



Memoir Writing as a Healing Journey

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*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

—T. S. Eliot

Memoir Writing as a Healing Journey

This e-book is designed to help you embark on an important journey. Whether you have suffered trauma, loss, illness, physical or emotional abuse that you feel could be healed through writing, or you simply want to use writing as a tool for self-examination, having a guide can be useful.

As a therapist and memoirist, I have used writing to help myself and my clients feel more whole and have developed deep compassion for the suffering of others. Through my research and practice with clients, therapists, and others who use writing as a healing tool, I have witnessed over and over again the power of memoir writing tease out the untold stories and free us from the bonds of the past. This e-book provides support and guidance in writing your own healing stories. One important point I want to make at the beginning: You do not have to write about “bad” things, “dark” stories, or pain in order to heal. Research has shown that writing positive, happy stories can be just as healing. However, I offer you ways to write those darker stories, as it can be helpful for some writers to bring them out into the open. When they are out of our minds and bodies and released onto the page, we are often able to develop new perspectives about what happened.

How to use the book

If you are like me, you grab a new book and eagerly devour it. I never follow an author’s advice to do each exercise as it comes! I browse and read snippets that catch my eye, then go back and try the exercises that most draw my interest. I won’t suggest that you do what I don’t do myself, but I will tell you how the book is arranged so you can decide how you want to use it. In these pages are many useful ideas and techniques—including research, anecdotes, and students’ comments; my own experiences in writing my memoir; and exercises and suggestions to get you writing. Because I’ve been in the healing profession for over thirty years and have a background as an artist—in both music and painting—I try to bring a sense of shape, rhythm, and timing to my writing. You have your own rhythm and timing

for the stories you feel the need to write and will discover a pace that feels comfortable for you. I invite you to take in my suggestions and apply whatever works for you. Your own creative process will be uniquely different.

There is no one way to write a memoir!

The voyage of discovery lies not in finding new landscapes but in having new eyes.
Marcel Proust

Chapter One

The Courage to be a “Real” Writer

In the course of my work as a memoir coach, I have met countless people who have a passion to write. If we are to live that passion, we must conquer a fierce internal adversary: the critic who admonishes us to use perfect grammar and eloquent language, and convinces us that if we were “real” writers the writing would flow effortlessly.



In my workshops, we talk about what a “real” writer is: someone who is published, polished, and vetted by the New York establishment; someone super-confident who writes 20 pages a day without confronting any obstacles. But the truth is that all writers, even famous ones, struggle with internal critical voices.

The critical voice may suggest that you are boring, or that your words and ideas will be a burden to the world. It often says such things as, “Why bother, who cares, what makes you think that anything you have to say is important?” If you have a “writing wound” caused by having had your creative efforts minimized or ridiculed, trying to write may feel like a battle, often a ferocious battle, fought between the part that wants to write and the part that criticizes. So it takes extra effort to encourage our creativity, to invite it to come out of hiding.

There is another task that stands in the way for many would-be memoir writers. They must learn to ignore an inner voice that shouts: “Don’t write that story, you’ll shame us. We’ll never speak to you again!” Many people are haunted by unspoken rules that forbid us from exposing the family’s dirty laundry. We become afraid to unleash our authentic voices and speak our own truths.

Often we feel the need to present ourselves and our families in the best light. This is not necessarily wrong. In fact, for people who tend to focus on the negative, this “best light” method can be quite healing. But those who are ashamed or who feel cowed by the old family code of silence must tell their deeply honest stories in order to heal. If you are such a person, your inner critic may tap into your fear, shame, and doubt to keep you silent. You must give yourself permission to tell the truth. I will discuss the inner critic

and how to deal with truth telling in memoir writing in later chapters.

In my writing workshops, I have seen amazing breakthroughs. Perhaps the safety and support of the group catch the inner critic unawares. Or perhaps the intense passion of the writer is ignited by the group process, and this allows the stories to emerge.

The people who attend my workshops often gasp at the beauty and courage of vignettes written in a few short minutes. These snapshots of a much larger story astonish us because they are fresh and real, composed in an atmosphere of trust. Each vignette piques our curiosity as the weeks pass, because it sheds light on the whole person we are getting to know through her weekly stories.

One woman wrote a character sketch about her young son, a beautiful golden boy of eight, who is the center of her life. She wrote and read about how important he is to her, coming into her life after she thought she would never have children. She wrote about the joy he has given her and grieved for the years when she was in despair about having no children. The group witnessed and held her in respectful, embracing silence. Kleenex was passed silently from hand to hand as everyone received her story. The room was filled with compassion and support, which she could feel and receive. She looked at us and wiped her eyes.

“Wow. I guess I took up a lot of time. I’m sorry.”

Everyone began murmuring, telling her how deeply the story had affected them, reflecting back to her what she had written and lived. As she was witnessed by the group, she began to relax and smile. Eventually she said, “I’ve never told anyone all this. I have never had the space to do this before.”

The healing this student experienced was not only in the writing of her story but in the sharing of what had been private. Later she wrote to me: “Attending this workshop was my gift to myself. It gave me the opportunity to reach deep inside myself, draw a circle of words around my heart, and share my deepest feelings with a group of fellow writers who were there waiting to receive me and hold me with compassion and acceptance. I left the workshop feeling fuller and more whole.”

The National Association for Poetry Therapy, a group dedicated to using writing and literature for healing, stresses the importance of groups for writers. The association suggests that there are three important stages of the writing-as-healing process:

1. Writing;
2. Reading your writing to yourself; and
3. Sharing the work with others and being witnessed.



The National Association of Poetry Therapy
www.poetrytherapy.org

The title “writer” can be intimidating. I have met many people whose writing is poetic and wonderful, but they wouldn’t call themselves writers. “I don’t identify with ‘writer.’ It isn’t really me.” Many of us get caught up in identity and labels.

Writing is simply an activity. If you write, you are a writer. Invite yourself to dip into the flow of words in your head and write down what you hear. You will be amazed at what you have to say, at the wisdom that resides within you just waiting to be tapped as you record and share your unique story.

Brenda Ueland, in her wonderful classic *If You Want to Write*, says that everyone is talented and original. All of us need to share our ideas with the world; it is part of our right as human beings to express ourselves. Ueland says that criticism destroys creativity. So-called helpful criticism is often the worst kind.



Whenever I got discouraged about writing I would read and reread Ueland’s book. It is full of wisdom and a positive spirit about our deep, inner creativity. She says we must write freely, as if to friends who appreciate us and find us interesting. We should write as if they are saying to us, “Tell me more, tell me all you can. I want to understand more about everything you feel and know and all the changes inside and out of you. Let more come out.”

If you want to write, think about how you can create space for writing in your life, a time and a place where you can nurture this spark into a roaring blaze. As you write, think of yourself as a listener, a translator. Focus inward and hear the stories that whisper to you in a low key; tune into your desire to capture your grandmothers' history, your mother's face, or your father's character. The creative spark lives in everyone—all you need to do is feed the flame.

And keep going, despite whatever difficulty arises. Even after completing two books, I continue to wrestle with words, phrases, and internal permission to write my truth. I have to force myself to sit down and write. We must all do this dance as we unfurl our stories onto paper.

Writing Invitations

1. Name five reasons you would like to write your life stories.
2. Write about what being a “real” writer means to you.
3. What writing support do you have in your life?
4. What stories do you like to read? Have any of these helped to heal you?
5. Describe the town, city, landscape you grew up in. Include buildings, weather, your favorite things about this place.
6. How did the place where you grew up shape you into the person you are today?
7. What family story that you heard as a child excites you or captures your interest? Write that story
8. Record what the critic voices have to say—the voices that stop or discourage you. We will spend more time on the critic later.

Chapter Two

*Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul
-- Thomas Merton*

Writing and Healing

Writing your true story can heal you, both physically and emotionally. Expressive writing, writing that integrates your emotions and insights with memories of events that occurred in your past, has been shown to improve the immune system and have a positive effect on such diseases such as chronic fatigue syndrome, arthritis, and asthma.

Self-disclosure and confession have long played a role in relieving stress and promoting health. As an ancient church sacrament, confession ritualizes the unburdening of shame and guilt, enabling a person to move forward in a positive way. In the confessional, we find words to speak the unspeakable—halting sentences woven through with shame and guilt, grief and regret. Confessional words pierce through the inner darkness, opening our hearts to the light of hope and forgiveness. Through confession and unburdening, forgiveness can begin, for ourselves and others.

Psychotherapy has been called the modern day confessional. Imitating a priest in the dim confessional, Freud positioned himself in the shadows of his office, creating a sacred space where clients could reveal hidden truths. His treatment rule was that they were to speak freely about whatever arose in their minds. This was a revolutionary, even dangerous, idea in Victorian times, when suppression of thoughts and desires were the order of the day. In therapy, as in the church confessional, deep feelings, worries, and the secrets of the soul could finally be formed into words.

A few years ago, I heard about the expressive writing research of Dr. James Pennebaker, a psychologist at the University of Texas, and was excited to see his results. I too had wondered if writing could offer the same relief talk therapy. For over a decade, he and his colleagues investigated the therapeutic benefit of writing in various settings and with a large range of populations. His research included prisoners and crime victims, arthritis and chronic-pain sufferers, new mothers, and people with various physical

illnesses. They were rich and poor, young and old, and all had various jobs.

During one of Pennebaker's experiment, members of the control group were instructed to write lists or plans for the day, while the expressive writing group received the following directions:

For the next four days, I would like you to write about your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your entire life. In your writing, I'd like you to really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends, or relatives; to your past, your present, or your future; or to who you have been, who you would like to be, or who you are now. You may write about the same general issues or experiences on all days of writing or on different traumas each day. All of your writing will be completely confidential.

Both groups wrote for fifteen minutes on each of the four days of the study.

Even though Dr. Pennebaker is a psychologist, the intensity and depth of the trauma expressed in the subjects' stories surprised him. Students wrote about tragic and traumatic events, such as depression, rape, suicide attempts, child sexual and physical abuse, drug use, and family violence. They often wrote about powerful emotions associated with these stories. Some of the writers cried from the intensity of the stories, yet most of them were willing to participate in the study again.

The researchers found that it is indeed healing to translate our experiences into words, to put events and feelings into perspective using written language.

In *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*, Pennebaker discusses how writing about emotional events relieves stress and promotes a more complete understanding of events. He concludes that simple catharsis, an explosive release of emotions, is not enough. Feelings, thoughts, and a new comprehension need to be integrated in our minds with memories of the events



that occurred in order to create a new perspective. Pennebaker compares the effects of writing to psychotherapy, where emotional disclosure and the release of inhibition are part of the healing process, along with the ability to integrate new insights into current behavior and beliefs.

Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957,) was a psychologist who studied the effect of suppressed emotions on the body. He and his students began to develop “body-based” therapies. Thanks to these influences, psychologists understand that repression and suppression of emotion contribute to stress, and emotional and physical imbalance.

In a primitive fight-or-flight system, powerful chemicals surge through the body to protect us against a threat. When the threat, or stressor, has passed, the body can retain the pattern of tension and vigilance, especially if there has been ongoing or severe trauma. When stress is released, the immune system responds in a positive direction, toward balance and ultimate health.

In 1999, an article by Joshua Smyth et al. in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* about the effects of expressive writing on arthritis and asthma sufferers made a rousing splash in the writing and psychological communities. In their 2002 book *The Writing Cure*, Smyth and Stephen Lepore present more recent studies. They show that while writing about trauma and negative emotions causes emotional pain and distress for a short period, both mood and physical health improve. Furthermore, *writing about positive emotions and a positive future* also lead to improvements in physical as well as emotional health.

Our personalities affect these benefits. If a person tends to withhold emotions, writing about negative experiences will likely have a positive effect on that person’s health. If a person generally focuses on negative feelings, writing about a positive experience or a happier life event may have a beneficial effect. Therefore, there is no single “right” way to use writing as a healing tool.

As research about the healing aspects of writing continues, we keep learning more about how to write ourselves well. Here is what one of my students, Clare Cooper Marcus, wrote about her experience with writing as a healing practice:

I’m lucky—writing comes easily to me. Between the ages of five and eleven, I

attended a small country school run by five eccentric women who insisted that we all write at least one essay a week. It was assumed that we all could write, and we did.

Fifty years later, my body and emotions thrown into turmoil by a diagnosis of breast cancer, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to record my feelings in a journal. I wrote while sitting, wracked with anxiety, in the hospital waiting room. I wrote about my fear of death, of pain, of not-knowing. I wrote sitting up in bed after my mastectomy, I wrote in the hospital garden, drinking in nurturance from the hundred-year-old Valley Oak tree, the squirrels running up its rotted trunk. I was writing myself into hope.

Writing was for me a form of Zen practice. It helped me stay in the present moment, aware of each feeling and insight arising, then falling away, like leaves drifting by on a stream of consciousness. Writing at such a time was an exercise in mindfulness. Although I also spoke my feelings out loud, to friends, to a therapist, to members of a support group, it was writing that enabled me to go deeper, to give my soul a voice. I believe it was writing as much as medical treatment that enabled me to heal.

Writing Yourself Well Techniques

In his research, Pennebaker found that when subjects used a large number of positive words (happy, good, laugh) along with a moderate number of negative words (angry, hurt, ugly) in their writing, health improvements were likely. Cognitive or thinking words (because, reason, effect) and words of self-reflection (I understand, realize, know) created the most resolution. So if you want to experience the greatest



healing benefit from your writing, pay attention to the emotional content of your words, and keep writing about a particular memory until you have causally linked the events with your feelings.

Causality occurs when an action or other stimulus leads to an outcome: This happened because that happened first. There is no causal linkage between the two events in the following sentence: *The queen died. The king died.* But in the next example, you can see a connection: *The queen died. The king died of grief.*

Your first efforts at writing memoir may be filled with confusion and negative or confusing emotions. Try to write an emotionally difficult story several times in different ways. After a while, you may find yourself writing from a positive perspective. For instance, you could look at what you learned from the event, or how a negative experience made you change your life in a positive way, offering you more self-understanding and healing.

Writing emotionally rich and integrated stories:

- Makes thoughts and events more concrete;
- Leads to greater self-knowledge;
- Releases emotional constriction and stress;
- Strengthens the immune system;
- Leads to short-term changes in the autonomic nervous system; and
- Provides a template for the writer's future story.

Think about the stories in your life that connect into a meaningful whole. What do you need to do now to bring together the frayed threads of your life? Could these secret

stories free you from the trap of silence?

Writing does not need to be difficult or complicated. Think of it as talking on paper, as Michele Weldon, author of *Writing to Save Your Life*, suggests. She goes on to say, “When you are writing to save your life, your feelings must be uncensored, raw, and unfiltered by the fear of reception. No one is judging you. No one else has to read what you have written. You are writing to save your life.”

www.micheleweldon.com

Give yourself permission to speak, to find your voice, and to write. Invite yourself into new and unexplored territory. For twenty minutes, write a story you have never put into words before. Then journal about how you felt writing it and your reaction to seeing it in words.

Write into acceptance, support, and encouragement.

Let your voice be heard!

Writing Invitations

1. Think about an important event in your life that led directly to another important event or to a person coming into your life. For instance, if you hadn't gone to the game that January night, you wouldn't have met John, whom you dated and eventually married. Write about what led up to this *turning point* in your life.

2. Set your timer and write for ten minutes about a traumatic event, looking for an understanding, a causal meaning to that event that doesn't create self-blame. For instance, if you think you were raped because you wore a short skirt—that is self-blame. But if you realize that you didn't pay attention to your intuition and take a safer route home, that insight can lead you to take better care of yourself in the future. Perhaps you didn't hear footsteps behind you because you were upset or you just had a fight with a friend, or you were sick. Integrating what happened into your overall understanding of yourself and the world can help you live your current life with more freedom and happiness.

3. Write about your *best future* self: Who will you be in one year? Five years? Imagine yourself living as you want to, but based on some aspect of reality and real possibilities that might emerge from who you are now.

4. Make a list of *positive, healing words* that make you feel good.

5. Write about an unexpected way in which you were blessed with healing, such as an experience with an animal or a garden.

Chapter Three

A diarist writes from the ever moving present. Autobiographic writing is written from a later point in time, in retrospect.

-- Tristine Rainer

Journals, Diaries, and Poetry

Some of us started writing in diaries or journals as children. Then, as now, we poured out our most private thoughts and feelings there. You might have been lucky enough to have a secret place where you could hide your diary away from prying eyes. Or, perhaps you had no privacy, or your family believed that putting feelings or thoughts into words was dangerous or threatening.

When I was thirteen I received a diary with a little key, but I knew the key would not protect me. I found that diary recently, and I had to translate the words—jottings about events—into what I remembered was really going on beneath them. I had to keep my real thoughts and feelings secret even in my diary, because my ever intrusive grandmother would have too much of me if she read it—and I knew she would read it. I knew early on that the written word could cause lots of problems.

With a background like that, how did I ever become a writer?

I always loved stories and books, letters, and all kinds of writing. As I mentioned before, it was my great-grandmother Blanche and her stories, as well as my curiosity about our family history, that brought me to writing. Despite an inauspicious beginning with diary writing, I found that later in life I clung to my journal as if it were a raft about to take me over Niagara Falls.

Well, a raft might not help under those circumstances, but the journal helped me sort out confusion about my family, being rejected by my mother, and my grandmother's anger. Though these events happened when I was a child, their effect did not magically go away in adulthood. My journal provided me with a place to use my voice when I didn't have one in the world.

Because various members of my family invented their own versions of reality, I became obsessed with what was real and what was not, and I used my journal to record what *really* happened. I wrote about my hopes for a better life and my dreams about the future. I kept track of my night dreams, which showed me my unconscious thoughts, desires, and traumas. This tracking of my unconscious helped in my long-term healing process.

One exercise in the first major therapy group I attended included writing hundreds of pages of painful and negative stories from the past. We had to structure our writing into a story. We had to write what happened (events) and our reactions (feelings) about what happened. We were taught visualization so we could see how we looked and what we felt in younger versions of ourselves. Writing as if in a trance forced us to encounter mental and emotional states that we had tried, unsuccessfully, to bury in the depths of our unconscious.

These techniques helped bring back memories, including specific words and dialogue to make the past real. All of us in the group had found ourselves caught up in repeating the past, despite every prayer that we would not. That repetition is what brought us humbly to the therapy process, where writing helped to wake us up.

Kathleen Adams, president of the National Association for Poetry Therapy, has written several books about journal writing: *The Way of the Journal*, *The Write Way to Wellness*, and *Journal to the Self*. Throughout her life she has been dedicated to the process of healing through journal writing. As a counselor and experienced journal writer, she has learned various techniques, such as Ira Progoff's Intensive Journal method, that bring structure and logic to the process of journal writing. Through her training as well as her own experience, she realized that people bring different needs to their journal writing.



Adams developed structured exercises to help create a safe and measured way to enter into potentially painful material. She suggests that we be careful when writing about very traumatic experiences because the writing itself can be overwhelming and cause

more stress, and that containment, relaxation, and nurturing help to bring a person back to balance.

If you want to know more about her suggestions for journal writing and healing, read her books and visit her Web site at www.journaltherapy.com.

Journal Writing Techniques

Many kinds of journal writing can have a healing effect.

- A daily diary keeps us in the present and allows us to track our activities, feelings, and tasks. This is a way to stay in the here and now, and to structure time, feelings, and goals through writing.
- Writing letters that will never be sent is a way to express your feelings to particular people without blasting them in real life with the force of your emotions. The unsent letter may be written to anyone, dead or alive, as a way to express perhaps forbidden or secret thoughts and feelings.
- Writing about your present and future selves and dialoguing with past selves—the person you were in earlier decades of your life—allow you to explore your identity: who you were, who you are, and who you are becoming.

A freewrite is a style of journal writing in which the pen does not come off the page for fifteen or twenty minutes. The unconscious is given full rein to ignore boundaries or interference by logic or a critic. In *Becoming a Writer*, Dorothea Brande says that “to have the full benefit of the richness of the unconscious, you must learn to write easily and smoothly when the unconscious is in the ascendant.” She suggests that you should write the minute you wake up.

In my memoir classes we often do a freewrite. New stories and thoughts arise in the moment, and what comes out of the freewrite is often a surprise. New ideas seem to come from nowhere to find their way onto the page. Sometimes a certain problem with a scene or memory is solved during freewriting. It is a time to let go, a time to put the intellect aside and just write.

Inspiring books about journal writing include *Life's Companion* by Christina Baldwin, *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron, *Writing for Your Life* by Deena Metzger, *If You Want to Write* by Brenda Ueland, and, of course, *Becoming a Writer* by Dorothea Brande. These books feed my soul and help me keep writing when I hit a dry spot. Even as you craft stories for your memoir, journal writing and freewriting help you to heal and to keep your self-expression fluid and fresh.



Poetry as Autobiography

I began writing poetry as a child. My grandmother had introduced me to poetry by reading to me from the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. One autumn night when I was nine years old, I sat next to her on the floor while she read “Annabel Lee,” the cadence of the words sweeping us up together into a world of tragedy and love. Other poems by Wordsworth, Longfellow, Carl Sandberg, and the Brownings were part of our English curriculum.

At age ten, in the heat of grief when a beloved cottonwood tree was cut down, I wrote my first poem. Into this poem I poured my sorrow about the tree’s murder and my confusion about the adults’ silence regarding this horrible event. I was a witness to this injustice, capturing the beauty and meaning of the tree in words.

Throughout my life poetry has lifted me from the depths of despair, especially e. e. cummings in my twenties. I wrote his poetry on cards and put them throughout the house, and sat on the campus lawn in spring reading poems that gave me joy and hope.

When times were dark, I read Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, and T. S. Eliot as I searched for ways to make sense of my world and my feelings. At the first meeting of my poetry class at Mills College, I told my teacher, Marilyn Chandler, that poetry had saved my life, and she understood what I meant.

When I began to write my autobiography, I did it through poetry, painting a picture of my family, my great-grandmother, my mother, my grandmother’s death, and

the grief I always felt because my mother denied me. I took poetry workshops and studied with Galway Kinnell, Lucille Clifton, and other poets at the Squaw Valley Poetry Workshop.

Finally I gathered my poems, self-published them in a chapbook, and read them at poetry readings. But after a while I felt I had to write my autobiography in prose. A narrative would connect all the dots and would allow me to comment at greater length about my feelings and experiences. So I began a fictionalized version and then turned to memoir.

Poetry allows us to capture fragments of insight and emotion because it does not depend on whole sentences or complete thoughts. A poem is a snapshot of a single moment, and in this moment all is contained within. In his book *Poetic Medicine*, John Fox says:

Poetry provides guidance, revealing what you did not know you knew before you wrote the poem. This moment of surprising yourself with your own words or wisdom is at the heart of poetry as healer.

Beginning a Journal

Think about what surprises you in your life. What kind of relationship do you have with words, songs, and images? You can have fun with your journal—it does not have to be deadly serious.

If you are a beginner or have let your journal go, buy a new one. Allow yourself to choose one that gives you pleasure with the color of its cover or the smell of its leather.

How you choose to write—in pen or pencil, in wire-bound notebooks or leather-bound journals, or on the computer—does not matter. What is important is to listen to your inner voice and give yourself permission to say what you think. Play with words; create images and stories that give meaning and joy to your life. Pick up your pen and listen.

Writing Invitations

1. Select a group of words at random and write spontaneous poetry sparked by the ideas they provoke.
2. Write about a troubling event for 15 minutes. Consider how this event may have helped you make changes in your life or how it created new opportunities for you. In this vignette, tell what happened as well as your feelings about the event.
3. How do you feel now, after writing about that event? If you are upset, write about those feelings until you feel better. Then do something to nurture yourself.
4. Write about a positive experience. Think about moments when you felt whole, ecstatic, spiritually moved, or deeply loved. Consider experiences with nature, gardens, and animals.
5. Write what is called an “unsent letter” to a person with whom you have unfinished business, such as anger, grief, or regret. Set a timer and keep the writing short, 10 to 15 minutes for this first letter. Do not send the letter, but don’t discard it. Later in the week write another version of this letter, and put it aside as well. In a month, read both letters and write a third version. Notice if you feel better or different about the person, the situation, or yourself.

Chapter Four

All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.
-- Isak Dinesen

Memories: The Good, the Bad, the Dangerous

Memories are woven deeply into the fabric of our lives. They help us know who we are; they help define us. Yet are we only what we remember? What about the memories that come up as we write and explore our deepest selves? Some memoirists have asked for my help with this subject. They begin their memoirs with enthusiasm and energy, looking forward to getting their stories on the page and discovering how the past has affected the present. But as the past is stimulated into current time by writing, new memories may come up, some of them painful. Sometimes we have unknowingly repressed our traumatic memories.

If traumatic memories gain a grip on your psyche, you may feel stuck, wanting to go forward, yet caught in the past. The solution: write yourself forward. Write yourself out of the stuck place.

Too often, memoir writers are chastised by family and society for not simply letting go of the past. “Get on with life; quit thinking about the past,” they say. But people can’t simply will themselves to forget what resides within. Sometimes memories intrude upon the psyche, as if demanding to be heard. Bad memories or parts of our pasts that are unresolved, have a way of intruding into our lives, as if demanding us to do our healing work.

When past memories are pleasing, the writing often comes easily and offers a positive foundation and a new perspective. Memories of traumatic events, however, can be as painful as the events themselves. The trauma of abuse, loss, or accidents affects the brain. A series of powerful chemical-physiological and emotional reactions accompany such memories. Psychiatrists and other clinicians use the term “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder” or PTSD to describe this state, which is now a common focus of treatment.

Continuing to write helps to resolve emotional issues by getting the images, feelings and conflicts out of us and onto the page, where they can be processed with more objectivity. In other words, the healing process is the writing itself.

Read more about post-traumatic stress:

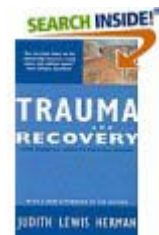
http://www.medicinenet.com/posttraumatic_stress_disorder/article.htm

Healing Trauma

When Dr. Pennebaker asked people to write about painful experiences, some of the stories that emerged related to traumas resulting from events in the outside world—natural disasters, car accidents, rape, or war. Others had to do with trauma or abuse at home—physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; alcoholism; and mental illness—abuse and trauma inflicted within what is supposed to be a safe place, at home and within the fabric of family and friends. That kind of injury is all the more insidious because the victims, particularly when they are children, don't realize that what is happening is wrong. It is simply the way mommy and daddy act. It's the way things are.

Even mature adults may feel that nothing can be done about life not being as they wish it to be. A pattern called “learned helplessness” describes those who feel stuck and unable to act to change their lives. This is an unfortunate term that has been used derogatorily in reference to women. It is not actually helplessness that is learned, but a pattern of fear and immobilization resulting from trauma. This complex physiological and psychological reaction renders the person unable to take appropriate action.

Whether a trauma occurs at home or out in the world, it has a lasting effect on the body and psyche—the body remembers as well as the mind. Various therapies help to heal the body/mind wounds. Sometimes these hidden wounds can lead to destructive repeating of the trauma, called “repetition compulsion.”



According to Judith Herman, author of *Trauma and Recovery*, “Traumatized people feel and act as though their nervous systems have been disconnected from the

present.” This means that the effects of the trauma follow the person throughout life, causing problems such as a strong startle reaction, sensitivity to loud noises, fears, phobias, nightmares, and depression.

During the last few years, a great deal of research has been done on the physiology and chemistry of the brain in relation to trauma and emotion. One new discovery is that traumatic memories are stored differently from regular memories, which makes them harder to resolve. For instance, people who have been traumatized may have recurring dreams or tell or write a story repetitively, as if a phonograph needle is stuck in the groove of the trauma.

It is possible for you to heal trauma and live a fuller, more expressive, and freer life. Writing your stories is an opportunity to put the old ghosts to rest. If need be, you can approach certain memories and issues indirectly rather than confront them head on. Pennebaker told his subjects that if a topic was too painful, they should write about something else.

Take care of yourself. Be your own best friend. There is so much to write about without taking on everything right away. If you do decide to write about what’s hidden in the closet, you can alternate between the dark and the light stories as a way of protecting your psyche from becoming overwhelmed.

When the past is painful: Writing the Dark and Light Stories

The critic within us and the critics outside us keep us silent. However, old wounds have a way of reasserting themselves into our current lives. The path of self-growth is a path of self-development and transcendence. Writing can be a powerful tool in this process, but it is important to keep ourselves safe and balanced as we unearth our stories.

Research has shown that writing our positive stories is as healing as writing our disturbing stories. We all want to avoid unnecessary pain, and our defense system helps us to avoid it. Yet healing comes from



balancing our system, and not staying trapped by situations, memories, or feelings about the past that limit our options for living full lives. Our fears, worries, bad dreams, anger, jealousy, insecurity, pain, and hurt are real. These feelings can at times get in the way of living a more positive life characterized by a sense of peace, forgiveness of self and others, and renewed energy.

So it is important to write the difficult stories, but consider weaving back and forth between your dark and light memories to prevent yourself from being re-traumatized.

Start with one of the dark qualities in the list below.

The darker topics

Pain	Rejection
Loss	Despair
Vulnerability	Depression
Fear	Jealousy
Longing	Death
Abuse	Illness

- Freewrite about one of the topics for 15-30 minutes.
- Do your feelings, thoughts, and reflections shift after writing? Journal about what you observe.

Next, choose a memory that evoked one of the following positive qualities and write that story.

Qualities of light

Peace	Love
Vulnerability	Trust
Joy	Awe
Generosity	Selflessness
Serenity	Courage

Further Reflections

- What happened during the writing, and afterward?
- Try to write a dark story to see if it can shift into a lighter story.
- Write a story where the beginning is darkness and the end is light, or the reverse.

- Balance your memoir writing sessions between dark and light stories to keep yourself in emotional balance.

The path of emotional healing is often like cleaning out an old wound: it hurts while we are cleaning it out, but we feel so much better afterward. It helps to have an ongoing practice that keeps the healing progressing. Here are some suggestions for your regular writing sessions.

- Make a list of the darker memories that trouble you from time to time.
- Write down the age you were when these difficult times happened.
- Write down what you did to cope with the event at the time.
- How do you feel now about the incident?
- What would you have liked to happen differently?

Be sure to honor yourself in the process. Because the goal of this writing is healing, give yourself permission to listen to the stories that your mind and hand lead you to. If you find that you can't stop writing the same story, you might need therapy or some other kind of structured emotional support.

Choosing to revisit different vignettes and times in your life cycle offers different points of view. As you write about yourself at different ages and in new voices, you will be writing and witnessing from multiple perspectives, weaving a larger, more integrated story of your life.

A trauma is resolved if you are no longer troubled by it and your life is relatively free of a negative reaction to the event. Resolution means that your life is not circumscribed by your fears and you're not disturbed when you remember the traumatic event. In other words, the traumatic event is remembered, but without the degree of emotional reaction that you felt before. It is simply an event that happened, part of the story of your life.

Writing Invitations

1. Protect the vulnerable person in you by distancing in the writing. First, write about what happened in the third person: “she” or “he” instead of “I.” Write as if you are watching the event in a movie.
2. Write a scene about a difficult incident, but make it turn out the way you would have wanted it to. Change the incident so it ends more pleasantly and positively.
3. Tell what happened before and after a difficult incident. Write around it, but not about the event itself.
4. Make a bare-bones list of what happened and put it aside. Notice your feelings as you make the list.
5. Make a list of the dark topics or stories that you know are there, but you aren’t ready to write yet. List them by title or theme.
6. Make a list of the light stories, stories that bring you a feeling of well being, happiness, contentment, and safety. They may include memories about love, spiritual experiences, and miracles.
7. When you are ready, choose from the “light” list to write a story.
8. When you feel ready, write one of the dark stories.
9. Alternate as needed to write your memoir in a way that feels balanced and safe.

Chapter Five

Discovering, Facing, and Writing the Truth

When we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

-- Marianne Williamson

“Truth” is a tricky subject these days, especially after the James Frey incident in early 2006, when truth and lie in memoir writing was in the national news and on Oprah.

After deciding where to begin, the biggest challenges for writing a memoir, according to the people I have worked with over the years, are issues about writing the truth, telling the truth, facing the truth.

What is truth? Who defines it? How do you understand it? When we choose to write memoir, we are diving into the rivers of memory to come up with our own version of what happened. We are going to investigate the memoirist’s journey through landscapes that are often fraught with stumbling blocks for the completion of our memoirs.

Writing a memoir invites us to reflect and explore who we are and who we were at a deeper level than ever before. As we begin to write our stories, we realize that our point of view, our “truth,” is often different from that of our families. We discover there are levels of truth, and that some of them have been hidden in our unconscious, only to stream out of the end of the pen.

Did you grow up with these behavioral rules?

- Always tell the truth.
- Be honest.
- Don’t tell lies.
- Honesty is the best policy.
- You will be punished if you lie.

Are these phrases familiar?

- Don’t air the family laundry.

- Family business stays behind closed doors.
- Quit blabbing about your personal business.
- Stop that navel gazing.
- You have quite an imagination!

Many writers and other creative people have been the truth tellers/shit disturbers in their families. They were the different ones, the loudmouths, the ones who challenged the family rules and myths. Such people often grow up to have strong voices, ideas, opinions of their own.

In a very close family, one that is threatened by differences, the dissenting voice must be brought into line. Thinking differently, having one's own version of the truth, is perceived as dangerous to the established power structure.

There is a force in families called homeostasis that serves to keep everyone together. In such families, you must obey the rules. If you break the rules, you are threatening to everyone else. You must conform or become the scapegoat of the family. As a result, you may feel that you aren't accepted or valued for who you are.

This is excellent, though painful training for becoming an artist or writer. However, it can also mean enduring the painful exclusion from the kind of acceptance you might yearn for. You may find yourself feeling the outsider in ways that are hard to bear.

How does feeling like an outsider affect writing your memoir?

Humans are social beings, and we need the company of others, even though as writers we are capable of spending long hours alone, at our desks or simply dreaming, thinking, creating.

As beginning writers, we often stop before we get started, hearing familiar critical voices in our heads, warning us not to speak the truth. If you have been shamed, threatened, or shunned by your family for telling the truth, chances are you have a very strong inner critic that fights with your creative force and gets in the way of your full expression.



The inner critic strives to enforce the old rules—stopping us from writing down what we really think or having us pull back from the “real” truth. Over time, we become familiar with this negative inner voice, as with a difficult friend.

But if you are to write your truth, you need to trade in your destructive inner voices for positive ones and find an antidote to the negative programs of old. This may mean more autonomy from the family, or at least from the old version of family you carry in your mind, and a new relationship with yourself.

I have had experiences with facing the truth that taught me a lot, and eventually helped me write my truth despite my inner critic, which was always loud and destructive.

Early on and even to this day, when I have faced the challenge of writing the truth, a niggling voice often pipes up: *Just change it a little to save face. Don't tell “that much” truth. What will people think?* The inner critic begins harassing me, and sometimes I turn away from the piece at first. But then, as I face the truth head on, digging into the groove of the story, I discover that the writing itself takes me to places I had not planned but needed to go, as if it has its own wisdom.

Years ago, I wrote a short memoir piece called *Who Am I?* I was tempted to change the story to be less revealing, to reduce my self-exposure. The story embarrassed me to some degree, and the level of truth that came out as I wrote didn't seem entirely my idea—some part of me was determined to write revealing truths, and I went along with it. In the end it was exciting, like a pioneer exploring new territory, wondering where the trail will lead. The story went on to win first prize in a contest, which meant even more people read it! My inner critic went nuts for a few minutes, and then I felt another level of healing. Not only did I speak the truth and write it; I was also rewarded by having others feel it was meaningful and powerful.

Another time, I was challenged by truths I was afraid to know about. I didn't want to know what that small voice murmuring in my left ear had to tell me. I'd noticed it for several months, the sense that there was something dark waiting inside that I needed to discover about me, something in the past. I tried to prepare myself, meditating to be ready for whatever might come forth.

Finally, through several traumatic circumstances in my life, I was forced to face the knowledge that I'd grown up with a grandmother who'd had psychotic episodes. I had known that much of my time with her was dark and frightening, but putting that name to it was terrifying. What did it mean about me? Was I doomed to be crazy too?

I was stricken with both despair and relief. Because I'd faced one of my worst fears, I became less afraid, stronger, and more able to continue healing. The voice in my left ear stopped. I integrated the insight and eventually realized I was not my grandmother, I was not doomed to her fate. It took many years to trust this, and to develop more strength and fewer fears.

Harry Potter's Technique

My writing students tell me they are afraid the past will overwhelm them when they start writing. Writers soon become aware that what they intend to write is not always what emerges. Sometimes our writing takes us past the barred gates and unwelcome memories come rushing out. How can we cope with this new knowledge? How can we face our truths, no matter how unwanted?



Recently, as I watched a Harry Potter movie, I took note of a technique that helped Harry confront terror. He was coached to hold in his mind the best memory of his life while he cast a spell on a terrifying apparition that represented his deepest fears. If the positive image was not strong enough, the spell would not work.

I have suggested a similar technique to my students, though we have had to make do without a magic wand. I talk with them about light and dark stories. “Light” stories bring light and healing, happiness and hope, love and forgiveness; dark stories are about wounds that are still unhealed, pain, loss, grief, and fear.

Jung talks about the repressed shadow in the human psyche, the parts of us we don't want to know about. However, when we face the shadow side of ourselves, we become more integrated and free to be whole.

One thing is certain: facing our truths, whether major upheavals in our lives or smaller day-to-day events, helps us to grow. Each time we face ourselves, who we are and who we have been, we build strength for the present and the future.

Start gently. Begin with your light stories and gradually call forth the dark ones. Tell the stories of your life in a safe way that inspires you to move forward, in your writing and your healing.

Writing Invitations

1. Write a story your family would call “false,” a lie, not true.
2. Write a story your family would call true, but you think is false.
3. Write a scene about your family that speaks of its philosophical truth about life, such as “we are very close,” “we are not religious,” “we are not prejudiced,” etc.
4. What stories would your family tell about you that you feel did not happen?
5. Do you have stories in your mind, or memories, where you doubt the veracity or the accuracy of the memory? Write about it.
6. What family secret(s) do you feel you are obliged to keep? Make a list.
7. How do you feel about secrets as a memoir writer? Journal about this.
8. Write a story you promised never to write.

Chapter Six

Reading and weeping opens the door to one's heart, but writing and weeping opens the window to one's soul.

--M.K. Simmons

The Process of Healing

All my life, I have been interested in how people can heal. For the last twenty-seven years I have had a private therapy practice, and have been blessed to work with wonderful clients. I respect and learn from them. As we work together, I hear about their families and how they all came to be who they are.

My clients arrive with a variety of woes, most commonly depression. Their childhoods may have included extreme dysfunctional behavior—alcoholism, abandonment, and emotional abuse. However, they appear normal, functioning well, with jobs, families, and normal activities. Their wounds are hidden and secret. As the work deepens, their masks are gradually stripped away, revealing tremendous secret pain.

A therapy office is a sacred space. In a sacred space, there is safety, trust, openness, vulnerability, and truth. I urge my clients to speak their deepest truths to me, especially those truths that have been too painful to think about. The therapeutic space becomes a place to lay down old burdens and open up new vistas of self-development, but sometimes a client is unaware of the pain that may have been repressed.

Loosening the Grip of the Past

When an event occurs that is too upsetting for us to absorb and understand, automatic reactions called defenses take over to protect us from psychic pain. Often, we learn from our families how to deal with painful realities, and family defenses and habits are passed on from generation to generation, creating a web of confusion about the truth. These defenses help maintain the family's often erroneous or distorted view of itself,

which is called the family myth.

It is my job as therapist to gently and gradually penetrate a client's web of beliefs and myths, which often cover up a deeper, more painful story. By asking lots of nosy questions, I find out what really went on behind the closed doors of the childhood home.

For some people, the difficult issues at home are easy to pinpoint. In a house with slammed doors, raised voices, and broken dishes, the problem is obvious. But in some families, the volume is turned down, and there is an elaborate dance to protect the feelings of the parents. In a normal-looking home, it is more difficult to identify problems because they are underground and invisible.

When I work to uncover new levels of truth on the path to healing, I stress to the client that the purpose is not to cast blame but to bring to light hidden wounds carried since childhood. I assume that parents have done their best. However, the client needs to come to terms with the whole truth of the family situation. Without discovering the real circumstances of childhood, it is impossible to resolve the pain it caused and continues to cause.

In the final analysis, it is not a confrontation with parents that leads to resolution of old issues, but a confrontation with one's self. The therapeutic and healing goal is to free ourselves of the aspects of the past that hold us back and to release patterns that keep us from being all of who we are, our best selves.

So when you write about the years of your childhood, you will explore ever deepening layers of feelings and perceptions about yourself and your family. You will uncover forgotten layers of memory, and you may find yourself questioning your life-long assumptions.

Writing about your childhood can help you know:

- Who you are;
- How you think and feel;
- What your life story is about;
- The meaning and direction of your life; and
- How to heal.

If the idea of writing about the effects of your traumatic emotional or physical experiences worries you, stop and ask yourself:

- How am I feeling right now?
- Am I in my body, feeling my feelings?
- Do I feel safe and comfortable?
- Would writing help me to release stress?

If your answers to those questions are in the negative, then engage in nurturing activities that will comfort and renew you. It is important to “contain” emotional expression of painful memories when you are feeling vulnerable. Practice containment by becoming involved in a positive activity that keeps you away from deep feelings for a while.

On the other hand, if you think that writing would be comforting and would help you to reduce stress, set a timer for five minutes and write. Or alternate short bursts of writing with another pleasant activity to balance things out.

Self-nurturing

Nurturing, comfort, and emotional soothing are necessary to the human organism, but sometimes they are missing in situations of abuse or trauma. Children who grow up in abusive environments learn that they must rely only on themselves. Independence can be healthy, but if it’s carried too far, it becomes neglect.



An arid wasteland without comfort or connection becomes internalized in the child, and it can be difficult for an adult from this kind of background to receive nurturing or to nurture herself. Lack of self-nurturing can be as seemingly minor as not drinking enough water or as major as self-destructive behavior.

Allowing the self to receive from others is a powerful healing act when we have been taught to keep our needs minimal or non-existent. Trust needs to be established again, with the self as well as with others. If you have been abused, you need to make a transition from internal judgments and that arid wasteland to self-nurturing and an

environment in which you can give yourself what you need.

Soothing and nurturing help to repair the tears in the fabric of our childhood. Although different people consider different behaviors to be nurturing, all such behaviors have one thing in common: they bring a sense of peace and well-being.

When I want to relax at the end of the day, my kitties give me some of the nurturing I need. I love stroking their soft fur and hearing them purr. My shoulders relax and I sit back, filled with a sense of peace. Some people are soothed by classical music, a warm bath, well-prepared and tasteful food, or a clean house. Gardening, exercise, and aromatherapy are just a few of the other ways you can create physical and emotional nurturance.

Good Memories as a Nurturing Practice

Writers all know that capturing a wonderful, numinous moments from our childhoods makes us feel extra warm and happy, as if we are bringing those special moments into our lives now and filling up the empty places in our hearts.

We remember that child person that we were, how we looked at the world with such amazement and awe and wonder. We think of times that will never exist again, times in history that can never be repeated—an amazing baseball game, the scent of a charcoal fire in the backyard in summer, the wonder of the mountains and trees and a bowlful of stars at night.

Perhaps we remember our teachers and mentors, or the way we caught fireflies in a jar, the sound of crickets chirping or the hoot of an owl. Our senses have captured many moments that have shaped our psyches into who we have become, and if we are lucky we have many memories that are uplifting or positive that help to balance the hard times we have had.

One student I worked with was writing so many traumatic stories, I suggested that she should find some positive stories to help her find balance in her writing life. She got upset and told me that she had only one good memory and that there were no good

stories, it was all bad. I suggested that she write out what she could remember that was good and bring it in the next week.

At the next class, she flew into the room with a smile on her face, waving a sheaf of papers at us. “I found so many more memories that I had forgotten. I really thought there was only one paragraph of good memories, but when I started writing some of the good things, I began to remember more and more of them. Now I realize there were many good times among the bad.”

Her story evolved in a new way, one that allowed her more balance, and she found that she had a sense of humor, as well!

Some of my special, numinous moments took place in a summer rose garden in the town where I grew up. The doves who-whoed, the Oklahoma wind blew through my hair, and a breeze warm and sensual wafted



the scent of roses toward me as Uncle Maj lifted the head of each flower, inviting me to bury my nose in its petals. I inhaled the sweetness of roses and heard the sounds of airplanes from the nearby air base and the buzzing of cicadas swirling around me.

I inhaled too the sense of safety I felt at Uncle Maj’s house, where he lived with his wife, Aunt Helen, my grandmother’s best friend. Here there was no yelling, no sharp words, just home-baked bread and the scent of earth and roses. I was protected here, and for the rest of my childhood these people made sure I was safe and gave me all the nurturing they could. Even when they could do nothing in an active way, I could see in their eyes that they were viewing me with a sense of warmth and love.

This memory has lifted me from sorrow many times in my life. I wanted to capture it in words not only to share its beauty and its healing qualities but also to share the love I was given by these two special people. They were compassionate witnesses, to use Alice Miller’s term, and without them, I might not have survived.

Hopefully you have some good memories to feast on in times of trouble, reminding you that you have a safe harbor.

Writing Invitations

1. Make a list of good memories. Select four of them to write as stories.
2. Write about how you have resolved traumatic events in the past.
3. How have memories of their past affected members of your family?
4. List five favorite ways that you nurture yourself. Write about five more for particularly stressful circumstances. Be specific. Describe time, place, and activity.
5. Rank nurturing behaviors in terms of what works best when you are emotionally stressed. Do the same for physical stress.
7. Write about experiences you remember that were healing for you. Write them in the present tense.

Chapter Seven

We are cups, constantly and quietly begin filled. The trick is, knowing how to tip ourselves over and let the beautiful stuff out.

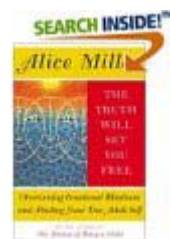
-- Ray Bradbury

Witnessing and Self-Nurturing

In her books *Drama of the Gifted Child*, *For Your Own Good*, and *The Truth Will Set You Free*, Alice Miller, a German psychiatrist, writes about the prevalence of child abuse, and how the wounds of child abuse affect people in adulthood. She believes that for victims to heal, the secret, shameful stories of childhood must be revealed and expressed to a compassionate, enlightened witness.

Miller believes that if another person becomes aware of the unfortunate situation we are in, and we are witnessed with compassion by that person, we don't become trapped in the darkness of it. She writes about the helping witnesses many of us were lucky enough to encounter as children—often an aunt, uncle, grandparent, or teacher: “A *helping witness* is a person who stands by an abused child . . . offering support and acting as a balance against the cruelty otherwise dominant in the child's everyday life.”

As adults, telling our stories to a therapist or spiritual teacher helps us to heal. That person becomes an “enlightened witness,” someone trained to fully understand the story. The enlightened witness sees us as the whole, beautiful being that we are. Miller says, “Therapists can qualify as enlightened witnesses, as can well-informed and open-minded teachers, lawyers, counselors, and writers.”



Witnessing Ourselves through Story Writing

Writing stories and sharing them in a group has been a powerful healing experience for all the students in my groups. People heal at different rates, often through surprising and seemingly ordinary happenings, but story writing often works quickly by turning us

into our own compassionate witnesses as the story unfolds.

This witness is the narrator “I” as it tells the story of the “character,” a younger version of who we are now. The narrative line is the invisible thread that weaves through your story, connecting its themes and sections. The narrator “I” comments and connects the elements of your story, while also being the main character in it. This dual consciousness is integrative and healing, and unique to memoir writing.

Often we feel we need forgiveness for what happened to us as children. Even as adults, many of us feel that we deserved the abuse we received, or that decisions others made were our own fault. Unfortunately, children take on the responsibility of the adults when they don’t understand what is happening to them. They think that the anger of the adults is their fault, or that the reason their parents got a divorce is their fault because they were bad.

Your book may have different sections and separate narrative lines that together tell the whole story. It might contain:

- The story of your adult life and how it was shaped by childhood.
- Your childhood story, which could exist in separate chapters.
- An adult voice, looking back with wisdom on the events of childhood and the influence they had on your development.

When you write your life story, you are at once a witness to it and its narrator and author. When you write the true story of your life, you witness what happened, and take a position about your thoughts and feelings as you put the past in perspective.

Story as Witness

Pennebaker’s studies complement what Alice Miller has been saying for years—that emotional wounds are carried in the body and need to be released through talking, writing, and expressing emotions. This release helps us integrate our experiences and frees us from self-destructive repetitive cycles.

How to shape the story of your life, and how much to put on paper about other

family members should you decide to publish your memoir, are discussed later in this book. Your first focus should be on the memories you need to write about for your own healing, stories that witness your feelings and experiences and explore how you were molded into who you are, with all your strengths and weaknesses.

We are a part of all that has happened to us, and it is all a part of us. Our task as memoir writers is to come to terms with the negative experiences in our lives and balance them with the life-enhancing, happy, and joyous events that were also a part of our pasts

Many Voices, Many Witnesses

There are various ways to witness ourselves and the stories of our lives. All kinds of artistic self-expression are powerful methods, including painting, gardening, and writing poetry. I learned another method of witnessing and being witnessed through Speaking Circles[®], a program created by Lee Glickstein.

In his book *Be Heard Now*, Glickstein talks about how the support of a positive group of people changes lives and provides a healing environment:

When people give us complete positive attention, we can let ourselves feel the old fears and know that nobody will criticize, interrupt, or psychoanalyze us. No one will take over the conversation . . . no one will imply that there's something wrong with anyone. We are honored for whatever we say, or don't say. It's our time and our space in which to be completely appreciated. That is the healing.



In this creative and alive listening environment, the deeper self is heard and received by the group. The stories are “listened out” of each group member in an environment of complete acceptance and unconditional positive regard. I found this to be a powerful and inspiring experience that helped me with my writing.

When we have not been received in this way, we feel inadequate and empty. We feel that there isn't enough of ourselves to support our own healing work, and this causes despair. We need to learn how to listen to ourselves as we are listened to by a good

friend, a therapist, a minister. As writers, we need to learn how to receive ourselves fully and unconditionally within our own skins.

Doreen Hamilton, director of training for Speaking Circles International and a colleague of Lee Glickstein and mine, offers programs that teach people how to create a positive listening environment and move into transformation.

If you have been abused or if memories haunt you, consider therapy along with writing about your past. If you become upset or overwhelmed, be sure to seek the support of friends and colleagues, as well as professional helpers. It is important to feel secure and safe when telling personal stories and to alternate painful stories with those about happy, positive memories. Creating a balance makes it possible for us to keep writing and not become overwhelmed when trying to write a complex story. The therapist holds the position of enlightened witness and compassionate listener. Often we need that objective person to listen the story out of us, to help us understand and reframe what we believe and how we hold our stories.

As we grew up, many of us felt out of control and unable to create the kind of peace and balance we wanted in our lives. It is important for you to understand how your family's dynamics apply to you, so you can make new choices to free your voice and tell your story. That is the process and purpose of focuses therapy work.

Hopefully you were blessed to have compassionate witnesses during your childhood who really saw you and noticed who you were, even if they could do little actively to help. For some children that witness was a pet, often their only friend. As an adult, you can cultivate compassionate witnesses among your friends, relatives, and colleagues, or you can choose to work with professionals who play that role.

Sometimes, a sense of being witnessed, accepted, and embraced can come from quite an unexpected source, as the following story suggests.



An Accidental Witness

I am a part of all I have met.

—Alfred Lord Tennyson

I still remember the moment when I first heard that line by Tennyson. I was sitting in my high school journalism class listening to Miss Scott philosophize. She sat at the big wooden desk in the front of the room. She wore cotton dresses over a generous yet contained figure, and she had Betty Davis eyes that seemed to see everything. Officially, she taught journalism, but I remember being inspired by all that she brought to the classroom.

At that time in my life, I was barely making it. A good friend had recently committed suicide, and my grandmother had changed from a kind caretaker into a screaming monster. I realized that the only way to survive was to get out of high school and out of town, but I often wondered if I would be able to escape. My despair came from watching the grandmother who had once rescued me, the grandmother who used to call me Sugar Pie and stroke my hair, turn into someone I didn't recognize. I had many secrets because one didn't "air the family's dirty laundry."

That spring afternoon in journalism class, the windows were open and the air smelled sweet and hopeful. I looked out at the fresh greening trees and the blue sky. Then I heard Miss Scott: "I am a part of all I have met."

The world stopped. I raised my hand and asked Miss Scott to repeat what she had said. She spoke the phrase again, and as she did, something shifted inside me. The usual tight knot in my stomach loosened and a sense of well-being came over me. Everything that had happened in my life—my mother's leaving me, my grandmother's going crazy, my friend dying—all of it knitted together into a fabric of meaning. Everything that had been painful and confusing was simply a part of my life. I could receive it in a new way. I was a part of everything, and it all was a part of me.

I realized that day that literature was about the exploration of the deep truths that underlie everyday reality. Miss Scott did not know what was wrong in my life, but it seemed as if she had witnessed me. Or was it Tennyson? My teacher, and literature, gave me something to hold onto.

Writing Invitations

1. Write about a witness who saw the *real* you when you were a child. Who was this person or animal? What was your relationship with him or her?

2. How did you know this person saw you? How did you feel about being witnessed?

3. Think about a compassionate witness who observed you well, who seemed to see and understand you. Tell the story of how you first met this person, how you felt about him or her, and when you realized that this person was paying special attention to you or witnessing you.

4. Write stories about your witnesses. What positive aspects exist in your life thanks to those who witnessed you?

5. Select two nurturing and fun activities that you plan to do in the next two weeks.

6. Write about childhood nurturing you received, from people, pets, food, games, books, etc.

7. What activities made you feel comforted and secure when you were a child? What smells, sounds, and sights were soothing and nourishing?

8. How do you define listening?

9. How do you know you are being listened to? What people have listened well to you in your life?

Chapter Eight

Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is that to go on living, I have to tell stories, that stories are the one sure thing I know to touch the heart and change the world.

--Dorothy Allison

Writing Stories as a Way to Heal

Writing a memoir is a long process that requires different kinds of writing. The first level is like journaling, where thoughts, images, memories, and associations spill onto the page as quickly as possible, without censoring. A first draft is composed of a stream-of-consciousness flow of imagery without much structure or logical sense.



I tell my students that this chaos is necessary for the healing aspect of the writing. Often when we try to impose a structure prematurely, we are covering up painful stories or trying to keep in control the outflow of memories that frighten us or worry us, as if their escape is dangerous to us. If we learned in the past that telling the truth and openly sharing the family secrets is dangerous to our well-being, this caution has been deeply learned. We need to unlearn it in order to craft our memoirs.

When we write memoir, the part of us that wants to heal demands to be heard. It demands that the unbidden stories erupt onto the page. Some of my students are afraid of this process, but when they come to understand that it is a necessary, though emotionally challenging, part of the writing, they are able to let the deep stories emerge.

I make my students promise not to compare their first drafts with published works or with other writers. We often subject our fragile first drafts to a terrible scrutiny, which is premature, unfair, and activates the inner critic.

Allow your journaling to continue and your raw narrative to spill out. Eventually, another layer emerges—the drive to develop and craft it as a story.

What is a story?

Pennebaker called a narrative, a story, “A type of knowledge.” I found this comment quite fascinating and began to explore the ways in which a story is a kind of knowledge. Teaching and coaching have taught me how this is so. My students’ stories contain several layers: the factual—what happened, when, where, etc.—and a wisdom layer, the insightful voice that evolves over time as we write.

I have already touched on this split consciousness between the narrator and the character of the story. It is a powerfully healing aspect of memoir writing, but it can be confusing. It helps to think of the observer as a camera lens that captures the unfolding story, while the character inhabits the body of the “I” that the story is about.

Here is one popular definition: a story is a narrative that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. While this seems self-evident, what it means on a deeper level is that we “construct” a story, creating a way for the telling of events to evolve into a climax and a resolution. The creation of a story goes beyond journaling to the idea of using fictional tools, such as scenes, that allow the story to be “shown” rather than “told.”

A healing memoir requires the use of scenes as a way to bring you, the writer/narrator, back to the time you are remembering. As writers, we again become the six-year-old whose father dies or the little girl who misses her mother. Bringing ourselves into this intimate contact with the people we once were and witnessing ourselves at the same time helps us heal by transforming our perspectives about our life experiences.

One reason story writing is so important is that it does more than give structure and meaning to an event; it provides a way to heal emotionally. After writing their memoirs, many people report that they are no longer haunted by disturbing memories and the emotions they evoke. The writing process has helped them integrate their life experiences and resolve old issues.

Writing Scenes Using Sensual Details

Most people, having gone to schools and taken the required English classes, have learned how to write essays, how to construct a narrative that compresses, summarizes, and often remains abstract. We were taught that good writing leaves out all unnecessary detail.

But writing stories is different. Here is an example of a narrative that does *not* use sensual details or scenes. I think you'll agree it is not very gripping.

When I grew up in Columbia in the state of Missouri, I was born to parents Ben and Sally. I had five brothers and sisters and we got along well except when my older brother beat me up. I enjoyed playing baseball and family holiday gatherings. I got good grades in school, which pleased my mother.

We live in a world full of sensual experience. When we write, we need to allow ourselves to feel this sensual world and bring it to the page. Writing our sensations means choosing words and associations that stimulate sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch in the mind of the reader.

Sight Use color, shape, texture, and other specific details to describe how things look. Specificity helps us remember better.

Sound Many memories are associated with intense sounds, such as loud noises—screaming, storms—anything that overwhelms our senses. Even small sounds—a clock ticking, keys jingling, a cat meowing—may evoke potent memories. Most powerful of all may be the sound of silence. Of course, some sounds evoke happy memories—the ticking of a grandfather clock, a rushing stream, the ocean, and music.

Taste Our taste buds are particularly sensitive during childhood. Some of our best memories involve food and spice: the first time we ate a particular food, or our favorite meal or dessert.



Smell Our olfactory sense may be the most powerful of all. Memory is easily evoked through experiencing a smell or scent connected with a particular person or event—the smell of someone’s perfume; the way a particular person’s clothes smell like no one else’s; the smell of lilacs, oranges, or the sea.

Touch Our skin can apparently retain the memory of a particular feeling, for example, the texture of rough or smooth surfaces, such as leather, sand, or a cat’s fur. Our bodies remember how we felt when we saw our first sunset or when something significant happened—a thrill coursing through the blood or a hollow ache.



Drawing from the summary paragraph at the beginning of this section, below are examples of showing a story in scene and including some sensual detail. Note that the details of the story are *shown* and not just *told*. There would be dialogue and even more sensual detail in a completed piece.

1. **Birth** *It was a snowy day in December, I’ve always been told, when I began my arrival into the world. My four brothers and sisters waited impatiently at grandma’s house for me to come home with our mother, whom I’d taken away from them. Late in my life they would remind me of this abandonment, but the day I arrived, the photos show their eager faces, from my brother age 10 on down to little Betty, looking at me with wide eyes.*
2. **Place** *The most memorable thing about living in Columbia as a child was the sudden arrival of amazing thunderstorms. The whole sky would ripple with huge, dark clouds and lighting would flicker across the horizon.*
3. **The conflict with the brother** *I could tell when Bobby was about to blow. His face would get crinkled, his eyes narrowing like a snake’s. His fingers would twitch and I’d try to figure out how to get away.*
4. **Holidays** *The long table would be loaded with turkey, dressing, two kinds of potatoes, three vegetable dishes, with five pies waiting for us on the side table.*

The jokes would fly around, and no matter what strife there had been, on this day we would celebrate.

5. **Good Grades** *Every time I brought home the report card, it was like Christmas. I'd proudly hold out the folded yellow paper printed with the name of the school and mother would nervously wipe her hands on her apron before opening it. Then her expression would change, as if the sun had just come up, her eyes shining. I knew she was proud of me, and I'd do anything to have her look at me like that.*

When you write, allow your mind to capture memories of sensual experiences. Feel, smell, and sense the details that you remember. Keep in mind that the use of sensual descriptions and language creates a feeling in the reader similar to your own experience. This is what you want; you want the reader to feel your world, to enter into your body and mind, and to journey with you into the past through the powers of your imagination and memory.

Stories as Healing

My students discover new information about themselves and their feelings when they take the plunge into writing stories that include clear scenes and sensual detail. One woman wrote about the trauma she experienced at the hands of her mother when she was a small child, a beating that terrified her, but she had forgotten it until a small detail reminded her—her memory of the close-up pattern on a linoleum floor. In the safety of the group, she took herself into the scene completely and into the body of the small child she was when this traumatic event took place.

While it was difficult for her to write the story, reading it was even more challenging. She stood up and read carefully, her hands shaking, about the beating, her feelings, and the decision this beating had caused her to make about herself. She realized that she had remained unconsciously trapped by this event. After she wrote it, she felt released. She felt taller, healthier, and more courageous. Furthermore, the whole class witnessed the suffering of the little girl that she once had been, and she experienced the

support and compassion of the group. It was a very healing experience for her to write this traumatic event as a story.

Writing Invitations

1. Describe a memorable morning when you were 4, 9, or 12 years old, or about a morning during each of those years. Where were you—e.g. country, city, state, building, or open landscape? What were you doing?
2. What was happening around you? Were there adults in your world and what were they doing? How did you feel in your body and in your emotions?
3. Write about a favorite house—your own or someone else’s. What was the mood in the house, the smells, and sensual world of the house? What happened there of importance to you?
4. Write about the smells and sounds of your childhood world. A farm world has potent smells, as does a city, a neighborhood.
5. Write in scene in the present tense using the “I” point of view.

Family life is full of major and minor crises -- the ups and downs of health, success and failure in career, marriage, and divorce -- and all kinds of characters. It is tied to places and events and histories. With all of these felt details, life etches itself into memory and personality. It's difficult to imagine anything more nourishing to the soul.

-- Thomas More

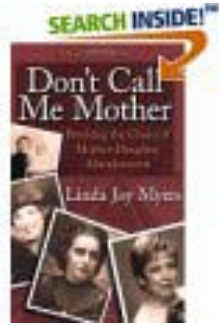
Quick Reminders for When You're Stuck

- Keep writing. Writing leads to more writing.
- Freewrite in a journal even if you aren't able to write a particular story.
- Read other memoirs to learn more about the writing process, style, and language.
- Outline, edit, and tinker with other stories when you aren't in the mood to write a new one.
- Go on the Internet to look at other people's writing and sites that encourage writing.
- Get out the photos, and look at the people and times you're writing about.
- Write a one- or two-page portrait of a family member or mentor who has helped you.
- Write a quick sketch of a happy moment.
- List the blessings in your life.
- Read fiction for style, technique, plot, scene, and character development tips.
- Eavesdrop in cafés, listening to dialogue and speech cadences.
- Read poetry.
- Attend author events and readings for inspiration



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***Don't Call Me Mother: Breaking the Chain of Mother
Daughter Abandonment***

Linda Joy Myers

Winner of the BAIPA Gold Medal Prize

*The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the
daughter, is the essential female tragedy.*

– Adrienne Rich

Tracks to My Heart

*The train bisects the blue and the green, parting wheat fields by the tracks.
Mommy and I rub shoulders, watching the landscape move backward as we sit in the last
car, as if erasing my childhood when she would board the train and leave me aching for
her. Now, in my dream, we rub shoulders, her perfume lingering. The old longing
wrenches my stomach.*

*Click-clack, click-clack, the train's wheels on the track, the language of my past,
my future.*

*Her face is soft. Her wine-dark eyes glance at me with promise, an endearing look
that gives me all I ever wanted. The click-clack ticks away the time, the mother time,
moons rising and falling as the years fall like petals in a white garden, our body-and-
blood song haunting my dreams. Mommy, where are you.*

Even as she is with me, she is gone.

The train station is the center of the universe, with tracks going and coming in all directions. People stand shivering in the ever-present plains wind, their hair kicked up violently when a train blows by, especially a freight bound

for Chicago where, as I understand it, all sensible trains end up. To me, the Windy City, as I hear my mother and grandmother call it, is the end of the known world. It is where I began and where my mother is off to as the three of us – my mother Josephine, my grandmother Frances, and I – stand in a miserable clutch. I am sure they are as miserable as I am, my mothers, standing there arms across their chests, hips slung out like bored movie stars competing for the same part. Maybe that's what they *are* doing – vying for the part of good mother, or bad mother, depending on how you define things. But to me they are beautiful and thrilling.

But underneath their beauty and power, a secret is buried. A secret that runs in the blood. This moment repeats for the third time what has happened before – a mother leaving a daughter, repeating what Gram did to my mother so long ago, and her mother before her. It will be years before I find out the whole story about the three generations of women who will define my life. At this moment, the ticking bomb is set to go off when my mother gets on the train. No one here claims any knowledge of this dire pattern. I can feel it though, deep in a silent place inside me, a place of desperation, the beginning of a crack that will split my life open.

The sun pinks the sky in the west, a place where the eye loves to rest in this open land. Already the lore of its history tickles my curiosity, even though at this moment I am four years old. I hear of Indian chiefs and the frontier, if not from books, from the pictures all around town proclaiming our cowboy heritage – neon signs, billboards showing an Indian chief in full headdress, peace pipe slung from an arm as casually as a gun. Right now the picture of an Indian, wearing only a blanket and standing in front of the Santa Fe Chief hangs on the waiting room wall, wreathed in smoke rising like a mysterious code to the ceiling.

I read the code here, tapping feet in open-toed suede shoes. I stare at my mother's toes, as if to memorize an intimate part of her, bringing my gaze up her shapely legs, my stomach in a pang, the scenes that brought us to this moment fresh in my mind.

Mommy and I came here a few months ago from Chicago, where we had lived after my father left. I don't know much about him, except that he went off to the war, and came back too, but not to us. She cries when she looks at his pictures. Every so often she shows me a small black-and-white photo of a man wearing a captain's hat and grinning as he leans casually against a brick building. The crease in his pants is knife sharp. With her slim fingers, she caresses a photograph of herself against the same wall wearing a big fur coat.

"That was the night before you were born, a cold night in March. What a wonderful thing that was for your mother." Mommy often talks about herself like that, as if she wasn't in the room.

I remember our time in Chicago, when Mommy would talk on the phone forever in the evening, twisting her hair in tiny ringlets all over her head, or knitting scarves and sweaters. I remember the amber light that shone over her like a halo, and I remember that I'd do anything to get her to scratch my back with her sharp fingernails.

But a few months ago, we left – my first time on the train. The ride was thrilling: the sound of the whistle, huge clouds of gushing steam, great deep rumblings of the engines that sounded like scary monsters speeding us by green fields and blue skies all around, with little towns along the side of the track and people waving, waving as if they knew us. The whistle tooted a special hello to them. What fun.

That night the porter unfolded the special bed that was our seat, pulling down a shade made of thick green cloth. I loved the little tent that he made for us. My mother had a dreamy look on her face, staring at the sights as the wheels click-clacked beneath us. Mommy wore her cotton nightgown, and I my pajamas. We cuddled between fresh cotton sheets. The train rocked us back and forth, back and forth in a sweet rhythm that one day I would remember as the best moment we ever had, Mommy and me. On the train, together. The next day, we arrived in Wichita where I met Gram, Mommy's mother.

She looked like my mother, with the same pretty face. Her voice was soft as she sifted my fine hair away from my forehead in a gentle gesture and smiled at me with soft brown eyes so dark I couldn't see the pupils you can see in most people's eyes. She was nice to me and called me Sugar Pie. But Mommy and Gram – whew – they sure did surprise me by fighting all the time. I'd watch, or hide in the hall, while they yelled, screamed, and cried. Almost every day. It was terrible to hear; it made my skin itch. I scratched the itch, making red marks on my arms. Their cigarette smoke filled the air. When Mommy rushed off to work each morning it was quiet and nice in Gram's little house. Windows let in the sun, making pretty patterns through the Venetian blinds on the hardwood floors. Gram read stories to me, and we made bubbles with soap in the sink. She taught me to eat prunes every morning. I began learning how words make stories come alive – Cinderella, Snow White, the Three Bears. Every day I waited for Mommy to come home. I loved her throaty voice, the way she touched my hair for a moment. I was always slinking around trying to get more hugs out of her, but she was not much for that.

One evening, everything seemed different. Mommy yelled, threw down her purse. Lit cigarette after cigarette, the frown between her eyes deepening

with each puff. Gram edged around her, as if she were looking for a way either to blow up or not to fight at all. Finally the explosion, my mothers with angry mouths opening and closing. I kept my eye on them while I put dishes on the table.

“I hate this place,” Mother said, stomping her heels on the floor.

Gram made a nasty face. Their voices had sharp edges, and got so loud I had to put my fingers in my ears. They were so loud, so angry it sounded like screeching bird, then something happened. Mommy got really quiet, which scared me even more and said, “That’s it, I’m going back to Chicago.” I can’t say how I knew it, but I could tell that she wasn’t going to take me, and if she left me now, it would be forever.

I watched Mother walk back and forth across the floor. The seams in her hose were crooked. Mommy never had crooked seams. I sat on the floor, my stomach in a knot, while I traced the patterns in the Oriental rug. I wanted to get lost in those swirls, like in a dark forest in the fairy tales. I could get lost and never be found again.

So here we are, waiting for the train. My chest is tight, there is darkness and ice all the way through me. I am shivering. How can she leave? She knows I don’t want her to go. My mother stands apart from me and from Gram, far enough to show that she is the one leaving, the one who will go alone on the train. I dread the train that’s about to take her away. All around me everyone acts normal. People bustle around getting ready, the train men push luggage carts, kids jump up and down. Words that I cannot say gather in my mouth, fill my whole body. Every muscle wants to run to her, grab at her and scream, “Please don’t go,” but I know that she and Gram don’t want me to do this. I don’t want to make them mad, I don’t want them to look at me with those dark

eyes of disapproval. I couldn't stand it. So I will pretend. The wind blows through me, whirling my dress, my hair. Then the sound of the whistle cries out, as if in pain. A deep sorrow lurches through me. I hold my breath to keep myself from crying. The light appears at the far end of the tracks and gets bigger. I can't stop any of this. The huge train tears into the station, rumbling the earth beneath my feet, kicking up my hair with the blast of wind. A scream comes out of my mouth, but no one hears me. The locomotive is too huge, too powerful and frightening, and it is coming to take my mother away.

Mommy and I are wrapped in invisible gauze, wrapped tight so it can't break, but as she touches me softly with her fingertips, and leans over to give Gram a kiss, I can feel the fabric unwrapping, unwinding us until just a thin piece is left. She hugs me lightly, as if she's afraid I'll cling to her. Her musky smell clings to me. She click-clacks toward the train on her high heels, almost as if she's glad to get away. Her seams are straight, and she is so beautiful with the sun on her face until she climbs into the train car.

Mommy, Mommy, I chant silently, putting my fingers to my nose to inhale her memory, her scent on my skin.

How I want to be on the train, to cuddle up with Mommy like we did before. But Gram looks at me with such sadness in her eyes, I know that I need to stay with her. It's funny that she was so mad before, but now I can tell she is sad, though she doesn't say it in words. I take her hand and stand with her as we watch the train disappear down the track in a puff of smoke.



The train whistle cries its lonely song, lingering in the wind that crosses the plains. It will call for me all my life, in my dreams and while I am awake. The train song, the train's power and promise are etched deep in my soul from this day forward.