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Wreckage, Wonder & Ways Through the Impossible: Writing About Life's Hard Stuff

"Everything can be endured if it's part of a story" -- Yiddish Folklore

"We write not to create works of art, but to build character,develop integrity, discipline, judgment, balance, order,restraint, and other valued inner attributes. Through writing, we develop self-mastery, which contributes to our emotional and spiritual growth. Writing, then, becomes the teacher" -- Louise DeSalvo

Why Write About the Hard Stuff: Writing can help you find greater wholeness, healing and strength. It can turbo-charge your resiliency -- your ability to endure and thrive. It can also help you sort out what really happened, not so much factually but emotionally, psychically, spiritually or other ways that shape and infuse who you are. Writing can give you back more of who you are, and give you a vehicle for your story so that you can contribute to growing the world's compassion and wisdom.

What the Research Shows: Research, particularly through the work of James Pennebaker and many others, shows the positive effects of writing for short, regular amount of times, while using structured exercises. Many poetry therapy scholars (who study the effects of poetic language in improving our lives) point to the need for writing prompts that point upward, lifting the writer to some sense of hope, bravery, understanding. The research also shows that simply spilling your guts on the page, especially repeatedly and over long periods, can re-traumatize people and cause more harm than healing. Art is a potent tool and practice: use it wisely, but use it!

When to Write About the Hard Stuff: When you feel you have enough distance from your life's hard stuff, you can write about. How to know when you have such distance? There is no exact formula; distance can come in the form of time, geography, moving on with an aspect of your life (new job, new boyfriend, new home, etc.) or many other ways. Listen carefully and fully to yourself to see if you are ready, and for help in this, you can consult with a counselor, clergy person or therapist; engage in a non-verbal practice (yoga, running, meditation, visual arts); or simply take your time and wait for the necessary distance and the right now. How do you know it's the right time? When you can't not about something. When you hear that small calling repeatedly, and it won't go away (like the farmer in the movie *Babe* when he got the wacky idea to enter a pig in a sheep-herding contest). When you just know it in your bones.

When Not To Write About the Hard Stuff: Marge Piercy writes of the writing life, "Work is its own cure. You have to like it better than being loved." With that in mind, here's the list of when not to write, and what not to do when you are writing about the hard stuff.

- Don't write to make yourself more likeable, to prove to others you are worthy of being loved, or to use your writing to control interactions with others. It doesn't work, and it can cause you damage.
- Don't force it.
- Don't dive into traumatic details unless appropriate.
- Don't embellish or dramatize. With hard stuff, the material is usually dramatic enough.
- Don't write if you're too close to it (how to know? Listen carefully to your own heart and responses).
- Don't write as a way to quell depression or anxiety.
- Don't write if the writing feels, in any way, harmful to you.

- Take breaks.
- If you feel you need to take a long break -- months, years -- take it.

Bottom Line: Let the writing tell you what it needs, what it is, and when to do it.

How to Write About the Hard Stuff: Through using many literary techniques in poetry, fiction, non-fiction, drama and memoir, we can find new ways to tilt our understanding of our experience and create writing of quality, potency and vitality. Here are some approaches to consider:

- Use third (he, she, they) or second (you, your) person to tell a story.
- Fictionalize what happened by adding in new characters or settings or plot twists or other elements.
- Describe what happened outside the usual story you tell yourself about the trauma, loss or challenge (writing about the frame or what's outside the frame)
- Bring in mythic element (use elements of fairy tales, biblical stories, Greek and Roman myths, contemporary myths)
- Narrate from other angles, even letting inanimate objects tell the story from where they sit.
- Tell the story behind story
- Write into the future: Tell the story from the vantage point of years from now to see it from another angle.
- Write a letter from yourself now to yourself then (or visa-versa) or engage in a dialogue.
- Focus on take-home messages: ask you writing to show you what your experience means to you.
- Don't grasp at meanings, answers, solutions too quick. Let them come over time, organically, from the writing and process of being with the writing.
- Stop only at moments of lift (whether on the page, off the page, or both). In other words, if you write a scene that very traumatic and painful for you, then aim yourself toward writing something that helps you feel you have some skin on your bones.

Groundrules

1. Don’t worry about spelling, grammar, and most of all, making sense.

2. Write what you know as well as what you don’t know.

3. Follow your writing, not the suggested exercise, the facilitator or what you think you should write. Write what wakes you up the most.

4. Feel free to experiment with poems, stories, dialogues, essays, letters, and whatever other form the writing wants to be.

5. Practice trust. Trust yourself to write what you need to write, how you need to write it.

6. Remember that all revealed in this workshop is confidential.

7. Treat all newborn writing with great respect and tenderness so that it can grow.

8. Reading your writing aloud is always optional.

9. No self-deprecating remarks allowed (especially when preparing to read your work).

10. Strive, as much as possible, not to compare your writing with the writing of others, and not to critique, interpret or analyze away what your writing is trying to show you.

11. Witness others. Listen carefully with your full attention. It will enhance your ability to listen to your own words.

12. Please share your responses to one another's work—what moves you, what stands out for you – but please refrain from critiquing or analyzing the work.

13. Treat all you do as a delicious and invigorating experiment. Play. Take chances. See what way leads to way, and what words lead to words.

Writing Prompts

1. After reading Mary Oliver's poem, write about a moment of letting go.

In Blackwater Woods

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.
– Mary Oliver

2. Make a list of moments in your life that you feel you *must* write about, and then pluck something off the list and start writing.

3. Describe a room (in a home, school, workplace or other place where you've spent a lot of time) in great detail, focusing on what you can see, touch, taste, smell and hear as if you're seeing it for the first time.

4. Read fairy tales, and find one that speaks to you, and then write about what the main character must endure (loss of voice or family, violence, abandonment, etc.), and then write about how you relate to this character or not.

5. Write a letter to yourself from your best-beloved (real or imaginary, human or otherwise), telling you what is most precious about you and your life. Get into great detail.

6. Write “The new story of your life” by starting out saying what's it not.

The New Story of Your Life

The New Story of Your Life
Say you finally invented a new story
of your life. It is not a story of your defeat
or of your importance and powerlessness
before the large forces of wind and accident.
It is not the sad story of your mother’s death
or of your abandoned childhood. It is not
even a story that will win you the deep
initial sympathies of the benevolent gods
or the care of the generous, but it is a story
that requires of you a large thrust
into the difficult life, a sense of plentitude
entirely your own. Whatever the story is,
it goes as it goes, and there are vicissitudes

in it, gardens that need to be planted,
skills sown, the long hard labors
of prose and enduring love. Deep down
in some long-encumbered self,
it is the story you have been writing
all of your life, where no Calypso holds you
against your own willfulness,
where you can rise
from the bleak island of your old story
and tread your way home.
-- Michael Blumenthal

7. Starting with “I did not expect to survive,” write about what you survived, and how.

Snowdrops

Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know
what despair is; then
winter should have meaning for you.

I did not expect to survive,
earth suppressing me. I didn’t expect
to waken again, to feel
in damp earth my body
able to respond again, remembering
after so long how to open again
in the cold light
of earliest spring –

afraid, yes, but among you again
crying yes risk joy

in the raw wind of the new world.
-- Louise Gluck

8. Write about a moment of being lost, and how you were found (or found your way).

Lost

Stand still. The trees ahead and the bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or bush does is lost to you,

You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.
-- David Waggoner

9. Start with “In One of My Earliest Memories.....” or write about something you experienced as if it were something you watched on television.

From *She's Come Undone*

IN ONE OF MY EARLIEST MEMORIES, MY MOTHER AND I ARE ON the front porch of our rented Carter Avenue house watching two delivery men carry our brand-new television set up the steps. I’m excited because I’ve heard about but never seen television. The men are wearing work clothes the same color as the box they’re hefting between them. Like the crabs at Fisherman’s Cove, they ascend the cement stairs sideways. Here’s the undependable part: my visual memory stubbornly insists that these men are President Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon.

Inside the house, the glass-fronted cube is uncrated and lifted high onto its pedestal. “Careful, now,” my mother says, in spite of herself; she is not the type to tell other people their business, men particularly. We stand watching as the two delivery men do things to the set. Then President Eisenhower says to me, “Okay, girlie, twist this button here.” My mother nods permission and I approach. “Like this,” he says, and I feel, simultaneously, his calloused hand on my hand and, between my fingers, the turning plastic knob, like one of the checkers in my father’s checker set. (Sometimes when my father’s voice gets too loud at my mother, I go out to the parlor and put a checker in my mouth—suck it, passing my tongue over the grooved edge.) Now, I hear and feel the machine snap on. There’s a hissing sound, voices inside the box. “Dolores, look!” my mother says. A star appears at the center of the green glass face. It grows outward and becomes two women at a kitchen table, the owners of the voices. I begin to cry. Who shrank these women? Are they alive? Real? It’s 1956; I’m four years old. This isn’t what I’ve expected. The two men and my mother smile at my fright, delight in it. Or else, they’re sympathetic and consoling. My memory of that day is, like television itself, sharp and clear but unreliable.
-- Wally Lamb

10. After reading Lamb's excerpt, write about a wave you've learned to negotiate or are learning about now.

from *The Hour I first Believed:*

It's like there's this wave coming toward me, but there's nothing I can do about it. And then it reaches me, crashes over me and...and I'm done for another day. I just give up. Give in to it. Because how do you stop a wave?

You don't. And you're wise to recognize your powerlessness to do so. But what you can do is learn how to negotiate this wave. Work within the context of its inevitability.
-- Wally Lamb

11. Toni Morrison begins a searing and astonishing book about the deepest wounds of slavery and racism by speaking from the vantage point of the house (even the house number, 124). Try your own hand at writing something beginning with an address, and then describing the qualities of that space

and time.

from *Beloved*

I24 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old--as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny band prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more; another kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the doorsill. Nor did they wait for one of the relief periods: the weeks, months even, when nothing was disturbed. No. Each one fled at once--the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time. Within two months, in the dead of winter, leaving their grandmother, Baby Suggs; Sethe, their mother; and their little sister, Denver, all by themselves in the gray and white house on Bluestone Road. It didn't have a number then, because Cincinnati didn't stretch that far. In fact, Ohio had been calling itself a state only seventy years when first one brother and then the next stuffed quilt packing into his hat, snatched up his shoes, and crept away from the lively spite the house felt for them.

-- Toni Morrison

12. Jane Hamilton begins this novel by having her narrator explain why she needs to journey into telling the story of a painful experience, and also while puzzling over “the kernel of meanness in people's hearts.” Consider beginning your own writing by describing why you need to write it, or landing on some key kernel (meanness, loss, change, etc.) that affects all in your story, and then describing that kernel.

From *The Book of Ruth*

What it begins with, I know finally, is the kernel of meanness in people's hearts. I don't know exactly how or why it gets inside us; that's one of the mysteries I haven't solved yet. I always tried to close my eyes and believe that angels, invisible in their gossamer dresses, were keeping their loving vigil. I learned, slowly, that if you don't look at the world with perfect vision, you're bound to get yourself cooked. Even though I may still be looking through the dark glass, even though I haven't finished learning the lessons, I'm the only one who tells the story from beginning to end. It can't be up to Ruby, because he has been spirited away and born again. Neither love nor prayer can bring him back. May can talk herself blue in the face and no one will hear. By rights this belongs to Justy, because he inherits the earth for a short time, but he doesn't quite count yet. He'll remember the taste of pecan balls, exactly how the powdery mash got stuck on the roof of his mouth, the color black maybe, and the color and shape of Ruby's teeth. They were rotten with sweets.

I tell myself that it should be simple to see through to the past now that I'm set loose, now that I can invent my own words, but nothing much has come my way without a price. I'm not counting on a free ride. I know the only way to begin to understand is to steal underneath May's skin and look at the world from behind her small eyes. I shudder when I think about the inside of Ruby's head, but I know I have to journey there too, if I'm going to make sense of what's happened.

-- Jane Hamilton

13. In “She Had Some Horses,” Joy Harjo writes of massive pain on personal, political and cultural

levels, and she's extremely effective by the use of repetition (of the phrase, “She had some horses,”), which works like someone drumming her heart. Find your own key phrase, repeat it often, and see where it leads you.

She Had Some Horses

She had some horses.

She had horses who were bodies of sand.
She had horses who were maps drawn of blood.
She had horses who were skins of ocean water.
She had horses who were the blue air of sky.
She had horses who were fur and teeth.
She had horses who were clay and would break.
She had horses who were splintered red cliff.

She had some horses.

She had horses with eyes of trains.
She had horses with full, brown thighs.
She had horses who laughed too much.
She had horses who threw rocks at glass houses.
She had horses who licked razor blades.

She had some horses.

She had horses who danced in their mothers' arms.
She had horses who thought they were the sun and their
bodies shone and burned like stars.
She had horses who waltzed nightly on the moon.
She had horses who were much too shy, and kept quiet
in stalls of their own making.

She had some horses.

She had horses who liked Creek Stomp Dance songs.
She had horses who cried in their beer.
She had horses who spit at male queens who made
them afraid of themselves.
She had horses who said they weren't afraid.
She had horses who lied.
She had horses who told the truth, who were stripped
bare of their tongues.

She had some horses.

She had horses who called themselves, "horse".
She had horses who called themselves, "spirit", and kept
their voices secret and to themselves.

She had horses who had no names.
She had horses who had books of names.

She had some horses.

She had horses who whispered in the dark, who were afraid to speak.
She had horses who screamed out of fear of the silence, who
carried knives to protect themselves from ghosts.
She had horses who waited for destruction.
She had horses who waited for resurrection.

She had some horses.

She had horses who got down on their knees for any saviour.
She had horses who thought their high price had saved them.
She had horses who tried to save her, who climbed in her
bed at night and prayed as they raped her.

She had some horses.

She had some horses she loved.
She had some horses she hated.

These were the same horses.
-- Joy Harjo

14. Adrienne Rich speaks directly to her reader in this poem, imagining what longing, loss, bitterness, anger and other challenges bring the reader to this moment. Write about why you are reading this poem, using the phrase repeatedly, “I know I am reading this poem.....”

From *An Atlas of the Difficult World*

I know you are reading this poem
late, before leaving your office
of the one intense yellow lamp-spot and the darkening window
in the lassitude of a building faded to quiet
long after rush-hour. I know you are reading this poem
standing up in a bookstore far from the ocean
on a grey day of early spring, faint flakes driven
across the plains' enormous spaces around you.
I know you are reading this poem
in a room where too much has happened for you to bear
where the bedclothes lie in stagnant coils on the bed
and the open valise speaks of flight
but you cannot leave yet. I know you are reading this poem
as the underground train loses momentum and before running
up the stairs
toward a new kind of love
your life has never allowed.

I know you are reading this poem by the light
of the television screen where soundless images jerk and slide
while you wait for the newscast from the intifada.
I know you are reading this poem in a waiting-room
of eyes met and unmeeting, of identity with strangers.
I know you are reading this poem by fluorescent light
in the boredom and fatigue of the young who are counted out,
count themselves out, at too early an age. I know
you are reading this poem through your failing sight, the thick
lens enlarging these letters beyond all meaning yet you read on
because even the alphabet is precious.
I know you are reading this poem as you pace beside the stove
warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder, a book in your hand
because life is short and you too are thirsty.
I know you are reading this poem which is not in your language
guessing at some words while others keep you reading
and I want to know which words they are.
I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn
between bitterness and hope
turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.
I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else left to read
there where you have landed, stripped as you are.
-- Adrienne Rich

15. Write about the first meeting of your parents, imaging whatever facts you don't know. Or go back to any moment before damage was done, and describe that precise moment.

I Go Back to May 1937

I see them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,
I see my father strolling out
under the ochre sandstone arch, the
red tiles glinting like bent
plates of blood behind his head, I
see my mother with a few light books at her hip
standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks,
the wrought-iron gate still open behind her, its
sword-tips aglow in the May air,
they are about to graduate, they are about to get married,
they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are
innocent, they would never hurt anybody.
I want to go up to them and say Stop,
don’t do it—she’s the wrong woman,
he’s the wrong man, you are going to do things
you cannot imagine you would ever do,
you are going to do bad things to children,
you are going to suffer in ways you have not heard of,
you are going to want to die. I want to go

up to them there in the late May sunlight and say it,
her hungry pretty face turning to me,
her pitiful beautiful untouched body,
his arrogant handsome face turning to me,
his pitiful beautiful untouched body,
but I don’t do it. I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together
at the hips, like chips of flint, as if to
strike sparks from them, I say
Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.
-- Sharon Olds

16. Go to a moment after a difficult experience, a week or year or decade later, and write about what you discover over distance.

A Week Later

A week later, I said to a friend: I don't
think I could ever write about it.
Maybe in a year I could write something.
There is something in me maybe someday
to be written; now it is folded, and folded,
and folded, like a note in school. And in my dream
someone was playing jacks, and in the air there was a
huge, thrown, tilted jack
on fire. And when I woke up, I found myself
counting the days since I had last seen
my husband -- only two years, and some weeks,
and hours. We had signed the papers and come down to the
ground floor of the Chrysler Building,
the intact beauty of its lobby around us
like a king's tomb, on the ceiling the little
painted plane, in the mural, flying. And it
entered my strictured heart, this morning,
slightly, shyly as if warily,
untamed, a greater sense of the sweetness
and plenty of his ongoing life,
unknown to me, unseen by me,
unheard, untouched-but known, seen,
heard, touched. And it came to me,
for moments at a time, moment after moment,
to be glad for him that he is with the one
he feels was meant for him. And I thought of my
mother, minutes from her death, eighty-five
years from her birth, the almost warbler
bones of her shoulder under my hand, the
eggshell skull, as she lay in some peace

in the clean sheets, and I could tell her the best
of my poor, partial love, I could sing her
out with it, I saw the luck
and luxury of that hour.
-- Sharon Olds

17. Write of a moment of sweetness in the middle of an impossible time.

Excerpt from *Angela's Ashes*

The apartment is empty and I wander between the two rooms, the bedroom and the kitchen. My father is out looking for a job and my mother is at the hospital with Malachy. I wish I had something to eat but there's nothing in the icebox but cabbage leaves floating in the melted ice. My father said never eat anything floating in water for the rot that might be in it. I fall asleep on my parents' bed and when my mother shakes me it's nearly dark. Your little brother is going to sleep a while. Nearly bit his tongue off. Stitches galore. Go into the other room.

My father is in the kitchen sipping black tea from his big white enamel mug. He lifts me to his lap. Dad, will you tell me the story about Coo Coo?

Cuchulain. Say it after me, Coo-hoo-lin. I'll tell you the story when you say the name right. Coo-hoo-lin.

I say it right and he tells me the story of Cuchulain, who had a different name when he was a boy, Setanta. He grew up in Ireland where Dad lived when he was a boy in County Antrim. Setanta had a stick and ball and one day he hit the ball and it went into the mouth of a big dog that belonged to Culain and choked him. Oh, Culain was angry and he said, What am I to do now without my big dog to guard my house and my wife and my ten small children as well as numerous pigs, hens, sheep? Setanta said, I'm sorry. I'll guard your house with my stick and ball and I'll change my name to Cuchulain, the Hound of Culain. He did. He guarded the house and regions beyond and became a great hero, the Hound of Ulster itself. Dad said he was a greater hero than Hercules or Achilles that the Greeks were always bragging about and he could take on King Arthur and all his knights in a fair fight which, of course, you could never get with an Englishman anyway.

That's my story. Dad can't tell that story to Malachy or any other children down the hall.

He finishes the story and lets me sip his tea. It's bitter, but I'm happy there on his lap.
-- Frank McCourt

18. Write the mean story, but in summation form to show what lurks behind the story you can (and feel you should) tell.

From *Two or Three Things I know For Sure*

Let me tell you the mean story. For years and years, I convinced myself that I was unbreakable, an animal with an animal strength or something not human at all. Me, I told people, I take damage like a wall, a brick wall that never falls down, never feels anything, never flinches or remembers. I am one woman but I carry in my body all the stories I have ever been told, women I have known, women who have taken damage until they tell themselves they can feel no pain at all. That’s the mean story. That’s

the lie I told myself for years, and not until I began to fashion stories on the page did I sort it all out, see where the lie ended and broken life remained. But that is not how I am supposed to tell it. I’m only supposed to tell one story at a time, one story. Every writing course I ever heard of said the same thing. Take one story, follow it through, beginning, middle, end. I don’t do that. I never do. Behind the story I tell is the one I don’t. Behind the story you hear is the one I wish I could make you hear. Behind my carefully buttoned collar is my nakedness, the struggle to find clean clothes, food, meaning, and money. Behind sex is rage, behind anger is love, behind this moment is silence, years of silence.
-- Dorothy Allison

19. Write what you can't or could tell but won't (describing what the unspeakable is by showing what surrounds it without showing it).

What I Could Tell

I could name all the pieces of violence –
the kick or slap, the friendly punch.
“Say it again,” the therapist says.
I remember this later, lying in the bathtub
watching my arms and legs float in water, so normal.
Do you see how contained I am? How calm
a poem, as if I were writing about
tree limbs in winter covered in ice. Delicate.
Connected to the glass trunk, bone to bone.

I startle awake. Someone behind me. Reflexes
not everyone has anymore or ever.
But that was another time, weighted in
the cells of skin. Smoke in the vein of the bone.
Does it matter that the shelf of sky was blue,
that there was heat right where
the fist imprinted itself on my leg?
Did it happen like a shovel edge into roots,
someone watching, hands around my neck
before I could speak, and I'm dying
all over again?

There was a room with no air, a cringing
inward, the iris already broken from its bulb.
There was a bathtub with a girl covered
in bruises, the door locked hopefully.

She was tired, so tired
she couldn't stay awake
to tell me what really happened.
-- Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

20. Write a moment when you felt divided (one part of you wanting to leave, one part wanting to stay, or any other divide), and aim to show the humanness of all those involved.

From *The Divorce Girl*

“I know why your dad goes there,” Mom began one afternoon. She’d cornered me as I was reaching into the refrigerator, trying to dislodge a pudding cup from behind a casserole. “That tall blonde waitress, the one with no bust. You know who I mean.”

I stood up and turned to find her staring at me earnestly, dressed in her white tennis outfit. How could I tell her she had it all wrong? I saw my camera lying on the counter and picked it up. It was an Olympus Dad got me from some sidewalk vendor in the city, or at least it looked like an Olympus. Every time Liz glanced at it in class, she only rolled her eyes.

“Oh, not that again,” Mom said.

“But you look good in that tennis outfit,” I told her, adjusting the F-stop. Last month I’d found out that Mom and I were the same size, although I was six inches taller.

She sighed. I thought she’d complain about how Dad should wait until he moved out of the house, how it wasn’t fair that he went out at night while she was home crying, worrying about the live baby and the ghost of a dead baby. But she didn’t. She just stood there, her hands on her hips, staring at me as I snapped a few pictures, the cacophony of the shutter quickly unfurling.

Dropping the screen that often made her seem too distant and unfamiliar to be my mother, she took my wrist between her thumb and fingers and looked into my eyes. “I want you home with me each night. Home,” she said.

I had never seen her cry before, although her voice was shaking when she talked on the phone once, a little while after the baby died, telling someone, “I never knew they could make coffins that tiny.”

She came up behind me now and put her freckled arms around my bony body, her voice shaking. “I don’t want this to hurt you, not to hurt you.”

I froze, wishing this scene were just another photograph. She never touched me, not with Roger still climbing in her lap and the baby always screaming from her playpen until Mom picked her up. I tried to remember the last time she told me she loved me, but it was too far back – before we moved to Jersey, before Joshua. I wanted to push her away and run, and at the same time I wanted to melt into her.

“You’re my girl,” she whispered, and something in me softened. I let her hold me tight, but I still didn’t lift my arms. A year ago she’d told me, “You’ve always been a daddy’s girl.” She had wanted to take me shopping for a new dress, but I stayed home so I could heat Dad’s dinner for him.
I lifted my hand now and placed it mechanically on her arm, part of me wanting her to hold me, part of me wanting her to let go.

-- Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

“Writing Trauma” by Louise DeSalvo -- blog post 2/27/10

There are times in every writer’s life when they come upon a book that changes the way they think about their work. Like many other writers who think about their creative process, I am continually searching for such a book. Sometimes, though, I come upon one unawares.

This happened years ago when I was shopping in a bookstore and I stumbled upon James W. Pennebaker’s Opening Up, a work about the healing – physical and emotional – effects of writing about trauma. Pennebaker wrote about his experiments with groups of university students who were asked to write about something they hadn’t often discussed. Pennebaker divided the writers up into three groups. The first were told to simply discuss the event. The second were told to discuss their feelings about the event. The third were told to connect a troubling event to the feelings the event elicited, and to reflect upon what happened. All the writers wrote for twenty minutes only over a period of three days.

Pennebaker discovered that virtually all the writers chose to relate something of enormous consequence that they hadn’t “opened up” about before. The divorce of parents. The death of a grandmother. An act that had difficult negative consequences. Many of the writers became very emotional as they wrote.

After, Pennebaker and his team of researchers assessed the health of his subjects by studying, for example, how often these students visited the health clinic. Later experiments by Pennebaker and other researchers refined the protocol still further by taking blood samples from the participants to determine their subjects’ ability to fight infection. In another, people with arthritis and asthma were instructed to write about something troubling, linking feelings with events; after, doctors who did not know these people were participating in the study judged them to be far better than they were before they had.

Pennebaker and his associates designed their experiments to determine whether repressing thoughts and feelings about traumatic events damaged health and whether expressing them improved health significantly. Their conclusion – supported by a number of follow-up studies, each, more sophisticated than the last – was that expressing thoughts and feelings about traumatic events could significantly improve our health. No health benefits seemed to accrue to the writers who wrote only about events or those who write only about feelings. Only the writers linking events and feelings were healthier.

Initially, though, those writers reported painful feelings. That is, they felt worse than they did before the experiment, though those feelings resolved in time, and they later reported having come to some kind of resolution about the event they described through writing about it. That’s because initially they might have been starting to feel pain about the event that might have been repressed. In time, though, the event seemed to become redefined through the act of writing because the writers witnessed what they survived, expressed their feelings, linked their feelings to the event, and reflected upon the act of writing in this way. Many writers stated that they’d never told anyone about the event described although it might have occurred several years before.

Pennebaker’s subjects were not writers: they were students. And Pennebaker’s subjects wrote for only twenty minutes a day, for three days running. I wondered whether famous authors had ever discussed the healing power of their writing. I wondered, too, about whether the act of writing could ever be harmful. These questions led to years of research, culminating in my book *Writing as a Way of Healing.*

I learned that, yes, writers as diverse as Mary Shelley, Virginia Woolf, Isabel Allende, Dorothy Allison, Junot Diaz, Janet Frame, and James Ellroy, to name just a few, described how the act of writing was healing for them.

But we all know about writers who seem to come to harm regardless of the fact that they write. Perhaps even because they write. Sylvia Plath is the most obvious example. What about them? What went wrong with their process?

I’ve always believed that writing about extraordinarily difficult material necessitates that we have a support system of some kind. I've always had the advice and good counsel of a psychotherapist as I went about my work. Still, as bell hooks reminds us, not everyone can afford therapy, and so, for many of us, writing remains the most important way – perhaps the only way – of easing our pain.

Through the years, I've learned to stay alert as I write to one significant factor. Is my writing helping me retell the event. Or is my writing making me relive the event. That is, am I retraumatizing myself by writing? Anyone who maintains that "just writing" is healing, I believe, is all wrong. Writing "real" can invite us to time travel back into the event itself; we can feel we are "there." All well and good – if this leads to a detailed recreation of the event. But if the writing elicits, in us, not just painful feelings (for our feelings will necessarily be difficult if we're writing about traumatic material), but elicits feelings, say, of being out of control, of being terrified, of being detached, of feeling fragmented, of wanting to abuse substances to deal with our pain, then we must back off our work, let go of our work, write something altogether different, before we try to approach the material again at some later, perhaps far later, time.

I've been asked how I manage to write about painful moments and whether I've ever needed to back off from writing about an event in my life.

First, let me say, that I've chosen never to write fully about my sister's suicide in a memoir that I might publish, although I have written many diary entries, using Pennebaker's formula. I know that I might never write a book about her. Though her death is decades in the past, it's not one I'm ready to write about at length. Whenever I've tried, it's not overwhelming sorrow that's stopped me. It's rage. My rage at her for taking her own life, for the consequences of her death to our family. Whenever I've started to write, I've monitored my reaction to writing this material, and, every time, I've deemed it too risky to continue. Perhaps I haven't found the way to tell this yet; perhaps I never will. But although I know that writing can heal, I also believe that it's my responsibility to determine whether or not I can proceed. And in this case, I can't. At least not yet.

But I have, however, written about many other painful parts of my life – my husband's adultery, for example (in Adultery); my father's violence (in Vertigo); my asthma (in Breathless). And I've learned a great deal about what works for me, which might not work for another writer.

For me to break into traumatic material, I've learned, I have to ease into it slowly, in small bursts of writing (a few minutes, say, and never longer than twenty), over many, many days, often, with breaks of days, weeks, sometimes months, in between. (This replicates, I think, how difficult material is often dealt with in psychotherapy – not in one fell swoop, but in small increments over a long period of time, with the traumatic material being returned to again and again and again.) Pennebaker himself conjectured that the twenty-minute writing sessions in his studies worked so effectively because the time writers were expected to devote to a painful subject was limited, and so whatever surfaced was unlikely to be overwhelming.

I often write the material in the third person on the first round – using "she," not "I." Sometimes, as in Vertigo, when I relate a childhood depression, and when I describe an instance of abuse, I've chosen to keep the third person in the published text. But sometimes I don't. After some time has passed, I take the third person recounting, and recast it as first person. It seems, for me, that going at the material using third person the first time around provides me with the kind of distance I need to get at the material. It also provides a kind of artistic distance and reminds me that I'm writing, not a confessional, but a work of art, and so, keeps me from reliving. Retell not relive seems to work for me if I write in third person at the beginning of the process. (One caveat: if using third person stirred feelings of depersonalization in me – one effect of trauma – I'd back off.

At first, I might not be able to link many feelings with the event and then reflect upon them – Pennebaker's ideal model for a healing narrative but from the very beginning, I try, no matter how primitive my recall or insights might me. In fact, often, with trauma, feelings are frozen, are inexplicable. So I just let myself conjecture what I might have been feeling until I'm well enough into the writing to begin to see what was really going on. But my end stage ideal (accomplished, I've learned, only in the very last drafts) is to link feelings with events, and to reflect upon them.

I let myself take up to perhaps eleven or more drafts of such an event for the piece to “sing.” In fact, I think that returning to the event again and again over time in the creation of a memoir helps me write traumatic material because. Each time I circle back over an event, it seems to be more and more one I’m telling and less and less one that traumatized me even though it did. Frankly, by the end of the process, I get so annoyed by needing to write at it again, that the potency of the event itself seems to have lost its traumatic impact.

Most significantly, through all the research I’ve done, I’ve learned never to ask the question “why” about a traumatic event, as in “Why did this happen to me?” But instead, to ask, “How did I get through that?”

At the beginning, I also tend to choose past tense. This tells me that the event is over. (I’m not reliving, I’m retelling). This keeps the event at a safe distance. In successive rewritings, I seem to switch, at some point, to present tense. Present tense, if used from the beginning, I think, would be too difficult: it might invite “reliving” rather than “retelling.” There is always a point in the revision process where I have to decide whether the published account of the traumatic material will be in the present tense, in the past tense, or some combination of both.

I love that kind of revision: switching the tense of one sentence, then another, then another. I seem to like a narrative that’s composed of both present and past to clue the reader that these events are in the past, but that their effects continue into the present. On those days, when I noodle with tense, when the work of recounting becomes focused, not upon the trauma, but upon the art of presenting it on the past, I know that the act of writing is doing its work.

Often, when I’m playing with tense, I’m so lost in the creative act, so lost in the wonderment of how powerful a device the use of tense is as a memoirist, I know that the event is on its way to becoming subsumed into a work of art. I know I’m close to finished with the retelling, and that I’m close to finished (for the time being at least) with the power this event has had over me. Virginia Woolf once said that she knew she was finished, that the event she was writing about was behind her, when she spent the day putting in commas and taking out semicolons, then taking out semicolons and putting in commas. Such is the transformative power of writing – it is the semicolon, the comma, the tense that begins to matter more than the event the precipitated the writing.
great summary of Pennebaker's work http://www.utexas.edu/features/2005/writing/

Writing about Wounds

Two studies found that expressive writing eased some stress for married soldiers, but may have worsened anger for those with high exposure to combat.

By Christopher Munsey, *Monitor* Staff, October 2009, Vol 40, No. 9, Print version: page 58

Expressive writing helped one group of soldiers improve their marital relationships following a deployment, but didn't help a group of soldiers with high combat exposure deal any better with anger, according to the results of two new Army-sponsored studies.

Researchers became interested in expressive writing—narrative reflections on the emotional impact of an event—as a possible way to help soldiers deal with their symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anger following deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, according to Army surveys, between 15 percent to 20 percent of service members who return from deployments report high levels of depression, anxiety and PTSD symptoms, said Amy Adler, PhD, a research psychologist with U.S. Army Medical Research Unit-Europe and study co-investigator.

Noting that soldiers who experience higher levels of combat experience report more symptoms of PTSD, depression and anxiety, Adler said researchers are concerned that some of these soldiers aren't "resetting" to better psychological functioning once they return home.

To explore expressive writing as a possible tool to help these service members, the researchers consulted with University of Texas psychologist James Pennebaker, PhD, who helped pioneer expressive writing as a treatment for trauma. Research with groups as varied as students, Holocaust survivors, the chronically physically ill, people with HIV, unemployed workers and maximum security prisoners had indicated that people who took a few hours to put their thoughts and feelings into words showed improved mental health, better immune system functioning and fewer doctor visits, Adler said.

To see if those results held up with service members returning from deployments, researchers recruited participants from an Army brigade combat team that returned from Iraq in the fall of 2007. In early spring 2008, soldiers were randomly assigned to write about their thoughts and feelings as they transitioned home, while control groups wrote about their exercise routines or did not write at all.
To their disappointment, researchers found that four months after participating in writing exercises, soldiers in the emotional writing group who had high levels of combat experiences scored higher on an anger scale, compared with soldiers not asked to write, said co-investigator Lt. Col. Paul Bliese, PhD, of the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. The emotional writing exercise seemed to make soldiers angrier than they were before sitting down to write.

"Overall, it appears that, for soldiers in the high risk condition, those soldiers reporting lots of combat experiences, expressive writing is actually contraindicated," Adler said.

The study results demonstrate the importance of not using interventions developed from civilian populations without testing the intervention first with soldiers in a randomized controlled trial, she said.
"For us, it really underscores that you can't just take stuff off the shelf from the civilian literature and assume it's going to work in your population. You have to do the research," Adler said.

Trying to understand the finding, Adler said that having a soldier sit down and write about traumatic experiences, as opposed to an approach where soldiers talk about their experiences with their fellow soldiers in platoon-size units, may reinforce rumination.

The writing intervention tested in a second study did, however, appear to help service members' marriages. Drawn from more than 100 married couples in the Fort Hood, Texas, area, soldiers and spouses either wrote about what the transition home has been like for themselves and their families or their physical health habits. Overall, expressive writing improved marital satisfaction and decreased yelling, reported University of Texas doctoral student Jenna Baddeley, who co-authored the study with Pennebaker.

Those results came from the study group where soldiers did the expressive writing, but their spouses did not, she said. For that group of soldiers, the positive effects of the intervention peaked at one month, and fell off after about six months, Baddeley said.

Looking to the results, Baddeley said previous research with men who were asked to write found improvement in relationships, and that as a group, soldiers need to dampen down their emotions during deployments.

"We think booster sessions may be a good idea," she said.

http://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/10/writing-stress.aspx

“Writing to Heal” -- Article on James Pennebaker at University of Texas website

For nearly 20 years, Dr. James W. Pennebaker has been giving people an assignment: write down your deepest feelings about an emotional upheaval in your life for 15 or 20 minutes a day for four consecutive days. Many of those who followed his simple instructions have found their immune systems strengthened. Others have seen their grades improved. Sometimes entire lives have changed.

Pennebaker, a professor in the Department of Psychology at The University of Texas at Austin and author of several books, including “Opening Up” and “Writing to Heal,” is a pioneer in the study of using expressive writing as a route to healing. His research has shown that short-term focused writing can have a beneficial effect on everyone from those dealing with a terminal illness to victims of violent crime to college students facing first-year transitions.

“When people are given the opportunity to write about emotional upheavals, they often experience improved health,” Pennebaker says. “They go to the doctor less. They have changes in immune function. If they are first-year college students, their grades tend to go up. People will tell us months afterward that it’s been a very beneficial experience for them.”

In his early research Pennebaker was interested in how people who have powerful secrets are more prone to a variety of health problems. If you could find a way for people to share those secrets, would their health problems improve?

It turned out that often they would, and that it wasn’t even necessary for people to tell their secrets to someone else. The act of simply writing about those secrets, even if they destroyed the writing immediately afterward, had a positive effect on health. Further studies showed that the benefits weren’t just for those who had dramatic secrets, but could also accrue to those who were dealing with divorces, job rejections or even a difficult commute to work.

“Emotional upheavals touch every part of our lives,” Pennebaker explains. “You don’t just lose a job, you don’t just get divorced. These things affect all aspects of who we are—our financial situation, our relationships with others, our views of ourselves, our issues of life and death. Writing helps us focus and organize the experience.”

Our minds are designed to try to understand things that happen to us. When a traumatic event occurs or we undergo a major life transition, our minds have to work overtime to try to process the experience. Thoughts about the event may keep us awake at night, distract us at work and even make us less connected with other people.

When we translate an experience into language we essentially make the experience graspable. Individuals may see improvements in what is called “working memory,” essentially our ability to think about more than one thing at a time. They may also find they’re better able to sleep. Their social connections may improve, partly because they have a greater ability to focus on someone besides themselves.

If writing can have such a dramatic effect on our lives, does that mean that we would all be best off keeping a daily diary? Not necessarily, Pennebaker says. While his work is not inconsistent with diary keeping, it acts more as a kind of life course correction. It allows people to step back for a moment and evaluate their lives.

“I’m not convinced that having people write every day is a good idea,” Pennebaker says. “I’m not even convinced that people should write about a horrible event for more than a couple of weeks. You risk getting into a sort of navel gazing or cycle of self-pity.

“But standing back every now and then and evaluating where you are in life is really important.”

Pennebaker’s research is benefiting people outside of those who participate in his studies. In 2004 he published “Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval.” The book is aimed at a general audience and offers a primer on writing and healing and numerous exercises that anyone who is capable of putting pen to paper can undertake. People across the country are giving it a try.

The Charlotte, N.C.-based company WordPlay recently offered a workshop titled “Writing to Heal” that borrows heavily from Pennebaker’s work. The participants were not necessarily people who came to writing with an intention to publish. But they each brought a life event they hoped to work through, whether it was a childhood trauma or a recent battle with cancer. Instructor Maureen Ryan Griffin said that each of the students came away feeling the writing had made a difference in their experience.

“They left with a new sense of the power of words,” she says. “They actually got access to using language as a healing tool in a way they had never used it before. Through writing they become active creators of their life stories. They are not simply people something bad or painful has happened to.”

Pennebaker has been looking at specifically how people use language in their writings and whether certain approaches to language translate into greater benefits from writing. To do so, he and his colleagues developed a text analysis program called Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC). Using LIWC they can look at the types of words people use in their writings. They are discovering some interesting patterns.

“People who are able to construct a story, to build some kind of narrative over the course of their writing seem to benefit more than those who don’t,” Pennebaker says. “In other words, if on the first day of writing, people’s stories are not very structured or coherent, but over the three or four days they are able to come up with a more structured story, they seem to benefit the most.”

Making a story out of a messy, complicated experience may make the experience more manageable. Linguistically, Pennebaker looks for words that are associated with more complex thinking, including certain prepositions such as “except,” “without” and “exclude” and causal words such as “cause,” “effect” and “rationale.” An increase in these types of words over the writing process suggests that the experience is becoming clearer and more narrative.

Pennebaker has also found that the ability to change perspectives during the course of writing is also a potent indicator of how well the act of writing will benefit an individual. Using LIWC, he can analyze the types of pronouns an individual uses. A shift in pronouns means a shift in perspective.

“So one day they may be talking about how they feel and how they see it,” he says, “but the next day they may talk about what’s going on with others, whether it’s their family or a perpetrator or someone else. Being able to switch back and forth is a very powerful indicator of how they progress.”

It’s not clear whether people who are able to construct narratives and change perspectives can be guided to do so in their writing, or whether doing so is simply a reflection of an emergent healing process for them. In “Writing to Heal,” however, Pennebaker offers exercises to help people experiment with both skills. After their four days of writing, individuals can analyze their own writing and try writing from different perspectives.

Griffin used Pennebaker’s exercise in changing perspectives in her class and found that it was one of the most profound things her students did.

“I was really struck by how amazed everyone was after writing about an event from more than one perspective,” she says. “It made a huge difference for them and their sense of the story to do this, and they were surprised by the power that had.”

Pennebaker is quick to point out that the act of confessing or expressing trauma has been part of healing for virtually all cultures, ranging from Native American indigenous cultures to those based on both Western and Eastern religious beliefs. He also notes that writing should be used cautiously. He doesn’t recommend trying to write about a trauma too soon after it happens and says that if a topic seems like it’s too much to handle, don’t try to tackle it before you’re ready. The effects of writing can be subtle, but sometimes they can be dramatic.

As an example, Pennebaker speaks of a young woman he worked with who had lost her husband very suddenly in an accident. The woman was praised by her colleagues in graduate school for how courageously and smoothly she had handled her husband’s death. She came to Pennebaker because she felt she needed to write about her loss. By the last day of writing she said she was transformed.

Within two months the woman had quit graduate school and moved back to her hometown. The writing experience had made her realize she was on a life path she no longer wanted and that she had been putting on a false, cheerful front with her friends.

“As a researcher, I could say, ‘Well here I have a technique that made an individual drop out of school, stop pursuing an advanced degree and return home,’” Pennebaker says. “It was a dramatic change, and it sounds like a failure. But from her perspective, it wasn’t.”

In fact, the woman felt that those four days of writing had saved her life.