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Writing About Life's Hard Stuff: A Flashlight in the Dark

As far back as I remember, I turned to art for healing, first drawing, then piano, eventually writing. What hurts us -- body, heart and mind -- when transformed into art can become a talisman of our strength, a pattern I've witness in the writing of my students and community workshop participants over the last 25 years. No wonder then that when family dysfunction devastated my family of origin when I was a teen, or when cancer invaded me and my family in recent years, I turned to words, going on to found a MA Program -- Transformative Language Arts at Goddard College -- in which people learn how to facilitate writing, storytelling and performance for social and personal transformation. It's this experience with writing through and about difficult passages, and working with students who do the same around the country, that leads me to offer "Writing About Life's Hard Stuff in Fiction, Memoir, and Poetry" at the Loft 1-5 p.m., Sat., May 3.

While I'm not sure that everything we experience happens for a specific reason, one thing I'm sure about as a fellow writer and human is that life gives us material, whether we're looking for it or not. We have the possibility of using this material to strengthen our writing, often finding ways in which putting pen to paper or hands to keyboard catalyzes growth, healing, awareness, and understanding. No surprise then that the research on writing and healing shows a direct correlation: James Pennebaker and many other researchers have shown that writing regularly for short periods of time, using structured exercises, can improve circulation, boost the immune system, and lift our moods. 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. At the same time, spilling your guts on the page 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!

In this workshop, we'll discuss how writing can lead to healing, and healing to writing, as well as when and how to write about life's hard stuff, examining what it means to have enough distance to write

with an eye toward transforming old stories of trauma into new ones of transformation. We'll look at ways to find support for the journey, and most of all, how to get as clear as possible about our motives for writing about past trauma and stress. We'll also talk about when *not* to write about something, and how, to quote Marcy Piercy, "Work is its own cure. You have to like it better than being loved." We'll experiment with writing prompts to help us engage with some of our hard stuff from new perspectives, such as telling a story with a different point-of-view, turning real-life experience into fiction or memoir or poetry, and new ways to frame subjects so that we can see new angles of those experiences.

Writing in the community of the workshop, even if we convene that community for just one spring afternoon, allows us to use our writing as a flashlight to navigate the dark, tangled woods or vast empty parking lot where there's no clear path. In the process, we can access more of of who we are, and grow our capacity for resilience, courage, tenderness, strength and perspective to not just endure, but find sweetness, vibrancy, certainly humor and even joy.

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg is the 2009-2013 Kansas Poet Laureate, author of 19 books (including poetry, fiction, memoir, and non-fiction), and founder of Transformative Language Arts at Goddard College, where she teaches.

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