the most time?
- How do you play?
- How do you rest?
- When do you fall asleep?
- What feels like wasted time?
- What feels like time well spent?
- What are times you connect with God ?
- What are times you connect with other people?
- When do you feel most like yourself?
- What are moments when you notice an increase in faith, hope or love?
- What are moments when you notice a decrease in faith, hope or love?

As you reflect on how you spend your days, consider what it reveals about what you care about, value, or believe in?

Revisit Daniel’s question: “And if you’re not spending your life on the stuff you believe, then what are you even doing? What is the point of the whole thing?”