

1. Event Title: When Confession Isn't Enough: Turning Adversity into Art

2. Event Description

Student writers, young and old, frequently choose to write about personal tragedies such as debilitating illness and loss. The result often is a direct confessional work that bemoans or simply describes those difficulties-i.e., what Vivian Gornick calls "the situation" without the story." To address that problem, our panel of veteran teacher/writers will offer examples and strategies to help writers transform traumatic experiences into artfully crafted, fully dimensional, personal narratives.

3) Type of Event: Pedagogy

4) Event Organizer: Mimi Schwartz

5) Event Moderator: Thomas Larson

6) Event Participants:

- Mimi Schwartz - ([www.mimischwartz.net](http://www.mimischwartz.net)) is the author of seven books, most recently *When History Is Personal* (2018). Others include *Good Neighbors, Bad Times*; *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction* (with Sondra Perl); and a marriage memoir, *Thoughts from a Queen-Sized Bed*. Her book, *Good Neighbors, Bad Times Revisited*, will be out in Fall 2020. She is Professor Emerita at Richard Stockton University.
- Mike Steinberg - Founding editor of *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*, Michael Steinberg has written and co-authored six books and a stage play. *Still Pitching* won the 2003 *ForeWord Magazine* Memoir of the Year. An anthology, *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction* (with Robert Root) is in a sixth edition. He's the nonfiction writer-in-residence in the Solstice/Pine Manor College MFA program.
- Sandi Wisenberg - S.L. (Sandi) Wisenberg is the author of a

chronicle, *The Adventures of Cancer Bitch*; an essay collection, *Holocaust Girls: History, Memory & Other Obsessions*; and a fiction collection, *The Sweetheart Is In*. She teaches at the University of Chicago Graham School and edits *Another Chicago Magazine*.

- Thomas Larson ([www.thomaslarson.com](http://www.thomaslarson.com)) - Larson is the author of *Spirituality and the Writer: A Personal Inquiry*, *The Sanctuary of Illness: A Memoir of Heart Disease*, *The Saddest Music Ever Written: The Story of Samuel Barber's 'Adagio for Strings,'* and *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative*.
- Joan Frank ([www.joanfrank.org](http://www.joanfrank.org)) is the author of ten books of literary fiction and nonfiction, with two new titles just published: *Where You're All Going: Four Novellas*, winner of the Mary McCarthy Prize for Short Fiction; and *Try to Get Lost: Essays on Travel and Place*, winner of the nonfiction journal *River Teeth's* competition for literary nonfiction books. A MacDowell Colony Fellow, Joan also teaches, edits, and reviews literary fiction and nonfiction. She lives in the North Bay Area of California.

## 6) Opening Remarks

Good afternoon and welcome to “When Confession Isn’t Enough: Turning Adversity into Art.” It’s a topic that all of us in this room have dealt with, I’m sure—and continue to deal with as writers and as teachers. One of the strong impulses to write—be it memoir, poetry, drama, or fiction—is to capture and make sense of the difficulties we face in our lives. But to engage our readers—to avoid the “Why do I need to know that?” response—we must do more than describe the event. We must create the struggle of living through the event, which, in turn, makes readers say, “Ah, I do need to know that!” What literary alchemy makes the difference? That’s what our panelists today will discuss, using their own writing and that of others they admire (or not). So let us begin.

## 7) What We Will Be Talking About

- **Thomas Larson –**

In writing a memoir about my relationship with my mother (perhaps the most depressed, inner-oriented, and distant person I've known), there is a tendency to engage the distance as something denied me, something I deserved and was not given. But that's overtly confessional. Instead, I find her far more interesting when I engage the distance as a kind of intimacy that she had with unknown and fearful forces and that I have with distance or unrevealed aspects in my own life. To write of her as spirit who embodies her ghost and haunts me (literally), I hope to turn the adversity she faced in life into an artistic expression that also makes sense in my life.

- **Sandi Wisenberg -**

I will talk about distance, how most of the time the best traumatic pieces become dynamic when there's a distance between the now of the narration and the then of the event. That distance allows contemplation but also a variety of new emotions. I will give examples and perhaps talk about exceptions.

- **Mimi Schwartz -**

My focus will be on strategies for writing about grief in ways that provide comfort, insight, and better storytelling. I'll talk about two in particular: the role of humor and the gathering of OPV (Opposing Points of View) and how they enable writers to move beyond what Vivian Gornick calls "the situation" and find the deeper meaning of "the story." Using examples from other writers and my own work, I will show examples of illustrate tips and caveats for exploring adversity in memoir.

- **Mike Steinberg-**

I'll be talking about how I teach students who write about matters of grief, illness, and loss to turn what at first seem to be confessional works into more reflective explorations. The hope is that they learn how to revise adverse situations into more meaningful, artful essays.

- **Joan Frank -**

I will talk about investigating truth without a pre-formed objective—only a general compulsion to possibly discern some larger truth. We're seeking a coherent, underlying tableau. Not an equation. Not a causality. Not a moral map or comeuppance. To approach writing

from memory this way, as a sort of patient safari hunter—if we're lucky, our reader discovers alongside us. Thus, there's a terribly important difference between mere reportage from memory and an urgent, overarching spirit of trying to dig behind or under the reassembled, reconstructed memories themselves for some larger understanding. I will try to list several notable examples.

#### 8) Moderator Questions (a sampling):

1. In the age of social media, how true is the saying, “No one cares but your Mama, unless you make them care”?
2. How does surprise, humor, and the unexpected enhance a piece?
3. What kinds of examples and exercises do teachers use to help their students learn how to turn straightforward confessional essays into more exploratory, meaningful works?
4. How has each of us taught the skill of moving from confession to art, from journal writing and self-examination to contexts that emphasize narrative, descriptive, and expository styles of nonfiction for the sake of a reader’s interest?