that remain genuinely perplexing, vexing, uncanny, luminous, unresolved. In short, one must be nudged to recognize that life remains a mystery—even one's own so-called boring life. There must also be some recognition of the charm of ordinary daily existence, which has nourished some of the most enduring non-fiction.

The use of literary models can be a great help in invoking life's mystery. I like to remind myself, as well as my students, of the tonal extremes available: we can rant as much as Dostoevsky's Underground Man or Céline's or Bernhard's narrators, we can speak (as the poet Mayakovsky says) "At the Top of My Voice," we can be as passionate and partisan as Hazlitt or Baldwin, or even whine, the way Joan Didion sometimes does, with self-aware humor. We can try to adopt the sane, thoughtful, responsible manner of George Orwell or E. B. White. From all these models a writer of personal narrative can then choose how measured or feverish she wants to come across at any time: in one piece, she can sound like the soul of reason; in another, a step away from the loony bin.

Mining our quirks is only the beginning of turning ourselves into characters. We are distinguished one from the other as much by our past conditions, the set of circumstances in our backgrounds, as by the challenges we have encountered along the way. It means something very different to have been the second-oldest boy in an upper-middle-class Korean family that emigrated from Seoul to Los Angeles than to have been born the youngest female in a poor Southern Baptist household of nine.

Ethnicity, gender, religion, social class, geography, political affiliation: these are all strong determinants in the development of character. Sometimes they can be made too much of, as in the more limiting sort of identity politics, which seeks to explain all the intangibles of a human being's destiny by this or that social
oppression. But we must be bold in working with these categories as starting points and not be afraid to meditate on our membership in each of these communities, and the degree to which it has—or has not—formed us.

When you are writing a memoir, you can set up these categories and assess their importance one by one and go on from there. When you write personal essays, you can never assume that your readers will know a thing about your background, regardless of how many times you have explained it in previous essays. So you must become deft at inserting that information swiftly—I might say, “I was born in Brooklyn, New York, of working-class parents”—and not worry about the fact that it may be redundant to your regular readers, if you’re lucky enough to have any. In one essay you may make a big thing of your regional background and very little of your religious training; in another, just the opposite, but in each essay it would be a good idea to tell the reader both, simply because this sort of information will help to build you into a character.

In this sense, the personal writer must be like a journalist, who respects the obligation to get in the basic orienting facts—who, what, where, when, and why—as close to the top of every story as possible.

So now you have sketched yourself to the reader as a person of a certain age, sex, ethnic and religious background, class or region, possessing a set of quirks, foibles, strengths, and peculiarities. Are you yet a character? Maybe not: not until you have soldered your relationship with the reader by springing vividly into his mind, so that everything your I says and does on the page seems somehow oddly, piquantly characteristic. The reader must find you amusing—that’s the crux of it—amusing enough to follow you, no matter what topic you propose. Whether you are writing this time about world peace or a piece of chalk, readers
must sense quickly from the first paragraph that you are going to keep them engaged. The trick, of course, is that you cannot amuse the reader unless you are already self-amused. And here we come to one of the main stumbling blocks placed before effective personal writing: self-hatred.

It is an observable fact that most people don’t like themselves, in spite of being decent-enough human beings—certainly not war criminals—and in spite of the many self-help books urging us to befriend and think positively about ourselves. Why this self-dislike should be so prevalent I cannot pretend to understand; all I can say, from my vantage point as a teacher and anthologist of the personal essay, is that an odor of self-disgust mars many performances in this genre and keeps many would-be personal writers from developing into full-fledged professionals. They exhibit a form of stuttering, of never being able to get past the initial, superficial self-presentation and diving into the wreck of personality with gusto.

The proper alternative to self-dislike is not being pleased with oneself—a smug complacency that comes across as equally distasteful—but being curious about oneself. Such self-curiosity (of which Montaigne was the fountainhead and greatest exemplar) can only grow out of that detachment or distance from oneself about which I spoke earlier. I am convinced that self-amusement is a discipline that can be learned; it can be practiced even by people such as myself, who have at times a strong self-mistrust. I may be very tired of myself in everyday life, but once I start narrating a situation or set of ideas on the page, I begin to see my I in a comic light, and I maneuver him so that he will best amuse the reader. Maintaining one’s dignity should not be a paramount issue in personal writing. But first must come the urge to entertain or at least provocatively stimulate the reader. From that impulse everything else follows.
There is also considerable character dimensionality to be derived from expressing your opinions, prejudices, half-baked ideas, etc., provided you are willing to analyze the flaws in your thinking and to consider arguments against your fixations and not be too solemn about it all. Nonfiction writing thrives on daring, darting, subjective flights of thought. You must get in the habit of inviting, not censoring, the most far-fetched, mischievous notions, because even if they prove cockeyed, they may point to an element of truth that would otherwise be inaccessible.

Finally, personal nonfiction writers would do well to follow another rule of fiction writers, who tell you that if you want to reveal someone’s character, actions speak louder than words. Give your protagonist, your I-character, something to do. It’s fine to be privy to all of I’s ruminations and cerebral nuances, but consciousness can only take us so far in the illumination of character. Particularly if you are writing a memoir piece, with chronology and narrative, it is often liberating to have the I-character step beyond the observer role and be implicated crucially in the overall action. How many memoirs suffer from a self-righteous setup: the writer telling a story in which Mr. or Ms. I is the passive recipient of the world’s cruelty or is exposed to racism or betrayal, say. There is something off-putting about a nonfiction story in which the I is infinitely more sinned against than sinning. By showing our complicity in the world’s stock of sorrow, we convince the reader of our reality and even gain his sympathy.

How much more complicated and believable is George Orwell’s investigative left-wing self, the I in The Road to Wigan Pier, for having admitted he found the coal miners’ smells repellent, or James Baldwin’s I in Notes of a Native Son, for acknowledging how close he came to the edge with his rages against racism in restaurants! Character is not just a question of sensibility. There are hard choices to be made when a person is put under pressure, and
it is in having made the wrong choice, curiously enough, that we are made all the more aware of our free will and humanity. So it is that remorse is often the starting point for good personal writing, whose working out brings the necessary self-forgiveness (not to mention self-amusement) that is necessary to help us outgrow shame.

I have not touched on some other requirements of good personal writing, such as the need to go beyond the self's quandaries, through research or contextualization, to bring back news of the larger world. Nor have I spoken of the grandeur of the impersonal, formal essay. Yet even when the word I plays no part in the language of criticism or other nonfiction, a firm sense of personality can warm the voice of the impersonal narrator. When we read a Samuel Johnson or Edmund Wilson or Lionel Trilling or Susan Sontag essay, for instance, we feel that we know these authors as fully developed characters (prickly, tolerant, combative, judicious), regardless of their not having referred personally to themselves at all in those pages.

The need thus exists to make oneself into a character, whether the nonfiction uses a first- or third-person narrative voice. I would further maintain that this process of turning oneself into a character is not self-absorbed navel gazing, but rather a potential release from narcissism. It means you have achieved sufficient distance to begin to see yourself in the round: a necessary precondition to transcending the ego—or at least writing personal nonfiction that can touch other people.