

Suggestions for Writing
based on *The Tribal Knot: A Memoir of Family, Community, and a Century of Change*
by Rebecca McClanahan *tribal knot.com*

1. Do any of the characters/relationships in the book remind you of your own experience? For instance, is/was there an Aunt Bessie in your life? A matriarch like Hattie? A close sibling relationship like the one between Arthur and Vena, or Hattie and Charlie, or Bessie and Sylvia? An influential or absent uncle, grandfather, or father? Write about that character or relationship.
2. Write a letter to an ancestor or to a descendant. Tell them things that they could not learn otherwise, things they could not possibly know without reading your letter.
3. Using the lists of Hattie's and Bessie's many identities as examples (see pages 258-9 and pages 321), make a list of all the multiple identities you might use to describe yourself or another family member or ancestor. Use the list as the basis for a character sketch or a remembered or imagined scene.

4. Choose one or more of these passages as inspiration for your own writing:

“Is there a golden time in the life of a family, a community, a tribe? Or is it only by looking backward that we decide when, or if, that time existed?”

“I did not want to die. I wanted not to live. There's a difference.”

“At times, we all require a proper distance from what is ours, to be reminded of its beauty.”

“Someone works all her life to make a home yet never truly inhabits it, homesick as she is for some lost place.”

“Can we ever know our loved ones, all their separate and warring selves?...Or must we always edit their lives to complete our own?”

“Early photographs of my mother confirm my father's frequent remark: ‘She was a living doll.’”

“One of the blessings of childhood is its distance from adulthood, the long, vast landscape of forgetting.”

To what degree are we responsible for, and to, those forces that have formed us?

“Because of Aunt Bessie, I never saw books as dead, finished texts. They were living, breathing entities, unexplored territories into which we would venture the next night, and the next. Anything could happen, and we would be present when it did.”

“The story of any event in a family's life...is also the story of those who were not present.”

“If her words held no answer, I decided, I would read her life.”

“Well, that is the way of the world, Bessie thinks. Those who are meant to survive, do.”