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An Introduction to

OPTIMAL DISTANCE
A Divided Life

by

Joan Carol Lieberman

I had good reason to believe that I would be dead before my autobiography, *Optimal Distance,* was published. For many reasons, I had been counting on that eternally protective outcome. But because the expert estimates of a gaggle of doctors were wildly inaccurate, post-publication, I find myself still alive, albeit fully dependent on pharmaceutical life support, in a state of psychological nakedness.

Recently, I read an essay in *The New York Review of Books*, by the Scottish and Sierra Leonean writer, Aminatta Forna, whose feelings about psychological exposure mirror my own. She described how she felt following the publication of her memoir.[1] **"It was like having a skinned inner-self dragged out and placed beneath the hot gaze of strangers."**

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[1] Aminatta Forna, *The Devil that Danced on The Water*. London, England, Harper Collins, 2002.

Readers have told me that I am very brave because they have never read a book more forthright than *Optimal Distance*. Certainly, I made no attempt to obscure or soften my flaws, nor those of others who played important roles in my life. A wise friend mentioned it was quite fortunate that I had managed to outlive so many of those I described.

A Memoir versus An Autobiography

In recent years confusion has developed about the differences between two genres: memoirs and autobiographies. Many wordsmiths blame Amazon for this confusion because its powerful search engine treats both genres as one. However, Amazon is not alone. Even the venerable *Kirkus Reviews* has been known to mistakenly label an autobiography as a memoir and vice versus. But Webster's Dictionary, the Library of Congress, and other similar authorities make a clear distinction between them.

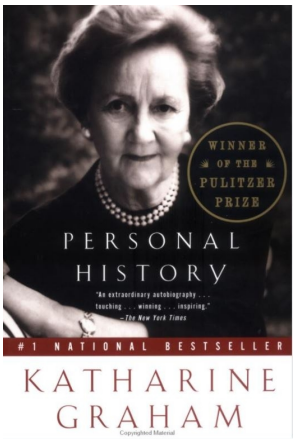
A memoir focuses on an experience or event in an individual's life and can start anywhere and be written by anyone. Classes on memoir writing have become prolific, ensuring that a plethora of memoirs are published every month.

Autobiographies Are Rare

In contrast, an autobiography is a historical document covering the trajectory of an entire life, starting at the beginning and progressing chronologically to its end. Almost all autobiographies have been written by famous leaders, or more recently by people with marketable resumes or media platforms crowded with curious readers.

Regardless of fame or gender, the task of writing an autobiography is challenging. Not only are our brains pre-programmed to forget most of our childhood, the majority of us have difficulty recalling what happened yesterday. Further, as we approach the end of our lives, the cognitive effort to reassemble the arc of our earthly existence often exceeds our mental or physical capabilities, sometimes both.

Katharine Graham, who is currently being portrayed on the silver screen by Meryl Streep in *The Post*, won a Pulitzer Prize for her 1997 autobiography, *Personal History*. She was eighty when it was published and readily acknowledged that she couldn't have written it without the full-time assistance of her researcher, Evelyn Small, who needed an assistant herself; nor without the help of her prestigious editor, Robert Gottlieb.



My own autobiography, *Optimal Distance*, is an anomaly. While I share a June 16 birth date with Katharine Graham, unlike her, I am not famous and my professional work and reputation are peripheral to my narrative. Having been born and grown up in Utah, a place founded on magical thinking, I relied heavily on excessive research and fact-checking to protect myself against the hot lion-like scrutiny of readers who might find parts of my life simply unbelievable.

While I had no researcher, near the end of my process, I was saved by the thoughtful questions and artful editing of Emma Komlos-Hrobsky, a New York City writer and editor at Tin House Books. I have known Emma since she was a child and she led me through the editing process with great wisdom, tenderness, and professional skill.

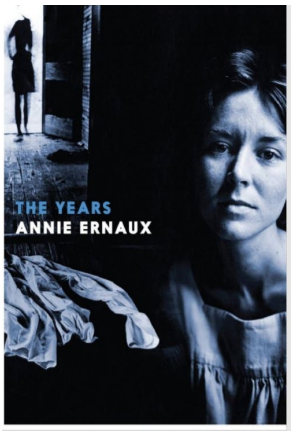
EMMA & JOAN 1992

EMMA KOMLOS-HROBSKY 2015

A Comparison of Two Autobiographies: *The Years* and *Optimal Distance*

Autobiographies are so rare that as far as I have been able to determine only two were published in 2017: An English translation of *The Years*, by the prize-winning French author, Annie Ernaux,[2] and *Optimal Distance*.

Edmund White recently reviewed *The Years* for *The New York Times*[3] calling it a "collective autobiography" or a "**WE-moir**" alluding to the way in which the poet James Merrill once mocked memoirs, calling them "**ME-moirs**." *The Years* is a sociological narrative of the generational history that Edmund White and myself shared with Ernaux, who was born in 1940 in a small village in Normandy. White found her autobiography "both familiar and distancing." Annie Ernaux protected herself by using only impersonal pronouns, either "we" or "she,""they" or "he." She became a third-person observer her life.



[2] *The Years*, first published as *Les Annees* in France in 2008, was translated into English by Alison L. Strayer and published in America by Seven Stories Press in November 2017.

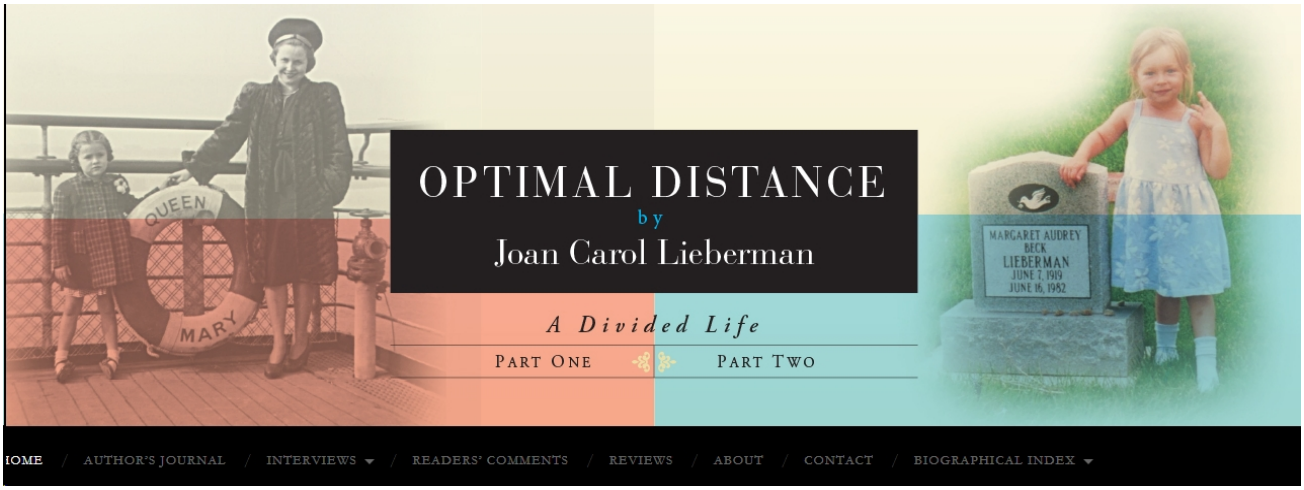
[3] White, Edmund, "Reclaiming the Past in the Internet's Infinite Present" *The New York Times*, January 18, 2018,

Optimal Distance:
Not a ME-moir or a WE-moir, but a WHY-moir

In contrast*, Optimal Distance* is a **WHY-moir** which follows the arc of my life intimately. "WHY" questions are inherently difficult to answer-- many are unanswerable. However, searching for the answers to such questions is part of being a human being.

Drawing extensively on my diaries and personal correspondence, I wrote *Optimal Distance* after a decade-long search to understand the true circumstances of my birth and childhood, as well as the origins of my parents and grandparents. My search was led by numerous unknowns. WHY did I always feel as if I was missing some part of myself? WHY did my mother develop schizophrenia? WHY was my father unable to face the nature of my mother's mental illness? WHY was I an only child in communities where most families had five or seven children? WHY didn't I know what I to believe about God, death, and the other big questions that others seemed to feel so certain about? And WHY, after being told I would be lucky to survive six months, had I survived, when so many others more deserving and needed had not?

I was forty-seven when the cancerous death sentence was first handed down. My psyche was instantly overloaded with WHY questions. I turned away from the future I had planned and instead began looking back at my life. Sweeping away the dust of time, I uncovered mysteries and opened a human vault stuffed with secrets. The intuitive connections between humans and animals came into the foreground, along with the ways in which dreams act as a source of intelligence and guidance. I also saw how most of us understand coincidences and synchronicity as sources of luck – either good or bad. Then, as I began writing about my discoveries, repetitive Harry Houdini-like escapes from death repeatedly tested my personal agnosticism.



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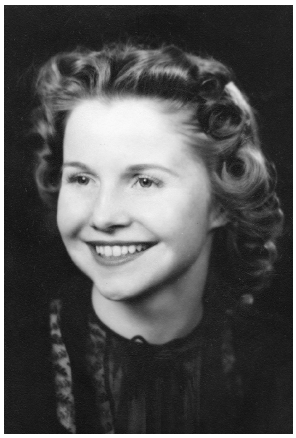
What do I mean by optimal distance? First, we are each engaged in an endless dance of distance–always searching for more or less physical separation and psychological intimacy between ourselves and others from the moment we are born. Infants often experience the breast of their mother as part of them, so close that there is no distance. As we begin to cautiously toddle away from our mothers or primary caregivers, we look back to make certain she or he is there if we need support. That is usually the first time there is a change in optimal distance, but from that moment forward, distance between ourselves and others is constantly in flux.

As we grow older most of us become engaged in a struggle to solidify our beliefs and to face our mortality. Both faith and death eventually require us to find a comfortable psychological distance. Throughout history, those who have moved too close to their deity have found themselves not only seared, but perceived as mad. Also, as our standards of living have improved, we have become expert in the denial of death. We take risks, often heroic risks, unable to see that such risks may cost us our lives.

Like most of us, I began to learn about optimal distance from my mother. She suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and episodically

displayed violent behavior. My survival was dependent on paying extremely close attention to her facial expressions and behavior in order to keep a safe distance away from her whenever she was hallucinating. Many of the observational and diagnostic skills that informed my writing, and which I relied upon as an adult in my professional career, were developed while growing up in my mother's always uncertain, often terrifying territory.

I walked at nine months, learned to hide outside, often keeping warm between our two dogs, but more importantly at many critical junctures I was rescued and protected by substitute mothers. I had many unconscious and remnant memories of that substitute mothering–some as vague as the scent of vanilla or the image of rick rack, others were of brooms made perpetually powerful, of wise words transformed into a well of deep comfort. Taken together those memories unconsciously motivated me to spend most of my life trying to save not only my own mother, but other mothers as well.



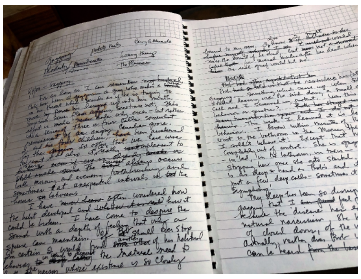
THE AUTHOR'S MOTHER,
MARGARET AUDREY BECK LIEBERMAN

THE AUTHOR'S PARENTS,
MARGARET & FRANK, ON THEIR WEDDING DAY

My writing skills may have come from a critical antidote to my mother's madness--a diary given to me by my Aunt Mary when I was

five. My initial entries were simple crayon drawings mixed with a few misspelled words. Despite their primitive nature, as an only child I quickly discovered that describing my experiences made me feel less anxious and alone– as if someone was really listening, urging me to live on and to tell them more. By the time I was in third grade, I couldn't go to sleep at night unless I had tried to document my day– a moment of happiness or tears, a confused confession, or my defiant outrage.

I continued to be a diarist long after I had left home for college, married, and had children. I still am a diarist, but as I was finishing *Optimal Distance*, I began shredding my old ones. I kept only one, written in 1993 while I was in Florida caring for my Jewish mother-in-Ruth. Excerpts of those diary entries can be found in *Part Two* of *Optimal Distance* in "My Book of Ruth."



1993 FLORIDA DIARY

I was in high school when I began researching the nature of schizophrenia. Unfortunately, it was 1959, still part of an erroneous era that lasted half a century, during which it was believed that schizophrenia was caused by cold or distant mothering. Such mothers were labeled as "refrigerator mothers" or "schizophrenogenic mother." The era began before anti-psychotic drugs had been discovered, but lasted thirty years after they were introduced.

In 1962, I was in Paris making preparations for working as a medical volunteer in French Africa. There I found the a tiny sign of hope when I read about the first anti-psychotic medication then being used to treat schizophrenia in France. That same year, on the night I returned to my parents home from Africa, my mother made another attempt on my life. I had learned enough while in Paris to arrange for her to be hospitalized and treated with Thorazine, the first anti-psychotic medication approved for use in America.

My father had a deep unconscious need to avoid facing the true reality of his wife's illness. He never left her, but he found it very hard to supervise her medical care, so that became my responsibility.

Part One of *Optimal Distance* begins before my birth and ends with my mother's death on the morning of my fortieth birthday. In 1970, I was a single-mother working as the director of the Boulder County Head Start Program when my parents arrived from Tucson for an unannounced visit. My father, overwhelmed by my mothers behavior, decided to move to Boulder, despite my protests. Over the next twelve years, it was necessary for me to hospitalize my mother sixteen times at four different hospitals. She went through three psychiatrists, multiple drug regimes, and electroconvulsive therapy.

My mother's paranoia often made her want to disappear, to find a more optimal distance from her demons. It was behavior that she began exhibiting when I was an infant. My mother's last escape (or escapade) ended in Salt Lake City in October 1980. Having indicated her intention to go to the Westminster Mall, she instead drove to Salt Lake City. She stopped for gas at Little America in Wyoming, and purchased a Heath Toffee Bar. Pulling back onto Interstate 80, she took a bite and broke a tooth. On the outskirts of Salt Lake, she found a dentist to put a temporary cap on her tooth and ended up renting a trailer from him.

When it started to rain, the trailer roof leaked. She became convinced that the FBI had seeded the clouds with poison just for her,

based on an electronic signal from the special chip the dentist had placed inside the temporary cap. Screaming in fear, she called her oldest sister in Bountiful. Her sister called my father.

My father flew over the Rocky Mountains and drove her back to Boulder in her Beetle. As they crossed Wyoming, my mother repeatedly saw imaginary wounded women opening the passenger door and jumping out of whatever car was on the highway in front of them. At her insistence, my father stopped more than a dozen times to search for the wounded women only my mother could see.

After my father brought her home to their Boulder apartment on Cedar Avenue, my mother put her demons to work full-time on the contents of the Dead Sea Scrolls, searching for secret scriptural messages. It was work that kept her safely preoccupied until the end of her life. She died on the morning of my fortieth birthday in 1982.

Second Chances

Part Two of *Optimal Distance* begins after my mother's death, Freed from both responsibility for and fear of my mother, I happily gave birth to a second child, my son Eben Valentine.

When Eben was three, I developed breast cancer. I started a preschool for him in our home out of worry that I wouldn't survive. That preschool became Boulder's Friends' School.

Eben was five when the cancer spread to my liver. My oncologist told me that, if I was lucky and had a good response to treatment, I had about six months to put my affairs in order. Death began lurking about on the sidewalk in front of our Marine Street home. At night he would stand outside and shine a spotlight on my dusty agnosticism through our bedroom window, which came from my having inherited religious beliefs at opposite ends of the spectrum.

As a child, I was introduced to the all-knowing and all-seeing

Heavenly Father whose rules I absorbed in Mormon Primary School versus the steady scientific atheism of my father, which he slowly revealed to me as a teenager. These two polar-opposite beliefs systems were surrounded by my mother's hallucinations. She frequently imagined that either God or the Devil was whispering in her ear. The crazy combination solidified my uncertainty.

My father's conversion to atheism came from both the hardships of his childhood and his education as a scientist. His Jewish father, was related to the first, and so-far only Jewish governor of Utah, but his mother was the daughter of Irish Catholics who arrived in America on separate famine ships.

My mother's parents and grandparents were Mormons, whose European ancestors were among the first pioneers to arrive in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1847. Whether it was an early symptom of schizophrenia or a moment of crystal clear thinking, my mother lost her faith in Mormonism in 1934 during the Great Depression. She was fifteen-years-old and very hungry.

Those unfamiliar with the dominant cultural climate of Utah in the first half of the 1900s, have asked me: "WHY did you ever become a Mormon?" When I was almost five-years-old, my father, who was a research entomologist for the USDA in Delta, Utah, was transferred to the experimental research station at Utah State in Logan. We happened to move next door to the Evans' family, all of whom were extraordinarily kind to me. I started following the Evans family to the Mormon Ward house, where I attended Primary School and sat in a state of fearful obedience through the long Sacrament and Testimony Meetings.

Whenever I was at the Ward house I always felt like a small wild animal desperately trying to hide among a huge herd of domineering dairy cows. Nonetheless, the Mormon Church saved my life, just not in the way promised by Joseph Smith. Instead, it enabled me to make

friends and have an independent connection to the community, while also providing safe refuge from my mother because her paranoia kept her from ever going near a Mormon Ward house.

In 1965, as a student at UC Berkeley with a two-year-old daughter, I wrote to the Bishop of the University Ward asking to have my name removed from the Mormon membership list, saying I didn't believe Joseph Smith was a prophet, but rather a man who suffered from manic depression.

I was immediately charged with apostasy and an excommunication trial date was set, more than a decade before Sonia Johnson's trial became a national news story. Sonia Ann Harris Johnson, who was also from Logan, was excommunicated because of her outspoken advocacy for the Equal Rights Amendment.

My excommunication trial on the grounds of apostasy was conducted by three white male Mormon bishops, who quickly and unanimously condemned me to burn in hell for eternity.[4]

After the breast cancer spread, I began to worry about the spiritual and genetic legacies I would be leaving my two children. Coincidentally, while pondering these issues, my father's sister and her husband arrived from Salt Lake City to bid me a final goodbye. They planned to stay a week, which is a long visit even for a healthy hostess. After the initial tearful conversations, there was not much more to say. However, I had long been haunted by what I didn't know about my taciturn father's traumatic childhood. To overcome my father's resistance, I persuaded

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[4]At my own excommunication trial, I testified it was my belief that Joseph Smith suffered from manic depression, and using my youthful twenty-three-year-old arrogance, presented this evidence of my judgment:

1. His hallucinations began with an imagined angel named Moroni who chose him and only him to translate some very special golden plates.

2. His hyper-sexuality lead him to creatively introduce the practice of polygamy.

3. His megalomania was revealed when he told his followers that they must tithe ten percent of all their wealth while building magnificent golden spired temples inside which his secret rites were to be performed.

4. His racism was revealed when he claimed to have been told by God that when the last Native American was finally converted to Mormonism, they would all turn white.

the two elderly siblings to let me interview them together. When you are dying, resisted wishes are more easily granted.

So for the next five afternoons, over tea and chocolates, my father and aunt excavated and argued over their childhood memories of growing up in Newark, Ogden, and then Salt Lake. When my secretary transcribed those taped interviews, there were one hundred fifty pages of remarkable family history.

Those interviews answered a few WHY questions–ones which I didn't even know I had, while simultaneously producing a long list of additional ones that I needed to explore.

Moving from one treatment to another, somehow my survival persisted. My unconscious, still on high alert for death, was busy dreaming. I had a haunting dream about the two Springer Spaniels that were not in my conscious memories, but rather only in the family films taken while we lived in Delta from the time of my birth until I was four and one half. I asked my father what had happened to those two dogs.

Sobbing he said: "Your mother made me shoot them. They were good dogs and they loved you, but she was the boss."

I had never seen my father cry that hard, although he was frequently moved to tears. For this reason, I didn't push further at that moment.

The next day, on March 1, 1992, a spring blizzard struck Boulder. Piles of downed trees and broken branches were on every street, which over- whelmed arborists and tree services, as well as trash haulers. Every time I closed my eyes I was flooded with nightmarish images, which the hospice nurse and doctor thought might be due to some kind of drug reaction. I felt a strong urge to run away and hide, as well as waves of shame and fear. A week later I had a dream about my father and petrified wood.

Dreaming of Petrified Wood

Frank was very busy cleaning up my yard–filling a large dumpster

to the brim with many things, but mostly with sticks and old pieces of petrified wood. Others, myself included, stood around watching, but we were not allowed to help with this task in any meaningful way. Frank was being very controlling about what went into the dumpster and how the sticks got stomped down. Then came an awareness that at some point my father was going to pour hot oil on the sticks and burn up the contents of the dumpster. I felt worried that this would cause trouble and wondered whether such burning was even legal. But clearly Frank intended to burn it up regardless of the rules.

This dream finally gave me the courage to confront my father about the early history of my mother's illness. It turned out that he held the key to a large locked vault stuffed with secrets.

For the first time he told me the story of my birth, explaining that my mother had only wanted a boy. Further because she didn't like to be touched, and because they were living in a small town with only one doctor, my parents only learned she was having twins a few weeks before she went into labor. My twin brother was stillborn and complications from the birth led to a complete hysterectomy for my mother. She went the rest of her life without hormones, insistent that her sterile condition be kept a secret.

My father also confessed that the only other non-Mormon couple in Delta had repeatedly urged him to have my mother committed to an insane asylum because they felt certain she was trying to harm me.

My father's tearful confessions included the name of a critical first-hand witness to an episode during which my mother had a major break with reality. That witness mentioned another name. I was able to locate those two witnesses and during telephone interviews and correspondence, they both described the same murderous attack made on me when I was two and one-half-years old. My mother's weapon was a broken tree branch–a stick which had become petrified as it shaped the remainder of my life.

I suddenly understood WHY I had always felt as if a piece of me was missing. It explained WHY there were no menstrual pads in our home when I had my first period. It explained WHY I was an only child and WHY my mother felt devastated and ashamed in a state that places too high a value on a woman's reproductive capacity. (Mormon's have large families because of the belief that many souls are waiting in Heaven to come to earth). I began to understand and feel sympathy for my mother's terrible losses and the additional stigma she felt in her own family. I staggered away from that long conversation feeling it was necessary to re-frame my life.

Not long afterwards, MRI scans revealed that I had experienced a "spontaneous radical remission" of tumors in both my liver and my brain–a remission that lasted for two years. I do not know if consciously facing the nature of my mother's attack triggered the remission. As my atheist scientist father's daughter, I approach such a possibility cautiously. However, there is a growing body of medical research documenting cases of remission tied to immune system responses after psychological healing.[5]

When the metastatic cells returned, as they always do, like my mother I had a complete hysterectomy and participated in the first clinical trial for Herceptin, then called "anti-her." Other treatment regimes followed.

In 1999 I was invited to attend the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference as a Bakeless Scholar. My writing sample became *Part One* of *Optimal Distance* and I met Carol Houck Smith, Editor-at-Large for W.W. Norton who was not afraid of my mortality. She said all I had to do was

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[5] Hall, Stephen S. *A Commotion in the Blood, Life, Death and the Immune System*. New York, Henry Holt, 1997; Hirshberg, Caryle and Barasch, Marc Ian. *Remarkable Recovery, What Extraordinary Healings Tell Us About Getting Well and Staying Well*. New York, Riverhead Books, 1995. Turner, Kelly A, Ph.D. *Radical Remission, Surviving Cancer Against All Odds*. New York, Harper Collins, 2014.

to live long enough to write the ending. I returned home and began to try to describe the arc of my life.

Eventually, the side effects of years of chemotherapy caught up with me and calcified my arteries. In 2003, my kidneys' failed and I became dependent on dialysis. In 2007, I had a near fatal stroke on an airplane while flying to Utah to give a speech on Jewish genealogy. Eben and Bob nursed me back to partial recovery, but I stopped writing. Instead I tried to justify my existence by researching the genealogy of my friends and other individuals about whom I had written.

In 2014, my husband had a slight lull in his legal work for the first time since I had met him in 1971. He asked to read my dusty manuscript. I was hesitant, not certain how he would respond to several parts. When I finally relented, he became an enthusiastic and persistent advocate for publication.

In 2015, just past the forty year mark of our union, Bob and I decided to make a bucket list for our marriage–what he wanted from me before I died and what I wanted from him before I died. He wanted me to finish and publish *Optimal Distance*. You will have to ask him what I wanted.

During these years I continued working on the manuscript, believing that the fate of *Optimal Distance* would soon be in the hands of my husband. I remember too well the day he asked our beloved friend, Ann Marks Getches, if she would stand in for me and guide him after my death, telling Ann, "You will know better than me what she would want deleted and what should be kept."

Bob Pelcyger is a hero among husbands. He has stuck by me for almost three decades, all the while having to wake up in the morning prepared to find me dead in our bed or the chair in our living room. I know of no other man besides my father with the fortitude to stick with a wife through such a long illness. Sometimes I wonder if I inherited an epigenetic spousal selection tool from my mother.

There is at least one more possible scientific reason for my long my survival. While I was not part of the study published this month in the *Journal of Palliative Care*, the study provides evidence that cancer patients who tell their life stories in one way or another live longer![6]

All of us inherit secrets. Most are benign, but some are not. Secrets are often passed down over several generations and some become mysteries. As I investigated and explored the secrets of my history and those of my ancestors, I had to face hard truths and painful experiences. My deepest hope is that *Optimal Distance* will relieve my progeny from the burden of having to carry the secrets I inherited, while also inspiring them, as well as readers, to begin exploring their own WHY questions.

Writing my autobiography ultimately helped me shorten the distance between the past and the future, giving me time to examine my life from an ***optimal distance.***

[6]Wise, Meg; Marchand, Lucille R; Roberts, Linda J., and Chich Ming-Yuan. "Suffering in Advanced Cancer: A Randomized Control Trial of a Narrative Intervention" *Journal of Palliative Medicine*. February 2018, 21(2): 200-207. https://doi.org/10.1089/jpm.2017.007