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1804 words

Making a Living Doing What You Love: Community Writing Workshops

“Whoever Charles Bukowski is, he’s talking about my life,” says Lillian,* a bald 50-year-old woman wearing dangling red-beaded earrings. “I even brought his poem with me to chemo last week.” The other five people in the group – one man, four women, all in cancer treatment or married to someone who is – nod vigorously. We’re sitting around a small conference table in a local hospital’s oncology center, and we’ve just read aloud Bukowski’s poem, “the laughing heart,” which we’re about to use as a writing prompt.

This workshop is one of several I facilitate each week in my community to help people unearth greater meaning through writing, and find community through writing together. I also offer workshops for low income women at a housing authority, homeless adults in rehab, and what’s commonly referred to as “mainstream populations” although there’s usually nothing mainstream about them. I realized some years back, with considerable astonishment after teaching basic comp and creative writing courses as an adjunct instructor at the local university, that if I did nothing but facilitate writing workshops for various populations in my relatively small Midwestern city, I could make a living.

At first, I drew the usual suspects: people prone to take any kind of workshop that emphasized self-discovery, healing or transformation. But participants recommended the workshops to their friends, and those friends sometimes worked at social service

agencies, local businesses, school and universities. In time, I found myself writing with local teens, housing authority residents, the elderly, and in recent years, after I survived breast cancer, in the cancer community. I also leapt from classroom teaching at the University of Kansas to low-residency teaching at Goddard College.

Along the way, I realized that if I could make a living from doing this in Kansas of all places, then it must be even easier in more populated places. I sought out others who were doing this work, and soon discovered the National Association for Poetry Therapy, which offers certification training for people to become poetry therapists, holds annual conferences and publishes a journal. I also discovered the need for greater training in what it means to be a facilitator of other people's words, and helped found the Goddard College's Transformative Language Arts concentration, which educates people on social change and personal growth through the spoken and written word.

With the fierce competition for tenure-track jobs in college creative writing departments, and the challenge of negotiating the right balance of freelance writing, waitressing or whatever else pays the bills to give us time to write, there are many of us who would do well to set up a shop as workshop facilitators, which is often a freelance expedition, that can be tailored to supplement college teaching or freelance writing. Not only that, it's work that's vitally needed and deeply appreciated, especially by people who otherwise would have no opportunity to have their say.

The Basics to Get Started

The most important thing is to first consider whether you enjoy hearing people, especially ones who may not be as skilled as you when it comes to the craft of writing,

share their words. Are you committed to learning to listen deeply to what others write about their lives? Would you find this inspiring and regenerative? Can you see past what might initially seem like mediocre writing into some gems of discovery and creativity for the writer? If not, thanks for reading this far, and if so, keep reading. Here's some ways to get going:

- We're writers, and so where do we go when we need information? You guessed it – to books! Important resources to give you a sense of the healing potential of writing, as well as the ethical issues involved, are Louise DeSalvo's *Writing As A Way of Healing*, James Pennebaker's *Opening Up*, and a myriad of books with great writing prompts such as Kathleen Adams' *The Way of the Journal*, Deena Metzger's *Writing for Your Life*, Natalie Goldberg's *Wild Mind*, and John Lee's *Writing from the Body*. This is just a drop-in-the-bucket sampling of what's out there, but read widely, and then import exercises and approaches that work for you while developing some of your original ones.
- If real estate is location, location, location, then facilitating workshops is population, population, population. Look for places to offer your workshops where you'll reach populations that you're equipped to work with, and bonus points if you're part of that population already. For example, if you're challenged by chronic illness, think about how you can develop appropriate programming that might serve others like you. Think about what populations in your town or city could use a one-day writing retreat or eight-week workshop, and then look toward what you can create to help fill that need.

- Network in your home community. Get to know people connected with businesses, organizations or institutions where you might want to offer a workshop. Go to open houses and community events, and follow up on leads.
- Create a portfolio for when opportunity knocks. Include information on what the workshop would entail (or various kinds of workshops you might do, such as environmental writing, or a workshop for mothers and daughters); your experience as a writer, teacher and facilitator; a time-line and a budget or hourly rates (or details on how you'd be willing to try this as a pilot project for a free session or more first). You can also put together a resource list of articles and books that reinforce the need for this work to give your offering greater credibility with people who may not already know you.
- As far as getting paid, for private workshops that you organize yourself, it's always a good idea to have people pay an overall fee for the workshop rather than weekly fees. When someone pays \$90 at once for a six-week workshop, she'll probably attend more regularly and be less likely to let something that comes up keep her away than if she's just supposed to pay \$15 per session. For workshops with businesses, organizations or institutions that hire you, draw up a simple contract (if they don't draw one up) listing what your services will be and the payment you'll be due along with when that payment will happen. What to charge for any of this? Look at what people doing similar workshops charge in your community, and keep in mind that if you're just starting out, you might want to start a little low since you'll be doing a lot of on-the-job training.

- You also need to think through what, if any, craft considerations you'll bring into the workshop and make sure you communicate that clearly to participants. If this workshop is mainly about self-expression and discovery, then forget about critiquing sessions or do them carefully. In the rare times I offer critiquing, I often use the Squaw Valley Community of Writers method of critiquing pioneered by Galway Kinnell, Sharon Olds and other teaching writers there: when critiquing, only say positive things to encourage the writing.

The Lifelong Art of Workshop Facilitation

Learning to be a good facilitator is a life-long art. It's about creating and holding a safe space where participants can take healthy artistic risks, and that means being careful not to talk too much and yet talking enough to bring everyone on board. There are often challenges too: how to deal with someone who takes up too much time, what to do if someone writes something that leaves him especially raw, how to handle someone melting down in the group when tissues aren't enough. Networking with others around the world doing this work is a great way to keep educating yourself on facilitation.

Be utterly and consistently careful to do no harm. Focusing your workshop as a place for creative expression, rather than group therapy, is essential on several counts: ethical ones as well as legal ones. You absolutely must make sure to present yourself as someone who facilitates writing workshops, not a certified therapist of any kind. If you are in a clinical setting at all (hospital, clinic, residential facility), arrange to have a social worker or counselor from the setting co-facilitate with you. If you find that people are revealing far more than you know what to do with, figure out how to refer them, gently,

to more appropriate support. Attend workshops and conferences, read, and get whatever training you need to learn how to set clear boundaries and facilitate your workshops in an utterly ethical (and legal) way.

If you want to offer more than an occasionally fiction writing workshop at a local arts center, consider more serious training such as going through the two-year-or-more certification program to become a poetry therapist, earning a master's in Transformative Language Arts at Goddard College, or a related program. There are also week-long and shorter poetry therapy, journal therapy, and many other related programs around the country.

In all this week, keep in mind that it takes time to make connections in your community, and it takes excellent work on your part to keep them. Also keep in mind that what you'll witness as a facilitator of community workshops is a way for you to use your craft and patience to help others, and along the way, often astonish yourself. Some of the more moving and hopeful poems written by people in one of my cancer writing groups are now being posted in our local oncology center's examining rooms to give those men and women waiting for good or bad news a whole other kind of news: examples of the courage to explore in words the stories that tell just how human we are.

*Name changed to protect workshop participant privacy.

Resources:

Transformative Language Arts concentration, Goddard College, 123 Pitkin Rd.,

Plainfield, VT. 05667, 802/454-8311, www.goddard.edu, TLaconference@goddard.edu

Annual conference, “Liberating Yourself and the World Through the Spoken, Written and Sung Word,” is Aug. 6-9 in Plainfield, VT.

National Association for Poetry Therapy, DMS, 525 SW 5th St., Suite A, Des Moines, IA 50309-4501, www.poetrytherapy.org, info@poetrytherapy.org. Annual conference held each spring.

Center for Journal Therapy, 1115 Grant St., #207, Denver, CO 80203, 888-421-2298, contact@journaltherapy.com, www.journaltherapy.com.

Amherst Writers and Artists Institute, 190 University Drive, Suite 1, Amherst MA 01002, 413/253-3307, daphne@amherstwriters.com, www.amherstwriters.com.

Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003-3306, 888-BOOKS-TW, info@twc.org, www.twc.org

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