

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

Daniel Acosta, Jr.

Write Before I Die

I am not a writer, as the term is known in the literary world. I have never written stories--fiction or nonfiction--until now. After I retired, my wife and I moved back to Austin, where our three daughters were have established their lives and careers. My daughters asked me to write about what it was like to grow up in El Paso in the 50s and 60s as a poor Mexican boy, whose grandparents emigrated from Mexico in the early 1900s. My mother was born in Juarez, Mexico and my father in Valentine, Texas--near Fort Davis and Marfa.

When I retired at age 74 in 2019, I was a well-known educator and scientist in academic and toxicological circles. I worked my way up the academic ladder from Assistant Professor to Director of the Graduate Toxicology Program at the University of Texas at Austin; then to Dean of Pharmacy at the University of Cincinnati Medical Center; and in my final years of my career to Deputy Director of the Food and Drug Administration's National Center for Toxicological Research, the primary center for research at FDA. Along the way, I was elected President of the Society of Toxicology, the world's premier organization for toxicologists in academia, government, and the private sector.

Throughout my career, my doctoral students and I wrote research articles published in prominent toxicological and pharmacological journals. I served as an editor and reviewer for several of these journals. I was a primary author of many book chapters on drug and chemical toxicities, hepatic toxicology, in vitro toxicology, and so on and so on. I was the lead editor of several editions of "*Cardiovascular Toxicology*", which is recognized as one of the leading monographs in the discipline.

In 1985 I was first stimulated to think about my life in El Paso when I read a review of "*Hunger of Memory*". I was so impressed with Rodriguez's story that I wrote him a letter to express my admiration of his memoir. We began a conversation about how our lives were somewhat similar as poor Mexican boys growing up in an environment and culture that was predominantly white. Thirty-five years passed before I began the actual process of putting down memories of my family, education, and career on paper.

Not being an experienced writer, it has been a trial-and-error process on my part on how to write about my life experiences. I try to perfect my writing by reading well-known books written by Hispanic authors, such as Richard Rodriguez's "*Hunger of Memory*"; Domingo Martinez's "*The Boy Kings of South Texas*"; Sandra Cisneros' "*The House on Mango Street*"; Oscar Cásares' "*Brownsville*"; and Reyna Grande's "*The Distance Between Us*". Of course, I do not put my writing in the same category as those accomplished authors; my hope is to learn to become a better writer through my readings of their work.

For the last six years, I have submitted my El Paso stories to small, online literary journals. I have received over a hundred rejections from these journals. I am generally sent a form-letter rejection email, consisting of a few sentences. Occasionally one of these editors take pity on me and encourage me to keep on with my writing.

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I know that a story of a young Mexican boy in America who becomes a somewhat successful scientist, professor, and administrator is not unique nor that interesting. Most of my submitted stories were dry, long dissertations on my early school days, college, and career. As a scientist, the most important elements of research are the data derived from laboratory experiments and one's ability to explain to other scientists in publications the importance and relevance of the results to their particular experimental studies. In essence, scientific articles are short and to the point. There is no room for drama, doubt, conjecture nor creative elements in the writing of a scientific article—just the facts, ma'am.

I audited a few creative writing courses that are taken by undergraduate students at the University of Texas; Professor Cásares graciously allowed me to sit in and listen to his lectures on writing nonfiction stories. I saw how he meticulously helped the students with their creative writing assignments and how their writing improved by the end of the semester. I knew that he was extremely busy with his teaching, his family, and his own writings. I did not dare to ask for his comments on my writings before I submitted them to literary journals. I learned that lesson when I naively wrote a couple of writers (none of those previously mentioned) for their advice on my writing style. They quickly told me that they were too busy to help. I quote what one of these authors wrote me:

"I don't read unsolicited stories, because I get so many in my email, and I would never be able to get my own work done if I did".

I appreciated his candor. These past six years have taught me that writing well and enticing editors and everyday readers to read my stories is a serious business. It takes constant revisions of one's writings and then the patience and humility to accept letters of rejection (which I don't honestly have—my pride gets in the way) and to start the process all over again. I take it as a challenge when one of my stories is rejected; I want to make it better. I revise it and send it to another journal.

That is what scientists do when their research articles are not accepted by a particular journal; they modify them somewhat and then submit them to other journals. Scientists, by nature, are very competitive individuals, who want to see their work published by any means possible. My students and I were able to have our research published in good journals. Sure we had failures, but this is a part of becoming a scientist. I accepted that and tried to teach my students the importance of success and failure in science.

So, I began a quest to get my personal stories published on my own without much guidance from other writers. I guess the question I asked myself over and over is this: do I have what it takes to become a creative nonfiction writer? I learned very quickly that it was not going to be easy after having many of my initial stories rejected by so many editors and journals. However, a couple of editors suggested to not dwell so much on the discrimination that I saw in my youth but focus on some of my more enjoyable and unusual experiences as a young boy growing up in El Paso.

I needed more human interest in my writings. My first accepted story was about my high school days as a paperboy. It was accepted in 2020 after many rejections of this story and other stories. I sent the paperboy

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story after it was published to family, friends, and professional colleagues. I briefly mentioned in the story about a racist experience I had with one of my white customers, but the story was more about my interesting and somewhat entertaining experiences with people as a paperboy. To my surprise I received several comments from my white friends and colleagues about how my story reminded them of their many fond days as paperboys and papergirls! There was no mention of my being a poor Mexican boy trying to make it white America.

Although I still include in many of my stories the embarrassing and humiliating attempts to deny my Mexican identity as a young boy, so I'd be more accepted by my white classmates, I now realize that some readers do not necessarily want to read about my thoughts and ideas on discrimination and racism in white America. I'm not that accomplished as a creative writer to write my stories with drama, dialog, and character development that several editors suggested I do in order to have them published in their literary journals.

This brings me to why I submitted my story to *WHLR*. In my case, it is **to write before I die**. I am nearly 80 years-old and statistically I do not have the luxury of time to write my stories in a leisurely manner because I am nearing the end of my life. I read the very moving and candid story by Brooke Randel recently found in the latest issue of *Write or Die Magazine*- "*Writing in a Zigzag*". She describes her tortuous eight-year journey to write a memoir of her life. Frankly, I don't think I have eight more years to complete my life story, but one never knows how things turn out in one's life. I wished that I had read her story before I began my trek to write my own personal stories. I highly recommend her story to beginning writers.

I now appreciate what writers experience in rewriting, revising, and altering their stories so they can be accepted by the literary world.