

I am motivated by the fear of death. But the fear isn't really about the loss of life itself. It's about the loss of life stories.



I'm not talking about the stock stories that are a part of a person's repertoire as they plod, or play, their way through life. Or the kind of stories that you tell over dinner that have a beginning, a middle and an end. Not funny stories, sad stories, or really any kind of story that has a point to it.

What I crave, and what I worry about losing, are the long, rambling stories that people tell as they reflect on a life well lived. The stories that don't have a particular purpose, other than to say this is who I am, and this is what I was thinking and doing as I was on my way there.

That's why I like oral histories.

Oral history, now often called spoken history, is a conversation between the person interviewed and the person doing the interviewing.

Yes, some people would call it an interview. After all, it quacks like a duck. But it's more than just an interview.

There are three major differences between a spoken history and a journalistic interview (one done for a newspaper story, for example): 1) intention, 2) processing, and 3) final product.

A journalistic interview is conducted with a specific purpose related to a story that will be told immediately, and as such the reporter may discourage, and even fail to record, what might be considered small talk. Later, as the interview is being processed, a journalist focuses on information that illuminates the topic at hand; when the project is over, the notes or tapes may be considered disposable. The product is a story, and it is a story that is ultimately told from the reporter's point of view. Even if it is a Q and A style article, the direction of the interview is generally controlled by the reporter.

With oral histories, on the other hand, the focus is letting the person tell their own story in their own words. They talk about mundane things, and during the course of the conversation memories are crystallized into words. Some sugar, some salt; some smooth, some jagged. And then come the stories.

Sometimes they build up slowly and carefully, like stalagmites, with a steady drip, drip, drip adding layer after layer of meaning. And sometimes a story will suddenly crack open like a geode, a reminder that rough rock can conceal a shimmering miracle.

The result is not exactly the absolute sum of a person's lived experiences. It's just a series of moments frozen on wax, tape, CD, minidisc or microchip, take your pick.

And then comes the processing. Hopefully the stories get transcribed (turned into text and put down on paper) and digitized (the media is into an format that can be shared electronically).

The final product is the entire ensemble -- the original recording, its accompanying transcript, and digital reproductions. Ideally, it all gets institutionalized at a museum or library. The transcripts and digital reproductions are cataloged and filed with enough care that other people can find them when they need them.

Then the originals are archived away in a place where the temperature and humidity are kind to recorded materials. And if they are truly loved and cared for, they will rarely be exposed to light or dust, or the minute traces of oil on human fingertips (how strange that three of the things that bring joy and sustenance to our lives -- sunlight and earth and human touch -- can kill the tangible evidence of our memories.)

So anyway, ten years ago I collected spoken histories of about 30 people here in the

Lowcountry, and for ten years the digital video tapes and minidisks have sat waiting in a dark closet in my parents' house.

Before I buried them away in this safe place, I copied the audio portions onto cassette tapes. I bought a transcription machine. And for years I carried the tapes and that machine around the country. I transcribed the interviews in bits and pieces while living in places like Columbia and Charleston, Salt Lake City and Chicago.

During this time I worked on computers in public libraries, friends' homes, hotel business centers, and at work (not during company time, of course). At one point along the way, my dear friend Sally Mitchell gave me her old laptop, and it opened up a new world of digital independence.

Now I have a new Macbook, a new house and a new office. I've settled back into a new Beaufort, and now it's time to get back to work on those old stories.