

Personal Essays: Where to Begin

This I Believe Essays in NPR

This I believe essays:

Subjective/personal at the same time with inspiring content or message

Personal essay writing at its crisp and succinct form

The introduction always startling, ending with an epiphany/moment of faith/inspiration

Saying Thanks To My Ghosts: Amy Tan

Saying Thanks To My Ghosts

<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=103412215>

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Heard on [Weekend Edition Sunday](#)

AMY TAN

I didn't used to believe in ghosts, but I was trained to talk to them. My mother reminded me many times that I had the gift. It all stemmed from a lie I told when I was 4. The way my mother remembered it, I refused to get ready for bed one night, claiming there was a ghost in the bathroom. She was delighted to learn I was a spirit medium.

Thereafter, she questioned anything unusual — a sudden gust of wind, a vase that fell and shattered. She would ask me, "She here?" She meant my grandmother.

When I was a child, my mother told me that my grandmother died in great agony after she accidentally ate too much opium. My mother was 9 years old when she watched this happen.

When I was 14, my older brother was stricken with a brain tumor. My mother begged me to ask my grandmother to save him. When he died, she asked me to talk to him as well. "I don't know how," I protested. When my father died of a brain tumor six months after my brother, she made me use a Ouija board. She wanted to know if they still loved her. I spelled out the answer I knew she wanted to hear: Yes. Always.

When I became a fiction writer in my 30s, I wrote a story about a woman who killed herself eating too much opium. After my mother read a draft of that story, she had tears in her eyes. Now she had proof: My grandmother had talked to me and told me her true story. How else could I have known my grandmother had not died by accident but with the fury of suicide? She asked me, "She here now?" I answered honestly, "I don't know."

Over the years, I have included other details in my writing I could not possibly have known on my own: a place, a character, a song. I have come to feel differently about my ghostwriters. Sometimes their clues have come so plentifully, they've made me laugh like a child who can't open birthday presents fast enough. I must say thanks, not to blind luck but to my ghosts.

Ten years ago, I clearly saw a ghost, and she talked to me. It was my mother. She had died just 24 hours before. Her face was 10 times larger than life, in the form of a moving, pulsing hologram of sparkling lights. My mother was laughing at my surprise. She drew closer, and when she reached me, I felt as if I had been physically punched in the chest. It took my breath away and filled me with something absolute: love, but also joy and peace — and with that, understanding that love and joy and peace are all the same thing. Joy comes from love. Peace comes from love. "Now you know," my mother said.

I believe in ghosts. Whenever I want, they will always be there: my mother, my grandmother, my ghosts.

Independently produced for Weekend Edition Sunday by Jay Allison and Dan Gediman with John Gregory and Viki Merrick.

Life Is An Act Of Literary Creation:

By Luis Alberto Urrea

I believe God is a poet; every religion in our history was made of poems and songs, and not a few of them had books attached. I came to believe the green fuse that drives spring and summer through the world is essentially a literary energy. That the world was more than a place. Life was more than an event. It was all one thing, and that thing was: story.

I was in a small house in Cuernavaca with old healer women. We were eating green Jell-O. One of them told me this: "When you write, you light a bonfire in the spirit world. It is dark there. Lost souls wander alone. Your inner flame flares up. And the lost souls gather near your light and heat. And they see the next artist at work and go there. And they follow the fires until they find their ways home."

Aside from thinking my old Baptist preacher would not be amused by this kind of pagan talk, I recognized the beauty and awe, the deep respect in a woman who didn't read, for the act of literary creation.

Now, if it is all story, I believe we are the narrators. Many writing instructors will tell you that to be a great writer, you must be attentive. Shamans will tell you the same thing: If you want to be a good person, a whole person, wake up! Pay attention! Be here now! Zen monks will go so far as to hit you with a stick. Look!

I used to approach writing like a football game. If I went out there and aggressively saw more, I'd know more and I'd capture more, and I'd write better. Hut, hut, hut: First down and haiku! But I found out something entirely different. I learned that if I went into the world and paid attention (in Spanish, you "lend attention," *presta atencion*), the world would notice and respond. I would have demonstrated my worthiness to receive the world's gifts. It's a kind of library where you lend attention and receive a story. Or God will toss off a limerick for your pleasure.

In South Carolina recently, I was telling my hosts before a speaking engagement all about this idea. I told them that Story comes on the wings of hummingbirds and dragonflies. My host told me to turn around. A hummingbird hovered outside the window, three inches from the back of my head. After the event, I was in the street enjoying the silence. A dragonfly came and hovered over my head. Both times, all I had to do was look.

Independently produced for Tell Me More by Jay Allison and Dan Gediman with John Gregory and Viki Merrick.

Craft/Style in both the ‘This I believe’ essays: Class discussion

The use of the personal ‘I’ and the subjective assertion of the narrator’s personality

The voice used:

Emotional Urgency/ with potency of thoughts

Confessional and intimate, not preachy.