

Wisdom in the first person

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Critics have judged memoir the dominant literary genre of our time. Works like Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* and Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* have been as admired and influential as any works of fiction. The interest in memoir has also shaped recent Christian writing. Books such as Heidi Neumark's *Breathing Space* and Sara Miles's *Take This Bread* have deftly blended personal narrative and theological reflection, showing the rich possibilities of the form and encouraging others to try their hand. For whatever reason, many more first-person essays are being submitted to this magazine than was the case a couple of decades ago—and many more good ones are being written and published.

Memoir writing is full of hazards, since first-person narratives can be self-indulgent and self-absorbed. Some are written to settle scores or to portray oneself in a flattering light.

Although successful memoirs are as diverse as their authors, the memoirs that are serious moral reflections share a few traits. One is what Phillip Lopate, a chronicler

of the essay form, calls a double narrative focus: the essay moves back and forth between an earlier self and a later, more reflective self in an effort to wrest knowledge from experience. The rigor and honesty of that dual effort is what commands the reader's attention and respect. Successful memoirs tend to have one other trait: they engage moral authorities outside the writer—the voices of other people and the insights of a moral tradition carry some weight.

For these reasons, [Katherine Willis Pershey's first-person essay on sex before marriage](#) commands our attention. She is honest about her own experience, which she narrates through the lens of later insights. She also engages Christian moral teaching on the subject, testing her experience against the wisdom of the tradition and the tradition against her experience, refusing to toss either aside. Her essay invites readers into a much larger project: understanding the place of sex in a life rightly ordered toward God.

Last month the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Family issued a manual on sex designed to shape the behavior of young people. Although full of sound observations (sex is for "love and mutual self-giving"), the genre seems of limited use in fostering practical wisdom. People are more likely to learn how to wrestle with moral choices in their own lives by observing how others have done it in theirs. For that reason, personal narratives of the kind that Pershey has written are welcome and indispensable.

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