

Gruenewald tells the story that needs to be told

Judith van Praag

Many of us have a story within that begs to be told. We put it off, and off, telling ourselves: "One day, I'll sit down and write it down." Often we need a little push.

About fifteen years ago, Mary Gruenewald Matsuda's son and middle child said, "Mom you have never told us about Grandma and Grandpa and Uncle Yonei." Gruenewald (65 at the time) figured that if her own three children, and her brother Yoneichi's four daughters (their father died in 1985) were interested in their family history, it was up to her to tell the story.

She started by listing the facts, as she knew them. In January of 1999, Gruenewald's daughter-in-law told her about author and teacher Brenda Peterson, who was leading a writers group in Seattle. Until she joined the group, what Gruenewald wrote had been all-inclusive. Peterson suggested she ought to write a memoir, focusing on the war years and her camp experience. She advised Gruenewald to make a laundry list, of everything she wanted to address.

That done, the writer penned years –starting with 1941– on a stretch of butcher paper, laid out on the floor. Next she added the items from the laundry list, content for scenes and chapters. In Peterson's class she learned how to apply tools of fiction: adding character, dialogue and story line to her factual material.

In "Looking Like the Enemy: My story of Imprisonment in Japanese-American Internment Camps", Gruenewald doesn't just relate her own story in an engaging manner, her writing is a tribute to the mother whose wisdom she wishes to share with people who aren't lucky enough to have (had) such a wise parent. Exposing her heart and soul on paper was not easy. Gruenewald

remembers how Trip, a fellow writing student said: "Mary we came to class ready to read your words about Mama-san and you dismissed her in 200 words!"

Gruenewald then knew she had to go back to her desk, write with all the beautiful detail she had learned to use, excavating the painful as well as dear memories. Double hard because: "Culturally it was not done to reveal."

And yet writing has proven to be rewarding and gratifying to the now octogenarian author. Gruenewald says she's not same person she was, before she started to write her memoir.

She had for instance been prejudiced against "no, no" people (those against Japanese young men fighting for US army). Mary's family belonged to the "yes, yes" sayers.

While working on the book, she came to understand that both sides were living according to their convictions, each equally valuable and difficult. The "no, no" sayers had to withstand rejection they were ostracized. Gruenewald remembers situations in the camp, where a father was pro Japan, and the son was not: "Families got torn apart that way."

Writing gave Mary respect for those who thought differently. She learned to appreciate the value of democracy, where you have the right to dissent.

"During the 70's and 80's there was a movement to extract an apology from the US Government. Less than 1% of the Japanese American population stood up."

That this movement did not bring the people together pains Gruenewald till today. She states that both the soldiers of the 442nd, and the "no-no" sayers, need to be honored next to each other. "We need both of them, those loyal and critics."

Gruenewald cried a lot while writing her war memoir, but it was cathartic, and she recommends writing –getting that story down on paper– to others. She says that people have been coming out of the woodwork since her book was published, people from her past, people she grew up with. She talks more now, than ever; her heart is lighter and she's been told that she smiles more.

A senior friend showed her his life story, 25 written pages. Remembering her own starting point, and knowing that each paragraph could be made into one whole chapter, she told her friend: "Have courage! Be brave!" For that's what it takes to write in all honesty, delve deep into one's own, and family's past.

Gruenewald's advice for those who want to embark on a similar adventure: "Enroll in a writing group, write with people. You learn from each other. Come with pages to class. You get notes and a different perspective on your material, while you remain the authority."

Reconciled with her past, the author of the beautifully crafted memoir plans to visit Japan this coming spring. Finally. No telling what the title of her next book will be.

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