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FYW 150

### **An Imaginative Sense-Memory Exercise**

One of the exercises that I use is teaching students to “re-inhabit” a remembered experience in order to write narrative in a vivid and meaningful way. It’s an exercise I learned in theatre from Anton Chekov’s grandson. I discovered it worked even better for writers. I ask students to relax, closing their eyes, and think of a place they have often been in different seasons. It can be indoors or outdoors. It can be on a retreat, in their grandmother’s kitchen, ice-fishing, or anything else that brings them strong, pleasant emotionally-connected memories. I explain I will guide them through each of their five senses to re-experience one particular occasion when they have been there. Each section is done slowly, softly, and often with more elaboration. When they have had a minute or two to decide on that special place and that occasion, we begin. When the exercise ends, they will write non-stop everything they can remember about that memory for 15 minutes and then turn in whatever they have. They are usually astonished at what they accomplish during that time.

**So then, we begin with the sense of sight:** What can you see in this place? Is it day or night? Are you indoors or outside? What time of year is it? What objects can you see around you? Sizes, shapes, colors... Natural objects or humanly made? What can you see nearest to you? Then, farther away? Then, far off in the distance (or through the window)? Are there people in this place with you at this time? Imagine the expressions on their faces and what they are wearing.

**Next, the sense of sound:** Think of what you can hear around you. Natural sounds: wind, rain, waves? Human-made sounds such as a teakettle whistling, someone strumming a guitar, voices.... What sounds are more distant and far off like a plane overhead or a motorcycle on a highway some distance away. Can you hear anyone talking, or is it so quiet you can almost hear snow falling and stars twinkling? If people are talking, what are their voices like? What are they talking about? Is there laughter? Is there music in the background?

**Then, the sense of touch:** Reach out and touch whatever is around you. Leaves, sand, water.....Touch the objects you remember. Are they smooth or rough? Warm or cold? If you are indoors, touch objects that have special meaning in this place. Can you feel their shapes, their textures? Think of what each object in this place feels like to the touch.

**Let’s next go to the sense of smell:** What fragrances do you associate with this place? If outdoors, the scent of suntan lotion? Campfire? Flowers or perfume? Remember the smells in this place--of pine needles or the breeze? If indoors, can you smell the way you remember it to be? Coffee perking? Food being cooked? The scent of someone’s skin or hair?

**Lastly, the sense of taste:** If there is food associated with this memory, what does it taste like? What is salty or sweet? What is bubbly or smooth? Hot or cold? Remember that little children sometimes taste things we wouldn’t normally taste as adults—like a window screen or a rock. What might your environment taste like? And then, spend a few more moments going over this memory and what this

place has meant to you—the hello’s and goodbyes....the hugs....the “until next time’s”. Breathe, relax..... You are almost ready to come back into the present.

**(I use a soft chime to signal the end of this time).**

And now you are ready to write down everything you can remember that is connected to what you just envisioned—at least a full handwritten page or two—describe everything tied to your five senses that you can remember about your special place and the specific occasion you remembered. You have fifteen minutes!

**(Most students seem to enjoy this exercise. Some don’t want to stop writing. In the following class, some will share their work. We will discuss why they chose that particular place and that particular event, as well as what they learned about description and being able to write from a deeper center than just the intellect).**