

USING NARRATIVES TO WRITE AND HEAL

By Jennifer Lynne Bird

Oxbridge Academy

I love full circle moments. Therefore, it seems appropriate that I submit this article to the journal co-edited by Tom Poetter and Denise Baszile, who also served as two of the members of my doctoral dissertation committee at Miami University when this journey began for me. In the years since I wrote my dissertation focusing on the topic of using writing to help me heal after my mom's death, my writing-as-healing odyssey expanded to include using writing to help high school and college students, physical therapy patients, church congregation members, and readers of my writing who need hope during the current pandemic times.

ACT I: WRITING TO HELP MYSELF HEAL

My journal saved my life. Of course, I feel gratitude for the other resources, such as family, friends, therapy, and medication, that helped me find light during the dark moments after my mom's sudden death. Nevertheless, the moments when I frequently processed my emotions occurred when my pen scribbled thoughts in my notebook or my fingers flew over the keyboard of my computer. My dissertation committee continued to give me the opportunity to explore this topic. As my dissertation chair, Tom Poetter supported my innovative idea; Denise Baszile gave me additional motivation by telling me to just write.

I became a participant observer in my own research study; interviewing other teachers at Miami University's Ohio Writing Project took me away from my own grief, while writing gave me the opportunity to deal with my feelings. Grief researcher Edelman (2020), who also experienced the death of her mother, articulates how I felt when she writes, "organizing disordered thoughts into a coherent, manageable account is what helps us make sense of a crisis and fit it into a larger system of personal meaning" (p. 142). I used writing to shape my narrative of loss and try to find meaning in it. It felt difficult because I didn't know at the time that sudden loss often doesn't fit into a coherent narrative. Edelman explains, "a sudden loss offers no opportunity for a logical progression of cause-and-effect relationships that lead to an inevitable conclusion" (p. 175). Essentially, I tried to find connections during the day of my mom's death where none existed and eventually realized that nothing I did or didn't do on that day made a difference in the outcome.

Despite my inability to discover connections in the narrative of my mom's life, I developed connections in my writing and research. I discovered the qualitative interpretive field of narrative inquiry and used it to explain how writing helped me during this difficult time in my life. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain that "one of the starting points for narrative inquiry is the researcher's own narrative experience, the researcher's autobiography" (p. 70). They elaborate that, when conducting a narrative inquiry, researchers "make themselves as aware as possible of the many, layered narratives at work in their inquiry space. They imagine narrative intersections, and they anticipate possible narrative threads emerging" (p. 70). I love narrative inquiry because when telling the stories of others, I also tell my own story. My story matters. My voice matters. I can immerse myself in the narrative threads emerging without becoming a detached researcher. The first person "I" in my "I am" statements means something.

I learned that writing from a place of pain caused me to have no energy to censor my writing voice, which became a good thing. Tom Romano, another Miami professor and member of my dissertation committee, introduced me to the concept of writing voice. Romano (2004) believes that “our voices are shaped by the places where we learned language—in our parents’ arms, at our school desks, in the neighborhood, on playgrounds and streets” (p. 6). Building on Romano’s observation, I believe that our voices also become shaped by our experiences. I wish I had never experienced the tragic and untimely death of someone I loved, but because I did, I want to use my experiences to help others.

I didn’t realize at the time that not everyone turns their tragedies into life lessons to make a difference in the lives of other people. Duckworth (2016) calls this concept grit and states, “the hope that gritty people have has nothing to do with luck and everything to do with getting up again” (p. 169). Sometimes getting up in the morning seemed like an accomplishment, but my cat Lucy needed food, I needed food, and I actually looked forward to getting back to banging out words on my computer, especially in the middle of the night after I had already vented to friends, family, and my therapist. Remembering that time in my life, I wonder if I became too focused on making something good happen in my life after my mom’s death. Lamott (1994) writes, “there is still something to be said for painting portraits of the people we have loved, for trying to express those moments that seem so inexpressibly beautiful, the ones that change us and deepen us” (p. 192). I wanted to write about my mom so that I didn’t forget the little moments in our life together. Her death did not define her life story. The narrative of my dissertation intertwined my mom’s story, my story, and the stories of my research participants, much like the tight braid of a rope I was clinging to in order to keep me from sinking into a dark depression. Revising my writing led me to revise my life. Fallon (2020) believes, “where we get unstuck in our writing, we get unstuck in our lives” (p. 34). I also didn’t realize at the time how my research about writing-as-healing would lead to finding my purpose in life.

ACT II: WRITING TO HELP PATIENTS

After I moved from Ohio to Florida and accepted a position teaching current and future teachers at Florida Atlantic University, my writing-as-healing exploration became pushed aside in favor of the practical issues of beginning my university career, teaching classes, and attending committee meetings. My failure to focus on self-care resulted in throwing heavy bags of books on my shoulders, injuring my neck, and going to physical therapy. My pain levels seemed to change based on the day and my activities, so I recorded my symptoms in my journal. After my mom’s death, my dad and I found a yellow legal pad where she had listed her symptoms. My family will never know what would have happened if she had showed her notes to her doctor, but when confronted with my own medical issue, I decided to take the risk and share my journal with my physical therapist.

Writers take a risk when sharing their writing with other people. Cameron (1998) shares,

the very vulnerability required to be open and creative is a vulnerability that puts our creativity at risk. For this reason, meticulous care must be taken to find “safe” readers and people who can be our “before, during, and after” friends to our work. (p. 181)

Writing, especially narrative writing, provides the reader with a glimpse into the writer's personal life. Safe readers can validate the writer's experience and provide encouragement. Vulnerability does not happen easily for me. Sociologist Brown (2017) explains, "the definition of vulnerability is uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. But vulnerability is not weakness: it is our most accurate measure of courage" (p. 154). I like Brown's definition that vulnerability represents courage. If I wanted to feel better, I needed to share my pain narrative with my physical therapist and trust him with my story.

Compassionate clinicians make a difference. My physical therapist, Dr. Eric Wanner, chose to read my journal, said he liked my idea, and used my notes to adjust his treatment plan to help me heal from my neck pain. Not only did he appreciate my pain narrative, he added interpretation of it as part of the contributing factors to my neck pain. On the last day of my physical therapy treatment, Eric wondered if my writing idea could help other patients. We decided to work together to design a research study. I consulted with Tom Romano on the writing theory I developed, and Eric contacted his former research professor, Dr. Claudia Jayne Brahler, at the University of Dayton for statistical advice. It seemed like more than a coincidence that the professor who helped guide the research lived near my hometown of Kettering, Ohio, so it became easy to meet with her on UD's campus to discuss data when I returned home to visit family.

Our research team discovered that physical therapy patients who wrote and demonstrated positivity in their writing showed greater healing gains on objective physical therapy measures such as the LEFS (Lower Extremity Function Scale), DASH (Disabilities of the Arm, Shoulder, and Hand), Modified Oswestry (for back pain) and NDI (Neck Disability Index) (Wanner, Bird, & Brahler, 2016). Our research contributed to the existing literature illustrating that writing can have physical health benefits in addition to emotional health benefits.

Psychologist Pennebaker conducted the original writing study that showed writing can lead to physical healing. Pennebaker and Smyth (2016) explain, "most important, people who wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings related to stressful or traumatic experiences had reliable improvements in health in the two to three months after writing" (p. 25). By transferring their thoughts from the mind to the page, people could process their thoughts and feelings and free their bodies and minds to heal. Medical doctor Rankin (2013) elaborates,

the body relaxes. The doctor convinced your brain that all will be well, or at least that everything will be done to try to ensure that it will be. In such a relaxed state, the body can get busy doing what it does best—making efforts to heal itself. (p. 47)

Even though Rankin discusses talking to a doctor instead of writing, Pennebaker's research illustrates that writing provides the same benefits as talking to someone, especially if the writer doesn't have a supportive person to listen.

Our research study asked physical therapy patients to complete an original survey we designed (Wanner & Bird, 2013) by responding to numerical subjective and written subjective questions. The short answer writing prompts that comprised the written subjective questions captured the first impressions of each writer. If a writer spends too much time on a response, it becomes easy to overanalyze. Writer Goldberg (1986) elaborates,

so when we write and begin with an empty page and a heart unsure, a famine of thoughts, a fear of no feeling—just begin from there, from that electricity. This

kind of writing is uncontrolled, is not sure where the outcome is, and it begins in ignorance and darkness. But facing those things, writing from that place, will eventually break us and open us to the world as it is. Out of this tornado of fear will come a genuine writing voice. (p. 106)

Knowing the first impressions of the physical therapy patients gave our research team insights into each person's feelings about pain. The numerical subjective questions provided insight into both the goals the physical therapist set for each patient and the goals patients set for themselves. Medical doctor Tindle (2013) explains, "giving yourself credit for meeting a goal is more than just a superficial nod. It actually highlights the accomplishment as concrete evidence that you really can make changes" (p. 130). Patients who clearly articulated their goals became more likely to achieve their goals.

My interest in the medical field continued, and I decided to enroll in Duke University's Integrative Medicine Health Coach Program. My schedule became quite busy as I juggled taking classes while simultaneously teaching for FAU, but I felt like I lived my life's purpose during the process. The final part of my certification focused on an internship at Jupiter Medical Center in Florida; I loved working with orthopedic patients in the hospital and discussing their lives while giving them journals to write their thoughts. I earned not only certification through Duke's program, but also became a National Board Certified Health and Wellness Coach.

Health coaches focus on vision and values to encourage people to set and accomplish their goals. Williams (2019) asks the questions, "do you want to get to the end of your life and question whether you've really lived? Or worse, regret not going for your dreams?" (p. 12). Health coaches use open-ended questions and reflective listening to help people discover the path to their best lives. My specialization combined my writing knowledge with my health coaching knowledge. I encouraged hospital patients to use writing to tell their pain narratives and help themselves heal by both sharing their narratives with their medical team and setting goals for what life looked like when leaving the hospital.

ACT III: WRITING TO HELP WITH SPIRITUALITY

On my path of research and writing, I enjoyed witnessing the moments where everything fell into place. While intellectually I know this happens because of detailed knowledge, I believe spiritually plays a role. So I shouldn't have felt surprised when one of the ministers at my church approached me about the possibility of becoming part of the church's new Stephen Ministry Program. Stephen Ministers serve as lay caregivers who walk with members of the church's congregation on their spiritual journeys. I accepted the opportunity to train to become a Stephen Leader and co-teach future classes of Stephen Ministers. I noticed similarities between the skills required for a health coach and the skills required for a Stephen Minister.

Stephen Ministers use the same skills of open-ended questions and reflective listening that health coaches use, only Stephen Ministers incorporate prayers into their conversations with care receivers. As a Stephen Minister, I remind people through prayer that God stays with them during difficult times. Bessey (2019) shares

I pray that you would remain open to participating in your own healing, even if it comes to you in ways that you resent and fear at first. Just because it's new to you doesn't mean God isn't already waiting there for you in the doctor's office, in the therapist's room, on the page, in the conversation, in the solitude. (p. 210)

Like health coaches, Stephen Ministers do not give advice, but instead walk with anyone who needs help or wants to create change in life. My writing knowledge became another resource for helping members of my church congregation. Lyons (2019) writes, “I snuck downstairs in the middle of the night to unload the burdens of my heart on my laptop. Writing was the only way I knew to process what God might be doing in my life” (p. 27). Writing provides an outlet for people who want to process their emotions between visits from a Stephen Minister.

I returned to the hospital as a volunteer to pray with people who needed comfort before or after surgery or while recovering from illness or injury. I sat in the chapel of my church after services in case anyone visited and needed prayer. I led workshops on journal writing at church. For anyone interested in journaling, I agree with Ashcroft and Olsen (2012) who suggest, “don’t try to be profound on the pages of your journal; just be yourself. This is about you, your heart, your guts, your relationship with God. All you have to do is start writing” (p. 141). Once again, trust the first impression on the page without worrying about the content or appearance of the writing, because no one else has to read it. TerKeurst (2020) writes, “my journals weren’t linear like spreadsheets or crystal clear like photographs. They were more like abstract art made up of words that probably wouldn’t make sense to others” (pp. 98–99). When rereading my own journals, sometimes I can’t even make sense of what I wrote a year ago, but I had, and will always have, a safe space to process ideas when I need it.

ACT IV: WRITING TO HELP HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

In the midst of the research with physical therapy patients, the same research team decided to see if writing showed similar benefits with the college students I taught. Student volunteers completed an anonymous survey about journal writing. While the research objectives did not focus on anxiety, we learned that a large number of college students in the group surveyed experienced anxiety. Our research team also discovered that students who demonstrated a positive attitude while writing experienced less anxiety (Bird & Wanner, 2015). This result dovetailed with the result of our physical therapy research study and illustrated additional possibilities for writing as healing.

During this time, I made the decision to return to teaching high school and became the Director of the Writing and Reading Center (WRC) and an English teacher at Oxbridge Academy in Florida. I enjoy training the student peer tutors who work in the WRC and continue to discuss the same skills of asking open-ended questions and practicing reflective listening with them that I learned as a health coach and Stephen Minister. When I am not working in the WRC, I teach English classes and immerse students in the world of writing and literature.

I encourage my students to critique the literature they read, research topics that interest them, and incorporate their narratives into their writing. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) believe that, “from the point of view of curriculum, the idea is that the curriculum a person has experienced is found in that person’s overall past record of experiences in private life as well as in professional life” (p. 20). Narratives symbolize the place where each student’s personal curriculum experiences intersect with the professional curriculum of the school. I love that teachers at my school have the freedom to contribute ideas to the curriculum, thus, shaping the collective narrative of the community and experiencing *currere* during our conversations.

In addition to studying works of literature from the past and telling their stories of the present moment, I want my students to know they possess the power to shape their future and the future of their communities. Beyer (1996) explains, “the belief that

significant educational and social change is possible has been fueled by a number of forces—both theoretical and practical” (p. 16). Even though almost 25 years passed since the writing of that statement, the sentiment about the possibility of change remains the same. Beane (1997) describes curriculum integration as, “the ideas that people have about themselves and their world—their perceptions, beliefs, values, and so on—are constructed out of their experiences” (p. 4). Past experiences can provide insight for how to help live in the present moment as well as set goals for the future. My favorite part of teaching involves encouraging students to write the next chapters in their stories so they can live lives that make them happy.

Since the beginning of my high school teaching career at Chaminade-Julienne High School in Ohio, I used journal writing in my classes. I remember writing in my own journals as a high school student and later rereading them to laugh at the things I once thought important, ponder a wise insight from my younger self, or remember a favorite memory. I wanted my students to have the same experience. I also know life as a teenager can feel stressful. Journals provide an outlet for writing about experiences and relieving stress. Dalebout (2016) explains writing in language teenagers understand as, “journaling is basically texting your feelings to the most nonjudgmental friend you could ever have” (p. 11). My students admit that sometimes they don’t want to share their feelings with anyone, which is why writing helps them. Journaling also illustrates to teenagers that all writing does not have to look perfect. I can relate to struggling with perfectionism as a teenager (and sometimes as an adult) and witness my students facing the same struggle. Writer Lamott (1994) believes, “perfectionism means that you try desperately not to leave so much mess to clean up. But clutter and mess show us that life is being lived” (p. 28). Journals should not become a perfect work of writing because no one’s life is perfect.

I decided to not read my students’ writing in their journals, although I tell each class to ask for help from either me or the school psychologist if they write something that concerns them. Romano (1995) writes, “but we must be aware that we speak and write our rude truths in particular social settings. We have to be willing to face consequences our words might trigger” (p. 135). If writing the truth about life in a journal triggers intense feelings for students, I want them to know a community of compassionate people exists to support them. Several times during each school year, I conference with every student individually and discuss what they learned from writing. The majority of students tell me that writing helps relieve stress and anxiety. As this common theme consistently emerges, I encourage students to continue writing.

Every year at Oxbridge I teach *The Freedom Writers Diary*, the true story of California teacher Erin Gruwell and her students, named the Freedom Writers, who use writing as a form of social activism to create positive change. Gruwell (1999) writes of her students, “I realized that, in order for them to grow, they had to branch out and explore new ground” (p. 273). Journal writing helps students explore new ideas for themselves and, if they choose, a method for finding common ground with their classmates. While I don’t require my students to share their writing with me or their classmates, I conduct a class discussion on the value of journal writing. When students choose to share with their classmates how writing helped them, it strengthens the class community. Romano (2008) elaborates, “in our classes students have opportunity to connect dramatically with the human experience of others. Students can come to know those others. They can come to know themselves” (p. 92). Realizing that their classmates share similar feelings helps students learn they do not have to feel alone because others have similar experiences. Brown (2018) explains, “people realize they’re not alone. Sharing their stories together

normalizes shame, creates connection, and builds trust” (p. 135). Learning each other’s narratives builds empathy in a safe space for learning. It applies to the teenagers I teach as well as to anyone who wants to build a stronger community for themselves and other people.

ACT V: WRITING TO CREATE CHANGE

As I write these words, the world struggles in the midst of a pandemic. Christmas arrives in a few days, as people try to find hope during a holiday season separated from loved ones either by distance or death. My school, like numerous others, transitioned to online learning, followed by returning to teaching in person with extra precautions including masks for teachers and students, Plexiglas surrounding desks, temperature checks upon arrival, and hand sanitizer stations. I wonder which parts of 2020 will appear in future history books.

While all this occurred, I found myself stopped in the hallway by former students telling me they still wrote in their journals. Current students told me writing in their journals served as a source of stress relief during the pandemic. Transferring thoughts from their minds to the page relieved the anxiety they experienced during an atypical school year and uncertain future. In response to student comments, I added more time in the curriculum for journal writing. I spent time reflecting on my teaching and agreed with psychologist Grant (2021) who argues, “I believe that good teachers introduce new thoughts, but great teachers introduce new ways of thinking” (p. 203). So I transformed literary analysis writing prompts by asking students to ponder how classic literary characters would respond to the current pandemic. I taught students my writing-as-healing research and reminded them how their journals could help them cope with stress while providing a personal record of events of life in this moment in time.

Even though a typical five act play concludes with a dramatic conclusion leading to a comedic or tragic ending, I realized the end of this writing as healing narrative remains unwritten. I intend for my writing-as-healing research and experiences to remain ongoing, as I learn new information and create new pathways to make a difference in the world.

When I wrote my doctoral dissertation, I never imagined how much my research and writing would help people. At the time, I only wanted to help myself. Romano (2004) believes that, “if the stakes are not significant, chances are that your writing won’t be compelling, the voice won’t be strong and urgent” (p. 25). I had the high stakes of needing to forge a new path and survive in a world without my mom. Only now can I look back and see that my writing did not serve as an end to earning my doctorate, but instead the beginning of my life’s purpose. And this article does not represent an ending either; I intend for numerous additional chapters to unfold in this writing-as-healing narrative.

I hope my words find people who can benefit from them. Writer Gilbert (2015) recalls one of her readers and shares, “once my book entered her hands, after all, everything about it belonged to her, and never again to me” (p. 125). I have a slightly different perspective that my words will always belong to me, but other people can also interpret my narratives as they choose. I share the sentiment of Hatmaker (2020) who writes, “for me, the practice of putting pen to paper creates an alchemy hard to duplicate any other way” (p. 213). Doyle (2020) also uses the alchemy metaphor by describing, “life is alchemy, and emotions are the fire that turns me to gold” (p. 51). Writing transformed me. Writing transformed my students, physical therapy patients, and members of my church congregation in need of a prayer. I feel blessed to belong

to a supportive family and strong circle of friends who will listen to my story. Times exist, however, when I don't feel like talking to anyone. Then I pick up my journal or my computer and let the feelings flow through words. Hollis (2020) feels, "I believe it's possible to find meaning in anything; I believe how I deal with the hard parts of my past and how I manage them in the present is me taking back ownership" (p. 24). I can't change my mom's death; I can change my narrative and merge the story of loss with a story of using that loss to continue to make a difference.

I consistently revised and rewrote my narrative without knowing a psychological explanation existed for it. In the two months between turning in the original draft of this article in December 2020 and turning in the revision in February 2021, I continued to revise my writing, my teaching, and my life. Edelman (2020) explains, "finding a balance between acknowledging the gravity of a distressing event and creating a narrative that includes redemption scenes appears key toward achieving hope, sustenance, and positive long term adjustment after a trauma or loss" (p. 251). Writing helped me find hope and a light during the dark times of my life. I hope writing helps the readers of this article find hope and a light during the current dark times of the pandemic. Soon, the page will turn to a new story.

And my narrative continues.

References

- Ashcroft, M., & Olsen, R. (2012). *My one word*. Zondervan.
- Beane, J. A. (1997). *Curriculum integration*. Teachers College Press.
- Bessey, S. (2019). *Miracles and other reasonable things*. Howard Books.
- Beyer, L. E. (1996). Introduction: The meanings of critical teacher preparation. In L. E. Beyer (Ed.), *Creating democratic classrooms* (pp. 1–26). Teachers College Press.
- Bird, J. L., & Wanner, E. T. (2015). Research as curriculum inquiry: Helping college students with anxiety. In V. C. X. Wang (Ed.), *Handbook of research on scholarly publishing and research methods* (pp. 273–295). Information Science Reference.
- Brown, B. (2017). *Braving the wilderness*. Random House.
- Brown, B. (2018). *Dare to lead*. Random House.
- Cameron, J. (1998). *The right to write*. Tarcher/Putnam.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry*. Jossey-Bass.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1988). *Teachers as curriculum planners*. Teachers College Press.
- Dalebout, K. (2016). *Let it out*. Hay House.
- Doyle, G. (2020). *Untamed*. The Dial Press.
- Duckworth, A. (2016). *Grit*. Scribner.
- Edelman, H. (2020). *The aftergrief*. Random House.
- Fallon, A. (2020). *The power of writing it down*. Zondervan.
- Gilbert, E. (2015). *Big magic: Creative living beyond fear*. Riverhead Books.
- Grant, A. (2021). *Think again*. Viking.
- Goldberg, N. (1986). *Writing down the bones*. Shambhala.
- Gruwell, E., & The Freedom Writers. (1999). *The Freedom Writers diary*. Broadway.
- Hatmaker, J. (2020). *Fierce, free, and full of fire*. Nelson Books.
- Hollis, R. (2020). *Didn't see that coming*. Dey St.
- Lamott, A. (1994). *Bird by bird*. Anchor Books.
- Lyons, R. (2019). *Rhythms of renewal*. Zondervan.
- Pennebaker, J. W., & Smyth, J. M. (2016). *Opening up by writing it down*. The Guilford Press.

- Rankin, L. (2013). *Mind over medicine*. Hay House.
- Romano, T. (1995). *Writing with passion*. Heinemann.
- Romano, T. (2004). *Crafting authentic voice*. Heinemann.
- Romano, T. (2008). *Zigzag*. Heinemann.
- TerKeurst, L. (2020). *Forgiving what you can't forget*. Nelson Books.
- Tindle, H. (2013). *Up: How positive outlook can transform our health and aging*. Hudson Street Press.
- Wanner, E. T., & Bird, J. L. (2013). *The Wanner Bird healing survey for pain recovery* [Original work copyrighted by the authors].
- Wanner, E. T., Bird, J. L., & Braehler, C. J. (2016). Bring out your patient's inner writer for a better experience. *PT in Motion*, 8(1), 62.
- Williams, E. (2019). *I heart my life*. Hay House.